



Year of the Snake

VIETNAMESE

New Year's name

Tết (pronounced "Thet"), short for Tết Nguyên Đán

Translated to mean "first morning of the first day"

Date in 2013

Feb. 10, Year of the Snake

Tết is based on the lunar calendar, which follows the moon's orbit around the Earth. Tết always falls on the second new moon after the winter solstice.

Special foods prepared for Tết

Mứt ("muyt"): Candied fruits.

Bánh Chưng: Sticky rice with mung beans and pork wrapped and cooked in banana leaves in a perfect square shape. This represents the Earth.

Bánh Dày ("baan zay"): Round cake made with rice flour. This represents the sun.

Journey with Newspapers In Education and Wing Luke Museum to learn how different Asian Americans celebrate the New Year!

Asian Americans bring with them many holidays from their ancestral homelands. One of the most important celebrations is the New Year.

Learn about Tết, the Vietnamese New Year, through the experiences of Thanh Ton and her family. Thanh is a Vietnamese American who was born in Saigon and raised in San Francisco. Now Thanh lives in Seattle with her husband, Kiet Ly, and their three children, Xuan, Minh and Dat. Thanh and Kiet remember celebrating traditions preserved by their own parents, who immigrated to the U.S. in 1975.

NEW YEAR'S TRADITIONS

Thanh associates the New Year with the smell of incense from offerings to family ancestors and to the Kitchen God, a legendary figure who watches over the kitchen and family. Her husband remembers midnight mass at the Catholic Church and the Hoa Mai (a small flowering tree native to Vietnam, believed to bring happiness, luck and prosperity), which his father would coax into blooming early, just in time for Tết.

Although their memories differ because of their religious backgrounds, Thanh and Kiet both recollect the excitement of Tết — preparing special foods, cleaning the house and getting new clothes. Thanh recalls, "Everyone is happy, because it's like re-starting the year. At midnight, we give New Year wishes to family. When I was at school in Connecticut, I would stay up until 3 a.m. just to call my parents in San Francisco and wish them a happy New Year."

Thanh and Kiet also remember many visitors coming to their homes. Kiet explains, "The first guest after the New Year is important because he/she sets the tone for the next year. So my parents always wanted someone who was honorable and happy." Visitors would be served tea and mứt (special sweetened dried fruits). Children would wish their elders happiness and good health, and in return, they would receive advice and encouragement along with a li-xi ("lee-see"), a red envelope with money inside.

BEING UNIQUELY AMERICAN

Traditionally in Vietnam, Tết lasted 14 days and was a country-wide celebration. Kiet explains how families here may observe Tết on the weekend immediately following New Year's Day. "Communities with large Vietnamese populations often hold community events such as the Tết Festival at the Seattle Center so the community can get together and feel the essence of Tết," he says.

At home, Thanh and Kiet confess that their celebration is not as elaborate as that of their parents. But Tết is still a big deal, and Thanh expresses the desire to pass on some ceremonial aspects to their children. "We tell them not to sweep the good luck out of the house, teach them how to offer good wishes to their elders, tell them to be happy, and give them li-xi. I light incense with my kids as part of my Buddhist background ... so they would have the same memories that I have."

LOOKING AT YOUR OWN FAMILY TRADITIONS

Does your family have traditions and holidays that are important to preserve? How have these traditions been preserved, changed or combined through the years?



All photographs courtesy of Kiet Ly

Celebrate New Year in the Chinatown-International District

Opening Celebration — Saturday, Feb. 2 (10 a.m.– 5 p.m.)
Wing Luke Museum (8th Avenue South and South King Street)
wingluke.org/2013newyear

11 a.m. Lion Dance
12–3 p.m. Zodiac scavenger hunt and stuffed animal petting zoo, New Year passport, games, crafts and prizes!

Celebrate the arrival of Year of the Snake with your students or private group. From interactive storytelling to cultural art activities, your group will experience many exciting New Year traditions. For more information, please contact the tour coordinator at 206.623.5124, ext. 133, or tours@wingluke.org.