

# New Year in Japan

*Around the time this newsletter arrives in the post, it will soon be the lunar new year and according to the traditional lunar calendar it will be the year of the dog. In Japan, however, it has been the year of the dog since the first of January.*

The 12-year zodiac calendar is used in Japan, but instead of waiting for the lunar new year, which can be as late as mid-February, the animal of the year appears on many of the Japanese New Year cards which are delivered en masse on the first day of January, and it also appears as decorations in stores and homes around the end and start of the calendar year.

Japan has used several different types of calendars over its long recorded history. The current Gregorian calendar was adopted in 1873 by the Meiji Government as part of its westernisation of Japan. The observation of *nengō* or 'era names' is still practised and used extensively in official documents. People living in Japan today need to be able to give their date of birth according to both ways of telling the year. This year is the 30th year of the Heisei (Achieving Peace) Era which began when the current Emperor of Japan acceded to the throne.



The phrase 'Geishun' 迎春 means 'welcome to the spring' when you read the characters literally. The phrase, which often appears on New Year's decorations and cards, now means 'welcome to the new year' and hints at the fact that Japan's new year was not always held at the same time it is today.

For farmers, the lunisolar calendars were for a long time a far more important way of recording the year. There are still New Year observances in rural areas that are part of *Koshogatsu* (small new year) which are held to coincide with the first full moon (around 15 January).

The very passing of one year to the next has been celebrated at different times in Japan. We can see this in some common but puzzling phrases used at New Year today. Comparing the New Year to spring would seem highly optimistic given Japan's cold January weather, but that is what the phrases *Geishun* (welcome to the spring) and *Shinshun* (new spring) suggest. In fact, Japan used to observe the new year about a month later than today's first of January, around *Risshun* (the start of spring). So people were looking ahead to the approaching spring, and knowing that, those phrases make sense!



2018 is the year of the dog.

New Year or *Shōgatsu* is the most widely observed annual observance in Japan. The basic pattern is spending time with family and visiting family and friends you might only see at that time of year. It is also common to visit a temple or shrine. It has a similar significance as Christmas has for most Australian families, but the food is much lighter!



A special time of year calls for special food, and that certainly applies to *Shōgatsu*. But traditionally little cooking was done over the new year. Rather food was prepared ahead using cooking methods that meant it could be eaten over several days. *Osechi ryōri* is the name given to this food whose roots stretch back to the Heian Period (794-1185). Many people still eat *osechi*, but far fewer prepare it themselves these days, with many families ordering it in. Presentation is always an important part of Japanese cuisine and special attention is paid to how the food is laid out in the beautiful multi-layered boxes that the *osechi* comes in. Real care is given to each of the small amounts of exquisite food—items are said to have particular meanings. A simple one to point out is the *kamaboko* fish paste rolls which are in the auspicious colours of pink (pale red) and white. To learn more about the many and varied items, see the beautiful photographs of a Michelin-starred chef's *osechi ryōri* at [Nippon.com](http://www.nippon.com/en/images/i00007/?pnum=2)

Other foods are simpler but no less evocative of the end of year. There is a tradition of eating *toshikoshi soba* on New Year's Eve. Soba is eaten throughout the year, but *toshikoshi soba* means 'year-crossing soba' and the hope is that by eating the long soba noodles a family's good fortune will last long into the new year.

Rice cakes or *omochi* are also an essential item at this time of year. They are used as part of decorations (*kagami-mochi* [right]) and in different versions of *ozōni* soups—simmered soups with soft and chewy rice-cakes. It's important to take care when eating *ozōni* that you don't just gulp it down, because choking deaths are not unknown!

