Herbal sake O-toso for Good Health and Longevity

O-toso is an herbal sake traditionally enjoyed in Japan during New Year celebrations. We spoke with an herbal medicine specialist to learn about its history, purpose, and how it can be enjoyed in modern times. **(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)**

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An example of a traditional set of utensils for O-toso. The herbal sake is poured from the *choshi* (vessel) on the right into the *sakazuki* (sake cup) on the left for drinking.

"O-toso is an herbal sake made by infusing a blend of various *kampo*[1] medicinal herbs (or crude drugs), known as *toso-san*, into sake or original mirin (*hon-mirin*)[2]," explains OGATA Chiaki, a pharmacist at the Kitasato University Oriental Medicine Research Center. "It has long been cherished by Japanese people as a New Year's herbal sake. The act of drinking it reflects a wish for a year of good health and protection from illness, supported by the benefits of the medicinal herbs."

"Drinking O-toso at the start of the New Year, wishing for health and longevity, is a cherished tradition that continues to this day and has become a customary part of the New Year celebrations. The two characters in 'toso (屠蘇)' have specific meanings: 'to (屠)' signifies the removal of evil spirits, while 'so (蘇)' symbolizes the revival of the soul. O-toso is a drink filled with the wish to drive away negative energy and embrace the New Year with a fresh start."

The history of O-toso dates back to ancient China, from where it was introduced to Japan. It is said that in the early 9th century, Emperor Saga (the 52nd emperor, reigning from 809 to 823) drank *tososan* infused in *sake* at that time. This event led to the establishment of O-toso as a New Year's drink in the imperial court. Later, during the Edo period (from the early 17th century to the mid-late 19th century), as *hon-mirin*, a sweetened type of sake, became popular, the custom of drinking O-toso spread to the general public.

Here's a simple way to make and traditionally drink O-toso. First, prepare *tososan*, which is available in stores such as pharmacies and supermarkets. Today,

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Left: An example of the main medicinal herbs used in *tososan* for O-toso. Starting from the top and moving clockwise: Chinese bellflower, cloves, jujube fruit, Japanese pepper, hawthorn fruit, dried mandarin peel, with cinnamon in the center.

Right: Pouring O-toso into a *sakazuki* (sake cup).

it typically comes in tea bag form, so on the night of December 31st, simply place the tea bag in sake or *hon-mirin* and let it sit overnight. On New Year's morning, remove the *toso-san* bag, pour the infused liquid into festive sake cups (see photo), and, in traditional fashion, the family drinks it, starting with the youngest member. In many Japanese households, special foods for New Year's such as *osechi* (see page 14) are prepared, and traditionally, O-toso is enjoyed before the meal.

O-toso is traditionally consumed as part of New Year's customs. OGATA explains its purpose and uses as follows: "For example, one of the medicinal herbs used in O-toso, Japanese pepper (*sansho*), helps maintain a healthy stomach and promotes digestion. It is also a common spice used in Japanese cooking. Other herbs commonly blended in *tososan* include cloves, jujube, dried mandarin peel, and cinnamon. These are familiar cooking spices and fruits, which you can prepare yourself. Cloves promote digestive function, jujube relieves tension and boosts vitality, while dried mandarin peel and cinnamon help regulate the digestive system. Additionally, Chinese bellflower has a calming and anti-inflammatory effect, and hawthorn fruit helps with indigestion and regulates the digestive system, making it another good addition. These ingredients can be found at Kampo shops or stores that sell Chinese ingredients. Each of these herbs serves a different purpose, but together in *tososan*, they contribute to overall health improvement.

"Moreover, instead of using sake or *hon-mirin*, you can add *tososan* to red wine and heat it to make a hot wine, or try adding it to tea or milk tea to create a spiced tea. I recommend adapting it in a modern style not only for the New Year but throughout the year as well."

Photo: PIXTA

Japanese pepper berries, with the dried fruit peel used for *tososan*.

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Convenient *tososan* with blended medicinal herbs in a tea bag.

1. Kampo is a type of Oriental medicine that originated from medicine introduced from China long ago, but it has developed uniquely as a Japanese medicine to suit the Japanese climate and the constitution of the Japanese people. The medicinal herbs (or crude drugs) used in Kampo are called 'shoyaku.' These include parts of plants, such as leaves, stems, roots, as well as minerals and animals, that are processed for their therapeutic properties.
2. The *hon-mirin* used for O-toso is a seasoning made from steamed glutinous rice, rice malt, shochu (Japanese distilled spirit), or brewed alcohol, which is fermented and aged for 40 to 60 days. Originally, it was intended for drinking, but nowadays it is commonly used as a seasoning. Note that other types of mirin are not suitable for O-toso.