

[SCENE]

Simply smashing

While building biceps, rice pounding strengthens a New Year's tradition in Japanese-American families

By Kimberly Palmer
Special to the Tribune

Wielding a brand-new, 10-pound wooden pestle, Tsutomu Terabayashi repeatedly smashed a handful of sticky rice in a bowl until a tasty warm ball formed. But it wasn't a one-man job—plenty of youngsters were eager to help.

"The kids wanted to try it by themselves, so one of the big guys held [the pestle] with one of the kids," said Chie Sugino, vice consul at the Japan Information Center, part of the Consulate General of Japan at Chicago, which hosted a rice-pounding party with the Japanese Rugby Football Club for about 150 visitors earlier this month.

The center had planned on using an electronic rice-pounding machine to do most of the work, but participants were so eager to pound by hand that they relied mostly on muscle power. Terabayashi said they made more than 75 pounds of sticky rice.

Pounded rice, or mochi, is one of the staple foods of Japanese New Year, partly because it can be made ahead of time and frozen, then quickly turned into soups or snacks with the addition of sesame powder, sugar or soy sauce. The New Year holiday called Oshogatsu, lasts from Jan. 1 to 3 and is dedicated to resting and visiting friends and family.

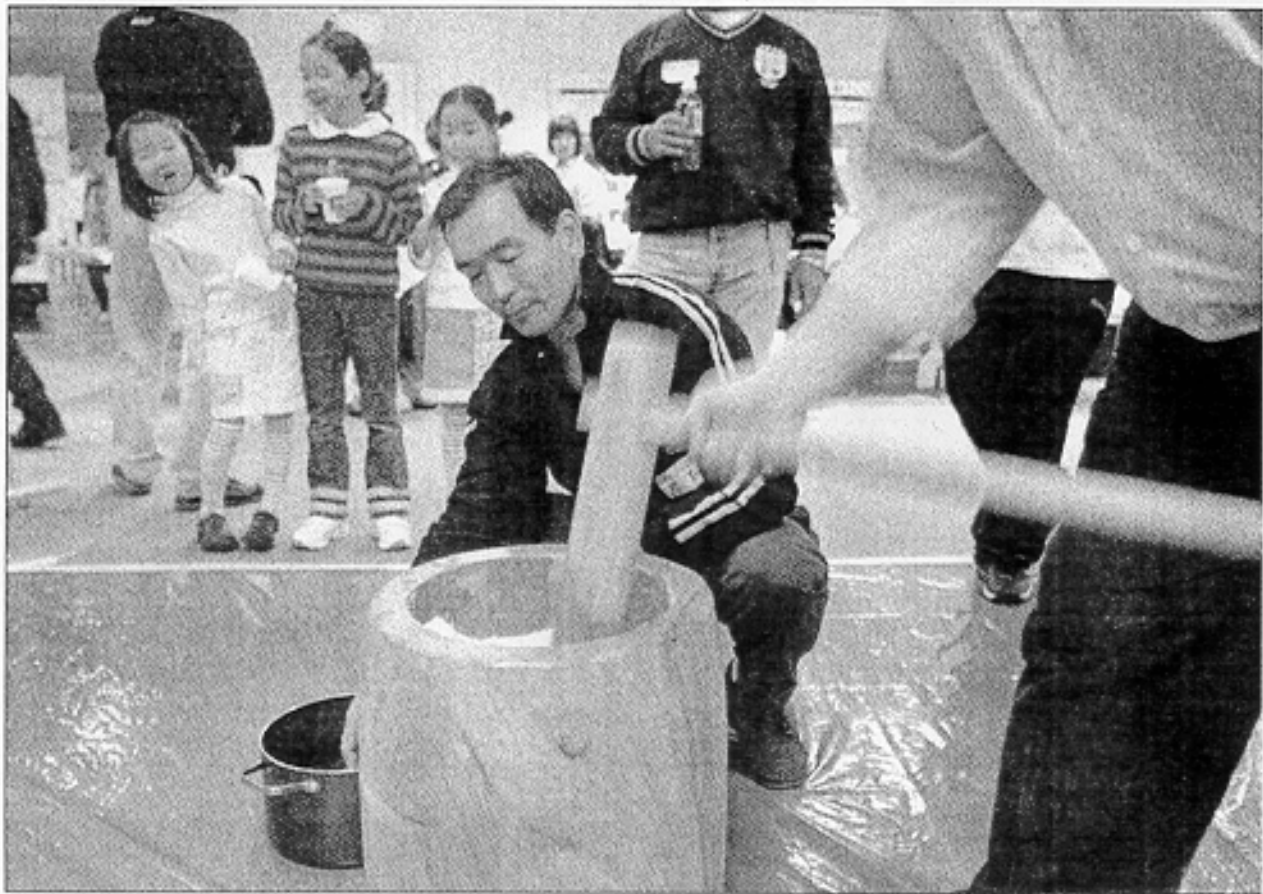
Traditionally, Japanese families pounded rice with wooden bowls and pestle to form mochi balls, but today many families buy prepared mochi.

