



The point in time between the old year and the new year, where the past and the future meet is a dangerous moment. We prepare for it by taking stock of our own strengths and weaknesses and making plans for our future. We announce our resolutions and dreams because we believe that wishes made at this time have the best chance of coming true. Hope is reborn with the new year.

SETTING THE DATE

During the winter many of the plants and animals that feed us disappear. The fields are bleak and empty and darkness reigns. When spring arrives, the fields turn green and life is reborn. For most early cultures the rebirth of the fields became the obvious time to begin a new year.

But different societies have chosen different dates to mark the beginning of their New Year. And even within the same society the date has often changed. Most of the time the day was chosen in relation to something that was happening in the sky or in nature—something that could be used to mark the beginning of a new cycle.



For centuries Europeans liked to celebrate New Year's on March 25th. It is the Vernal Equinox, the day when the sun is midway in its trip from north to south—the beginning of spring. We see the first of the New Year's vegetation—nature is being reborn.

The festivities that were part of the ancient Babylonian New Year are the most dramatic on record. At the edge of town they had a New Year's House devoted entirely to this annual event. In it, they celebrated the destruction of the monster that threaten all life—once he was dead the creation of the world could begin. Some historians believe that the Babylonian New Year's celebration was one of the very first rituals in human history.

At different times and in different places the fall was used to mark the New Year and it still shows up as the New Year season in many cultures and in many ways within our own culture. The start of the academic year is in the fall. Many corporations begin their accounting year in the fall. The Christian liturgical year begins in the fall with Advent. And, of course, fall is the beginning of the new television season.

The Jewish calendar is based on the moon and begins with the fall harvest. Accordingly, the Jewish New Year takes place between September 6th and October 5th. It starts with the ten days of Rosh Hashanah and ends with Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement. The word *Kippur* comes from the Babylonian and was used to mark an agricultural festival.



The Inca of Peru held the sun as the symbol of all power and chose June 21 (the shortest day of the year in the southern hemisphere) as their New Year's Day. On New Year's morning, all the fires in their capital city of Cuzco were put out, then relit later in the day with a piece of cloth that had been ignited by the rays of the sun.

At some point, towards the middle of July, and only in the tropics between latitudes 23½ north and 23½ south, the sun passes directly overhead. The ancient Maya of Central America noted this phenomenon and used the day it took place to mark the beginning of their New Year. It also marked the beginning of their agricultural cycle.



The calendars of Native American tribes are often based on the work that was done during the period of a particular moon, or the events that took place in nature.

The Kwakiutl people on Vancouver Island which is just off the Pacific coast of Canada have a calendar of ten months with the following names:

- No sap in trees
- Raspberry sprouting season
- Huckleberry season
- Sallaberry season
- Southeast wind moon
- Sockeye moon
- Elder Brother
- Sweeping houses
- Fish-in-river moon
- Season of Flood



The French linked the start of their New Year to the arrival of Easter Sunday. They celebrated the rebirth of the year along with the rebirth of Christ, thereby combining two important festivals of regeneration. Until the middle of the 1900s, the French did not give Christmas presents—gifts were exchanged at New Year's. Chocolate and *marron glaces* (nuts in sugar syrup) were given to relatives, money to employees. Visits were made to the homes of people who were higher up in your business or political circle and you always left your business card behind. But since almost everyone was out visiting someone else slightly higher on the social ladder nobody was at home. So people began mailing their business cards. Eventually the business card evolved into the New Year's greeting card. In France, you also visited your family, starting with the oldest members and ate dinner with them. It was always a mark of honor to do the visiting.



Originally, the ancient Romans liked March 1st for their New Year's celebration, but they also liked to end their year at the end of December, which meant that their year only had ten months. At the end of December, everyone just stopped counting for sixty days until March arrived. The Romans liked their calendar to reflect what was going on around them, particularly in agriculture and since nothing much was happening between the end of December and the beginning of March they just left those two months out. But King Numa had a number of Etruscan advisors who had spent time in Egypt and saw how the Egyptians filled in the blank period with two



new months. Numa loved the idea and adopted the practice.

In 153 B.C. the Roman Senate chose January 1st as the official date for New Year's. Suddenly, the New Year started when nothing special was going on in nature or in the skies. It was also a period that Roman religion considered blank, a time without a feast. The ability of the Senate to change the day that marked the beginning of the New Year is an example of a society's political representatives taking control away from nature. It sent a simple but timeless message—"We are the Senate and this is what we want, and therefore this is what you shall have. So get over it."

One of the reasons that the Senate chose January 1st for the start of the year was that January 1st was dedicated to the God Janus. Janus was the god of doors, city gates and all beginnings. He is usually shown as a gateway, or a figure with two heads, one facing forwards and the other looking back. The idea is that Janus represents the turning-point—the moment when the old year gives way to the new—the instant when you look back to the past and forward to the future.



