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SPOTLIGHT

New Year Comes with Rice Cakes

The New Year is the biggest holiday in Japan. Public offices and most companies close down for the year on Dec. 28 to ready for the New Year. As a traditional year-end practice, people sweep inside and around their houses, and make *mochi* rice cakes. They make a decorative *kagami-mochi* set with those rice cakes. It is two piled round rice cakes topped with a *mikan* mandarin orange, prepared as offerings to the gods.

Kagami means mirror, which is a major place a god dwells. So *kagami-mochi* is the home of this year's "house god." They put *kagami-mochi* at an important place in the house. After Jan. 15, we cut it with a kitchen knife or a hammer (it becomes dry and very hard) and put it in *zoni*, a traditional New Year's soup. People may unconsciously feel the god inside it.

Traditionally, making rice cakes was a big event. Family members, often joined by neighbors, used to get together and, with *kine* (mallets), pound steamed sticky rice placed inside the *usu* (big wooden mortar). The occasion was a favorite event for children especially. Now our life is getting busy, and we usually buy *mochi* at a supermarket or Japanese sweet shop.

The common way of eating it is by rolling a roasted rice cake with *nori* (dried laver seaweed) and dipping it into soy sauce – often with sugar – or into soybean powder mixed with sugar, or wrapping sweetened *azuki* (red bean) paste with a rice cake. We usually keep eating *mochi* until the cold season is over. Even though we can eat it throughout the year today, we still feel it is food for the winter season.

For the New Year, there are more rituals dating back to the ancient times. This seems to be a special period when all the Japanese become "more Japanese." **J S**

