

Celebrating the Chinese New Year with Herbs

Chinese New Year, also known as Lunar Year or Spring Festival is the most important holiday



in China. Every year the date is different; the beginning of the two-week holiday falls on the second new moon after the winter solstice. In 2010 (year 4708 on the Chinese calendar) Chinese New Year will fall on February 14. This is the Year of the Tiger, (Geng Yin). *

New Year's festivities evolved from a desire to celebrate the end of winter and the fertility and rebirth that come with the spring, Today, New Years is about family reunions and wishing everyone good fortune in the coming year.

The Chinese will take time to prepare for and enjoy a series of celebratory events throughout the 15 day period. By the time the New Year arrives, families have already spent several days preparing for the big event by cleaning house, buying gifts, cooking festive foods, and paying off debts. Here are some interesting traditions:

Cleaning - Before the New Year arrives, the Chinese consider it very important to give the house a thorough cleaning; sweeping away any bad luck that may have accumulated over the past year.



Debts - To start off the New Year, old debts are cleared before the first day of the holiday to avoid shame and misfortune.

Gifts

- Lai-See Envelopes: (also called Hong-Bao). Money is placed in these red envelopes and given to children and young adults at New Year's time, much in the spirit as Christmas presents. Presents are also often exchanged between families.

Decorations - Doors and window panes are also often painted red, considered to be a lucky color. In addition, people hang paper cuttings on doors and windows, usually of the character "fu," which means good luck.

Offerings - Many families have a poster of the kitchen god in their kitchen. The custom is to offer a ceremonial sacrifice to the kitchen god, to make sure that he gives a good report on the family's behavior when he returns to heaven.

Throughout the holiday, everyone speaks with words and phrases of auspicious things. No unpleasant words or thoughts are permitted to be spoken. The eve is reserved for the family to gather together and prepare and eat at midnight, dumplings, known as “[jiaozi](#).” The dumplings symbolize wealth and prosperity.

The first day of the New Year is time for a large [family banquet](#). Each dish will have a name which symbolizes health, wealth, or honor. Typical foods include fish, chicken, ducks, pigs, cakes, and fruit. Chives, cilantro, thyme, fennel, scallions and parsley are the customary herbs used in Chinese cooking. A whole fish (yu) has symbolic significance because this word sounds like the word for riches or abundance. It is believed that eating fish will help your wishes come true.

Chicken is an especially popular [main dish](#) at Chinese New Year,

symbolizing a good marriage and the coming together of families. Serving a whole chicken symbolizes wholeness, prosperity and family unity. Tangerines and oranges are passed out freely during Chinese New Year as the words for tangerine and orange sound like luck and wealth. When Chinese exchange oranges during the Lunar New Year, they exchange two, four, eight, or even sixteen oranges at a time. This is because the Chinese believe that all things should come in pairs.

Cakes such as sticky rice cake have symbolic significance on many levels. Their sweetness symbolizes a rich, sweet life, while the layers symbolize rising abundance for the coming year. Also, the round shape signifies family reunion. Finally, throughout the New Year period families prepare “trays of togetherness” – circular or octagon-shaped trays with eight compartments, each containing symbolic foods such as lotus seeds and lychee nuts that provides a sweet beginning to the New Year.