On New Year's Day the ancient Romans replaced the old laurel branches that decorated their sacred places with new branches cut from the grove of the goddess Strenia. The branches were thought to contain the Luck of the Coming Year. The Emperor insisted that each of his subjects make him a gift of a Stenia branch. It was a primitive form of taxation but it was also a sign of fidelity. And since all gifts demand a gift in return it symbolized the Emperor's obligation to the public. A similar custom survives in France and Italy, where workers give presents to their employers.

The Romans gave plaques or terra-cotta lamps to friends and relatives—molded into them were the words "A lucky and happy New Year to you." Thousands of these lamps have been found; they were lit and hung outside on New Year's Day, then brought into the house that night and kept all year for good luck. They appear to be our earliest season's greeting cards.

The Romans also gave gifts of dates, dried figs, honey, honey cakes and nuts—the accent being on sweetness. Nuts, however, were also a symbol of initiation or beginnings and were often used in weddings.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe couldn't make up its mind as to which of the Roman examples it should follow—the original date of March 1st, or the new but not necessarily improved January 1st. As



Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, March 25th became popular because it was the feast of the Annunciation of the birth of Christ—9 months before December 25th. But Britain liked December 25th because it was Christ's Birthday. It was also close to the winter solstice marking the darkest time of the year.

In 1066, William the Conqueror had himself crowned on January 1st and decided that henceforth the New Year in Britain would start on the anniversary of his coronation. But after William retired from conquering and passed on, the British changed the date back to March 25th—mass confusion throughout Europe.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII tried to straighten things out by setting up the Gregorian calendar, which is the basis for the one we presently follow in the Western World. But it was not fully accepted. The British held on to a March 1st New Year's until 1752.

SUPERSTITIONS AND RITUALS

WHAT YOU DO ON NEW YEAR'S SETS THE TONE FOR THE YEAR TO COME.

The second when the Old Year becomes the New is a most significant moment—filled with superstitions and elaborate rituals. It's important to be fully awake and clearheaded when midnight arrives and the turning point is marked by bells, horns and drums—that is the instant when you can consciously direct your fate. You should be joyful during the transition from the old to the new year. The whole idea of the New Year's Eve party is to establish a happy setting as the new year begins. You want to get off on the right foot.



If you like your work and want it to continue in the coming year, you should carry a symbol of your profession throughout New Year's Day. If you wear something new it will help you get new things. Bake or buy a fresh loaf of bread. Don't lend anything during New Year's Day and don't cry.

BRING IN THE NEW, BANISH THE OLD

It's time to turn over a new leaf—to make your New Year's plans and resolutions. Your house should be cleaned and all the garbage put out.

The image of the New Year as a diapered baby being welcomed in as the Old Year is ushered out illustrates an old German idea that was imported into North America during the 1800s. Often the Old Man is shown



as Father Time with a scythe that he uses to cut off the past. The use of a baby to symbolize the New Year goes back over 2,500 years to the

ancient Greeks. They had a festival that celebrated the return of the growing season and during the feast, the god of vegetation was presented as a constantly returning baby.

TAKE NOTHING OUT OF THE HOUSE

New Year's Day is a period that controls your luck during the coming year. It's considered unlucky to take anything of value out of the house because it sets a pattern where other valuable things might start leaving. Ashes from the fireplace that are created on New Year's Day are considered good luck—don't throw any of them out or you may be sweeping good fortune out the door. If you trim your fingernails on New Year's Day don't throw the cuttings out until January 2nd.



You should bring good things into your house and accept any gifts. Especially gifts of money and sweet foods. But you should make sure that all the good stuff comes in to your place before you give anything out. There's an old New Year's saying: "Take out, then take in, Bad luck will begin. Take in, then take out, Good luck comes about."

PAY ATTENTION TO MONEY MATTERS

Ideally, you will pay all your debts or as many as possible before New Year's Eve. Don't make any payments on New Year's Day or you may end up paying out money all year. Make sure that there is money in your pocket throughout New Year's Day and see that everyone in your family has a least one coin in their own pocket. On the last day of the year, put some money outside your house—under a tree or a bush. Then bring it in on New Year's Day.

FIRSTS

Many superstitions involve the First Person You Meet during or after an important event. In several Greek



myths, the hero is told to marry the first person he meets, or say some words of special importance, or kill them, or all three. An ancient wedding custom requires that anybody who meets a bridal procession should accompany the bride to the church, because that person embodies the luck you "find" on the path of life.

In Scotland, the welfare and prosperity of the coming year is thought to depend on the first person who comes to pay a visit. That person is known as the First Footer. In order to insure good luck, the First Footer should be male, tall, not flat-footed, not have eyebrows that meet in the middle and carry an evergreen branch which he leaves in the house. If he fits the description he is known as "the lucky bird". The First Footer can also bring in a shovelful of coal, a piece of iron, a log of firewood or a bottle of scotch whiskey. Almost everything associated with the First Footer is dark. Dark things are thought of as dangerous and powerful, so you want to get them on your side as soon as possible. Everything the First Footer brings into the house must be used up inside the house: nothing brought in by him should be taken out or your good luck will escape.