"Japanese children who live in the Chicago area have no chance to experience this kind of Japanese culture. That's why we want to do it," said Terabayashi, manager of the rugby club, which is one of several organizations in Chicago trying to keep the tradition from disappearing.

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Yukari Oharu digs into a bowl of mochi.



Tak Haruna (left) prepares mochi at a recent rice-pounding party at the Consulate General of Japan at Chicago. Participants were eager to try their muscle power. After all that pounding, warm sticky rice balls emerged.

Photos for the Tribune by Michael...

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For some Japanese-American parents, rice-pounding parties provide a fun opportunity to pass on their heritage. "I'm trying to keep [Japanese culture] alive in my children," said Andy Sato, an aikido instructor at the Japanese Culture Center in Lake View, who did not attend this particular party. "I tell them they can take the best of both worlds, and take them to every cultural event we have, whether they are open to it or not," he added with a laugh.

His mother-in-law, Alice Esaki, learned about Japanese New Year when she traveled to Japan in 1938 to live with her grandmother. She remembered going to the Buddhist temple at midnight and ringing the bell 108 times, the traditional Buddhist number representing human evils or frailties.

"My grandmother used to tell me that it takes away your sins. I used to say it is just like New Year's resolutions," said Esaki, who is now 79 and lives in Chicago.

Because she lived in such a small village, Esaki and her neighbors would steam their rice and then pound it together, traveling from one house to the next. "In our house there were just women, so all the healthy guys would come over and do the pounding for us," she said.

Today, strong men are still in demand for pounding duty. "It's time-consuming and you've got to have some muscle," said Mary Tracy, media coordinator for the Japan Information Center. "Watching older people do it is the most amazing thing. The older man

Tak Haruna (left) prepares mochi at a recent rice-pounding party at the Consulate General of Japan at Chicago. Participants were eager to test their muscle power. After all that pounding, warm sticky rice balls emerged.



is whacking it, and the older ladies are flipping it, and it's piping hot. One person makes a sound that becomes like a chant, so nobody gets creamed." If one person is out of sync, the pestle can smash fingers.

At Midwest Buddhist Temple in Old Town, all types of people were invited to practice rice pounding on Dec. 30. "There is a volunteer group from judo and aikido classes, who are a bunch of muscled people, but even though I do not have muscle I am invited to pound," said the temple's Rev. Koshin Ogui.

Itaru Yoshinaga, an instructor at the Tohkon Judo Academy, remembered pounding rice in Kyushu, Japan's southern island, when he was growing up. "You could hear at 4 in the morning the sound of pounding rice," he said.

Before resting for three days, Yoshinaga remembered, he would clean. "You clean up everything, physically, in your house, and in your car. You reflect on what you did in the last year, what was a bad thought, and what was a good thought, to clarify your mind," he said.

Then, after the first bath of the New Year, he added, "You feel really different, like a millionaire."

The mochi, because it is flavored with salty and sugary flavorings, can be eaten throughout the three-day holiday, which provides a break from normal cooking routines.

"Usually my mother works very hard to prepare every dish, and cleaning the house. Then she takes a rest on Jan. 2, totally, the whole day. My mother says, 'We do not do any household matter on Jan. 2,'" said Tomomi

Nomura, a police officer in Japan who is living in Chicago while she completes her graduate studies.

People of Japanese ancestry in Chicago also visit the temple on New Year's Eve. Rev. Ogui of the Midwest Buddhist Temple offers a 10:30 p.m. service. After ringing the bell 108 times, Ogui will lead visitors into the temple's social hall for buckwheat noodles. "The noodles bring out the old year, and [represent] long spirits and long life," he said. The temple also serves sake as well as Champagne, for a Western touch.

Another East-West confluence provided a teaching opportunity to Alice Esaki. After taking her grandchildren to the Tom Cruise movie "The Last Samurai," she talked to them about her husband's grandfather.

"He was one of those samurai, teaching common farm kids how to read and write which was against the rules at the time," she said. "The most important thing is for me to teach them the honor and pride of their heritage."

Mitsuwa Marketplace, at 100 E. Algonquin Rd. in Arlington Heights, will have a rice pounding demonstration beginning around noon Friday. The Tohkon Judo Academy, at 4427 N. Clark St., will have a rice-pounding ceremony from 8 a.m. to noon Jan. 10.