

Christmas in Japan is finger-lickin' good

BY CASEY UEBELHOR

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Less than one percent of Japan's population is Christian.

(Note: Although Shinto and Buddhist practices are still carried out at shrines and cultural centers regularly, most Japanese are self-describe as non-religious. It is possible to be secularly Shinto and Buddhist, and the majority of Japanese (over 90%) identify secularly with Shintoism and Buddhism in some form or in some combination.)

Still, Christmas is 'a thing' in Japan, and

that's thanks to the early 20th century entrepreneur, restaurateur and provocateur, Harland David Sanders, otherwise known around the world as *the Colonel*.

Yes, we're talking about Colonel Sanders here, the white-suit-wearing, chicken-frying Kentuckian with wispy hair and a stylized Van Dyke goatee. In Japan, Colonel Sanders is basically Santa Claus. No joke.

Throughout December, Japanese chicken lovers delight in likenesses of the Colonel costumed just like the jolly old elf. The company puts 'Santa Colonel' everywhere they can — street corners, bill boards, all across

the internet. (A large number of Kentucky Fried Chicken locations in Japan have life-sized, plastic likenesses of the Colonel smiling beside their doors year round. The chummy Kentuckian's arms extend slightly, fingers open, as if he is just about to offer you a hug.)

A bit of history: the fast-food chain, now simply known as KFC, first tested the Japanese market in 1970. Then, in 1974, the company launched a promotional campaign, "Kentucky for Christmas."

That campaign literally changed Japanese holiday norms. A special bucket called "the party barrel" was introduced, and December 24 and 25 were characterized as times for fun and family gathering. Western commercialized representations of Christmas took hold, and people caught on fast. Today, customers wait hours (seriously) to grab red cardboard buckets of fried wings and thighs. Favorite KFC sides in Japan are rice and American-style french fries.

It is true that Japanese cities do get festive around Christmas time with contemporary, highly stylized street decorations of twinkle lights and western songs (*Jingle Bells, We Wish You a Merry Christmas*), but according to Japanese language teacher, Michael Kluemper, Christmas in Japan is a "novelty holiday." In fact, Kluemper says most Japanese don't even decorate for the occasion.

"Would you decorate for Ground Hog's Day?" Kluemper jokes.

Those that don't honor the KFC commercial ritual often treat Christmas as a romantic holiday similar to Valentine's Day (which the Japanese also celebrate on February 14). On Japanese Valentine's, women purchase romantic gifts for men. Then, on March 14, White Day is celebrated, at which time men purchase romantic gifts for women. Kluemper explains that White Day was "just totally created by chocolat-

iers," the common gift for the occasion being white chocolate candy.

The most important winter holiday for the Japanese is New Years. Vacations from work begin around December 27 and last until the first or second week of January, similar to American custom. Post cards are sent to every friend and family member (and even acquaintances). The post cards are specially marked, Kluemper explains, held by the postal service and delivered on New Years Day, at which time a person might receive 20 to 30 postcards at once. Children dress in their finest kimonos, and folks take part in ceremonies at temples and shrines.

"It is a big deal," Kluemper says of New Years in Asia. Bamboo and pine are traditional household decorations; nearly every town celebrates spectacularly with parades, concerts and possibly the greatest fireworks displays in the world.

Just so you know, 2019 will be the year of the boar, which is the twelfth and final animal in the twelve year Chinese/Japanese zodiac cycle.

Tell Japanese acquaintances, "I wish you will have a good new year," by saying "Yoitoshio!" And to celebrate New Years the way the Japanese do, a bento box from your favorite Japanese joint should suffice. Traditional Japanese New Year fare is known as *osechi ryori*. These favorite dishes (candied chestnut and sweet potatoes, simmered shrimp, pickled chrysanthemum turnip, etc.) are often served in stackable, multi-level bento box style serving trays.

Michael Kluemper is a Dubois County native who taught for three years in Japan before returning to the states in 1993. His first American teaching job was at Forest Park, where he taught Jr. high art. In 1999, Kluemper started teaching high school Japanese, eventually developing his own English to Japanese language curriculum.

From 2001-08 he served as a board member for the National Council of Japanese Language Teachers. He has also worked on national task forces for the implementation of Japanese AP courses. Kluemper currently teaches Japanese at Atherton High School, Louisville.

Find Kluemper's textbooks, including "Beginning Japanese Textbook: An Integrated Approach to Language and Culture," at the usual online book sellers, including Amazon.

And to you and your family, *Yoitoshio!*



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