NOISE

The moment when the Old Year becomes the New is a moment when evil spirits can slip past your guard. Things must be done to keep them away. Loud noises can scare them off. Which is one reason New Year's is marked with the blowing of horns and the banging of drums. Shouting, screaming, whistling, ringing bells and the firing of guns have from time to time been part of the New Year's moment. In Russia, drums are beaten in every room of the house in order to make sure that evil spirits have been driven out—particular attention is given to corners. Making noise is also symbolic of initiation rituals and new beginnings; it's like banging on a door to make it open.



BEING TOGETHER

Being together with friends and family as the Old

Year gives way to the New goes back for thousands of years. The ancient Romans had a New Year's bonding ritual where people kissed each other in public in order to demonstrate their good will and affection.

These days, an effort is made to make the New Year's celebration distinctly different from Christmas. Christmas is for families and particularly for children. The celebration is primarily private and the overriding theme religious. New Year's is for adult couples and singles. The parties are public and held late at night after the children are in bed. There is a lot of alcohol and often a tone of open sexuality.

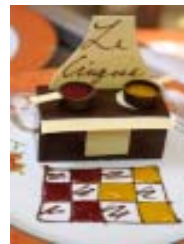
THE FOODS OF NEW YEARS

FOODS OF ABUNDANCE AND FOODS OF RESPECT

Many people believe that the foods and drinks of New Year's Eve will influence life during the coming year. On New Year's Eve the ancient Romans set out huge tables covered with food and decorated evergreen branches. They believed that the foods on the table were an omen for the next year and embodied their future luck. Both the quantity and the variety were

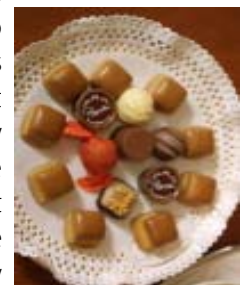


important; if you left anything out you risked not having it in the New Year. Accordingly, the table contained samples of all your favorite foods and in substantial quantities.



Foods of abundance also include things that signify "many". Italians insist on New Year's dishes that include lentils. People from the Middle East have sesame seeds and pomegranates. A pomegranate has so many seeds that it has been a symbol of abundance for at least four thousand years. Pomegranates often show up at weddings as well as New Year's.

The foods we traditionally serve at New Year's often show two aspects of life. One group is expensive and extravagant. They indicate our desire to have lots of good stuff in the next year. But alongside the foods of extravagance are foods that are simple, inexpensive and easy to make. Together the two groups balance each other. We put out caviar and champagne to show that we enjoy and appreciate the richness of life, but we also present foods that are simple, inexpensive and easy to make in order to show



that we are honest, frugal, opposed to waste and respectful of our good fortune.

HOPING FOR THE SWEET LIFE

Sweetness is a metaphor for the good fortune people hope to have in the New Year. Accordingly, sweet fruits and dried fruits like



figs, dates and raisins are eaten and given as gifts. So are honey cakes and candies. In France, a traditional New Year's cake is a pyramid of small balls of pastry stuffed with cream and covered with a sugary glaze—a symbol of both sweetness and abundance. The French also give jars of chestnuts in sweet syrup. And chocolate plays an important role, symbolizing the rich and sweet hopes that the giver has for the recipient. By the same token, sour and bitter foods are usually avoided.



HEADS UP

In some cultures, the heads of animals are included in the meal because the central theme is "first" and the head is considered to come first. Also, we often consider the first to be the "most important." The "first" person (the "head") rules and so the first moment "rules" everything that comes after. As a result, heads are an important symbolic food at New Year's. On New Year's Jews serve fish with the heads on. Fish are symbols of both abundance and fertility. Italians, Moroccans and Greeks have New Year's dishes with brains as the primary ingredient. Yemeni and Afghan cooks prepare whole sheep's heads. In some European cultures, New Year's dishes include tongue because the tongue is in the head.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Foods eaten during the New Year's celebration often have symbolic shapes. Breads and cakes that are usually long will be rounded for New Year's. The circle expresses your hope for a "well-rounded" year. It also "keeps the luck from escaping out of the end." Round pasta dishes will be served instead of those that have ends like spaghetti or linguini.



GETTING RID OF THE LEFTOVERS

The idea that leftovers should be used before the New Year begins is also very strong. We want to "start

from scratch." Accordingly, there are many recipes that do a great job of turning leftovers into festive dishes. The British do it with potted Stilton cheese served with port wine.

New Year's is also the time to eat something new or unusual, under the theory that people are hoping for new experiences in the coming year.

THE BALL'S OVER

Modern technology has no interest in using the moon or the sun to tell us when a year has passed. An oscillator that measures time by the transition of electrons between two specific orbits of the cesium atom informs us that when 9,192,631,770 beats have taken place another year is over. In New York the announcement is made when a glittering ball slides



down a pole, reaching the base at midnight. The dropping ball is actually an old maritime custom that was used in ports all over the world. The ball would drop each day at noon as a visual signal to the ships in harbor that it was time to reset their chronometers.



TO LEARN MORE . . .

THE BOOK OF THE YEAR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR SEASONAL HOLIDAYS

By ANTHONY F. AVENI, Ph.D.

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LE CIRQUE 2000

455 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10022

TEL: (212) 303-7788

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