

New Years in Japan by Twyla Olson-Hahn

The New Year for 2008 will always be remembered by my family as special. We literally rang in the New Year at a Shinto Shrine in Higashimurayama, Japan. Michael, my husband, our two children, Peter and Rachel and I visited our friends, The Kikuchi's, who live in Higashimurayama, Japan.

In 2003, on the 25th Anniversary JSCC adult delegation trip, we met Makato (husband) & Yukiko (wife) and their two children, Mayumi (daughter) and Masakazu (son). At that time Michael and I spent only 6 days in the Kikuchi home, but we became friends, in spite of culture and language barriers. Invitations for future visits were given both ways upon our departure.

Fifteen months later the Kikuchi's came to Independence to visit us for our 2006 Christmas celebration. Sharing the interesting and unusual things about our lives here in the USA, we were thrilled and had such a great time with our Japanese guests. Our return visit to their home was finally realized in 2008. With two college aged children the winter break was the only time our schedules allowed the four of us to go to Japan. I wouldn't recommend it however, because it is so cold in Japan compared to Missouri.



Yukiko was happy we'd be coming so we could participate in their family party at the beginning of the New Year. The things they do to celebrate the New Year are different from what we do. They are different only in the *what*, not the *why*. They celebrate with family and good food. They honor the past and have hope for a Happy New Year. I know all of my family, as well as everyone I know, who are a part of the JSCC on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, feel very blessed by our friendships.

In America we try to have our family get-togethers on a set date. In Japan they had the family New Years party on January 4. There were plenty of relatives, food, and drinking.

I fixed cinnamon rolls for everyone, which Yukiko had requested that I would, so I took powdered sugar with me for the frosting. I had made them in 2003, when Michael and I visited the Kikuchi's. They were a big hit and worth repeating.



On December 31, at midnight, we walked to the Shinto Shrine near their home to take our turn in ringing the huge bell. We didn't pull a rope to ring the bell, but pushed a large wooden log at the bell. There were boy scouts helping direct everyone. There was a big kettle over a fire, which turned out to be filled with a hot drink; which I think had alcohol in it. We stood in line, enjoying our warm beverage, and took our turn in the quiet and reverent atmosphere, waiting to ring the big bell. For those of you who've been to Higashimurayama, the shrine is the one where the monk hits you on the shoulder with the stick.

After the Shinto shrine we walked to a Buddhist temple a few blocks away and watched a musical performance. Unlike the Shinto Shrine, the Buddhist Temple event was like a party. Booths were set up with good luck charms and special items of significance that people could purchase. We didn't stay long because it was quite cold but there was a big bon fire in the middle of an open area which helped to keep people warm.

On New Years day, we visited the cemetery where the Kikuchi's relative's ashes were buried. The Kikuchi's decorated the grave with flowers and incense. Then they prayed and bowed to the family shrine. My family and I were invited us to do the same. From what we understood, this tradition is not usual to everyone in Japan, but something that has become a family tradition with our hosts. It was an honored to be included as part of their family this year.



Yukiko fixed a traditional New Years meal. To tell you the truth, I don't really know what we ate. In spite of having hosted Japanese girls at my home, and having been in Japan before, this food was made of things which I didn't have much experience with. To describe it, all I can say is that it was all cold food, which was served on beautiful lacquer-ware serving dishes.



Yukiko fixed a bowl of sake with a gold character floating in it. As tradition goes, the character's meaning was for a happy up-coming year. We past the bowl around to each other and drank from the bowl so we would have a **Happy New Year!**