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A Happy New Year Around the World

Cultures across continents mark the year’s turn with food noise and shared optimism

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As the world prepares to mark the end of one year and the beginning of another, communities across continents engage in rituals that transform the simple passage of time into a moment of heightened meaning. Anthropologists have long noted that the turn of the year is not experienced as a smooth transition but as a liminal threshold—a period when ordinary rules are suspended and societies collectively seek to manage

uncertainty through ritual.

In Japan, the final hours of December 31 are marked by the solemn ringing of temple bells in a ceremony known as Joya no Kane. Across the country, Buddhist monks strike massive bronze bells exactly 108 times, each toll representing one of the earthly desires that, according to Buddhist doctrine, bind humans to suffering. The ritual is highly structured: 107 strikes occur before midnight, with the final toll ushering in January 1. The sound is intended not as celebration but as purification, cleansing participants of past burdens and preparing them for renewal.

In contrast, Denmark's New Year's Eve tradition is far more chaotic. Danes collect chipped or unused plates throughout the year and, on December 31, hurl them at the doors of friends and neighbors. The resulting pile of broken porcelain is seen as a sign of affection and social capital—the more shards on your doorstep, the more friends you have. While this practice has declined in urban areas due to practical concerns, it remains a vivid example of how noise and destruction can be reinterpreted as positive forces during moments of transition.

Noise-making is nearly universal at New Year's. In Romania, villagers don bear costumes and parade through towns accompanied by drummers, their rhythmic processions meant to drive away evil spirits. In the Philippines and Latin America, families bang pots and pans at midnight to create a protective cacophony. Even animal sounds are watched closely; Romanian farmers believe that if livestock make noise at midnight, it portends bad luck for the coming year.

Food also plays a central role in New Year's rituals worldwide. In Spain, people gather around televisions or in public squares to eat twelve grapes—one for each stroke of midnight—believing that success in this rapid-fire challenge will bring good fortune for each month ahead. The grapes are often a special variety grown under paper bags to ensure thin skins and sweetness, timed perfectly for harvest in late December. Portugal has a similar custom involving twelve raisins, with each raisin eaten alongside a wish for the coming year.

In the Southern United States, families prepare Hoppin’ John—a dish made from black-eyed peas (symbolizing coins), collard greens (paper money), cornbread (gold), and pork (progress). This meal has roots in West African traditions brought by enslaved people and is believed to bring prosperity if eaten on New Year’s Day. Italy and Chile share a focus on lentils for their resemblance to coins; Italians pair them with sausage just after midnight, while Chileans may eat only a spoonful at midnight to ensure abundance.

Other cultures emphasize abundance through quantity rather than symbolism. In Estonia, it is customary to eat seven, nine, or twelve meals on New Year’s Eve—numbers considered lucky—leaving leftovers for ancestral spirits who are believed to visit during this time.

Fire is another common element in New Year’s rituals. In Ecuador and Colombia, families construct effigies called Años Viejos—often caricatures of disliked public figures or representations of personal misfortune—and burn them at midnight. The act is both cathartic and symbolic: by incinerating these figures, communities hope to destroy the negativity of the past year. In Russia, individuals write wishes on slips of paper, burn them over candles during the final seconds before midnight, mix the ashes into champagne, and drink it before the last chime fades—a ritual combining fire with ingestion to internalize hopes for the future.

Physical movement also features prominently in many traditions. In Brazil’s coastal cities, millions dressed in white wade into the ocean at midnight to jump over seven waves—each leap accompanied by a wish and an offering to Iemanjá, goddess of the sea. In Colombia and Mexico, people run around their neighborhoods with empty suitcases at midnight in hopes of ensuring travel opportunities in the coming year. Danes leap off chairs at midnight to “jump” into January safely; Scots await their “first foot”—the first visitor after midnight—who ideally brings gifts symbolizing warmth and sustenance.

Divination practices persist in parts of Europe. In Germany and Finland, families melt small lead or tin figures over candles and pour them into cold water; the resulting shapes are interpreted as omens for the coming year. Due to health regulations

banning lead products in recent years, many now use wax instead.

Material objects also play a role in attracting luck or love. Italians and Spaniards wear new red underwear on New Year’s Eve—a color associated with passion and fertility—while Swiss celebrants drop ice cream on their floors at midnight as an offering for abundance. In Puerto Rico and Cuba, families throw buckets of water out windows or doors at midnight to expel bad luck from their homes.

Some traditions have evolved into public spectacles unique to local identity. While New York City drops its famous crystal ball in Times Square each year—a practice dating back to 1907—other American towns have developed their own versions: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania drops a giant marshmallow Peep; Boise lowers an illuminated potato; Key West celebrates with a conch shell or even a drag queen descending inside a high-heeled shoe.

Despite their diversity in form and meaning—from solemn bell-ringing to exuberant food challenges—these rituals share common goals: warding off evil influences from the past year while inviting prosperity into the next. Whether through sound, food, fire, movement or symbolic acts within the home, communities around the world continue to mark this temporal edge with creativity and conviction. Each tradition reflects both local history and universal human concerns about fate, fortune and renewal as one year gives way to another.