

Chinese New Year

“Gung Hay Faat Choy”
“Gong Xi Fa Cai”



Did you know? Over 3 million people in the US celebrate Chinese New Year



Meet Jimmy Wong

Learn about Chinese New Year from Jimmy Men Yem Wong, who came from China to the US in 1939 when he was just 19 years old. He settled in Seattle, where he worked as a waiter, served in World War II with the US Navy, and raised his family. He recalls traditions from his village in China in an interview with his daughter, Chris Chinn.

NEW YEAR TRADITIONS

On New Year's Eve as a kid in China, Jimmy remembers feasts of special foods such as goose, taro, bean curd (tofu) soup, oysters, lettuce and "tay" (sweet pastry). What you eat during the New Year may give you extra luck, money and prosperity. Many foods sound similar to es and good luck. Jimmy shares, "Eat lettuce, 'soong toy', that means 'always get lots of money'", and "Oyster, in Chinese name is 'fool hall' that means 'rich' translated". Delicious dishes are shared with family to celebrate a good start for the year to come.

He also remembers how the New Year began the next day: "Chinese new year---they have firecrackers and get up early in the morning, get up about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning!"

There would be red envelopes with money inside which parents and grandparents would give out to children for good luck on New Year's Day, accompanied by a traditional greeting to wish prosperity and good times. Jimmy explains, "'Gung hay faat choy' - that means everybody make good money!"

In China, the New Year is based on the lunar calendar which follows the phases of the moon. Chinese New Year is on the second new moon after the winter solstice, which can fall between mid-January and mid-February.

In Jimmy's village, the celebration lasted for many days and family members took a vacation from work to be home for the holidays. Jimmy remembers New Year's activities such as playing games of luck and a lion dance, performed on the second day of the New Year to scare away bad spirits and bring prosperity to the local shops and businesses.

Traditionally, the new year observance ended with the first full moon and a festival of brightly colored lanterns. The Lantern Festival often included a parade led by the dragon, one of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac and believed to bring wisdom and good fortune to the new year.

BEING UNIQUELY AMERICAN:

When Jimmy came to the United States, he began celebrating the New Year on January 1st, because that was the "American New Year." He was a member of the Wong Family Association, one of the Chinese social networks that helped immigrants adapt to their new country. The Wong Family Association held an annual New Year's Eve banquet just before midnight on December 31st, and then celebrated again on the 4th day of the new year.

Although New Year celebrations were not based on the Chinese calendar, Jimmy continued many traditions from his village - enjoying special New Year's foods with friends and family, giving out red envelopes, and watching the lion dances in front of Chinatown shops and restaurants.

This year, Chinese New Year will be January 31. Jimmy anticipates celebrating with several generations of his family, including his great grandchildren, and handing out lots of lucky red envelopes!

Celebration Story: Lion Dance

For many people that come down to the Chinatown International District for Chinese New Year, Lion Dancers in their colorful lion costumes are a festive and fun highlight of the celebration. Learn about the Chinese New Year and the Lion Dance through the eyes of Royal Tan, a Chinese American Lion Dancer who trains under Master Mak Fai in Seattle's Chinatown-International District.

LION DANCE TRADITIONS

You might wonder how lions made their way into Chinese New Year traditions. Royal Tan explains, "For Chinese New Year, the Lion Dance is to bring good luck and to ward off evil spirits. The Chinese believe the lion is an auspicious creature and brings good luck... These stories have been passed down from generation to generation and the Lion Dance has been around for thousands of years."

One story takes place in a village in China where a monster called Nian, a word that means year in Chinese, causes problems for the village by eating all of the crops and damaging the buildings. The villagers came up with a solution to scare away the monster: they made a lion costume, played cymbals and drums, and lit firecrackers which saved their village.

The costumes are traditionally made from paper maché over a bamboo frame to make up the lion's head (complete with wagging ears and blinking eyes). A lion's body and tail are made from fur-lined fabric. But the lions really come to life through the partnership of two dancers, with one in charge of the head and the other in charge of the body. The last component of a Lion Dance is the drums and cymbals. Royal says, "The drums are like the lion's heartbeat, they match. When the lion does a different movement there is a different beat. It goes slow or fast, quiet or loud."

Keep your eyes open for a white lion with a rainbow body, a red lion with black hair and a black lion with a green nose. "Traditionally there are only three colors of the lion, as depicted in 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms,' a Chinese novel," Royal tells us. "They are Lui Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei," respectively. These heroic generals and their legends are remembered through the lion costumes. Today, you will see the traditional three colors of lions dancing along with lions of different vibrant colors—you may even see a lion aglow with LED lights. For Royal, the Lion Dance ties him to his Chinese American heritage and culture.



You read about Royal Tan and Mak Fai's Lion Dances, now, [see one in action!](#) What do you notice about the sights and sounds of these dances? What connections can you make to Royal's interview?

Just like any sport or activity, these Lion Dances take a lot of hard work and effort to perform. [Learn just how much work Mak Fai puts into performing these dances all year round.](#)

Flavors of the New Year: Steamed Fish

Ring in the New Year with wishes of abundance and plenty by sharing this traditional dish with your family. Mimi Chan, a Chinatown-International District historian and foodie, cooks steamed fresh fish for her family's New Year's feast and shares her recipe with us. Steamed fresh fish or Nin Nin Yau Yu (in Cantonese) sounds like "to have surplus/plenty year after year". The fish is served whole with the hopes that you finish all the goals you set for yourself, another homophone for the phrase from head to tail in Chinese. With an adult's help, prepare this delicious New Year's staple.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole fish, striped bass or sea bass are a common fish used for this dish
- 3 tablespoons fresh ginger, finely julienned
- 2 scallions, finely julienned with green and white parts separated
- 8 sprigs fresh cilantro, roughly chopped
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons canola oil
- ¼ cup water
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon sugar
- ¼ cup light soy sauce or seasoned soy sauce



1. Thoroughly clean the fish*. Descaling the fish using a knife or fish scaler if you have it; taking care to descale the area by the dorsal fins and head. Cut off the fins using a sharp kitchen shears but make sure to keep the tail! The fish should be cleaned of any internal organs. In the cavity of the fish you may notice a dark red line close to the backbone, use a spoon or the back of your nail to get rid of it. Give the fish a rinse and pat dry. Place on a heat-proof plate for steaming. *Some fish mongers or grocery fish counters may be willing to clean the fish for you as you buy the fish, ask and save some time.

2. Steam the fish. Using either a wok or large stock pot, place a steamer on the bottom with enough water to just about the bottom of the steamer but not touching it. Boil the water using high heat and place the whole fish and plate on the steamer and cover. Cook the fish for 8-9 minutes or until thoroughly cooked, a good way to see if your fish is done is to see if the fish flakes easily after being touched with the tip of a knife. Pour off any water that may have accumulated on the plate during steaming.

3. Prepare the Sauce and Serve. Put ½ of the ginger into a saucepan with two tbs of oil and heat on medium until the ginger begins to sizzle. Add the water, sugar, salt, soy sauce and white pepper to the saucepan until the sauce is brought to a simmer. Add the remaining oil, white parts of the scallions until the scallions start to sizzle and sauce is brought to a simmer. Garnish fish with cilantro, the other ½ of the ginger and scallion greens. Pour the sauce on the fish.

4. Enjoy

Chinese Zodiac

You learned all about the lion dances and the Nian myth that inspired them. Let's learn about another important story behind Chinese New Year's traditions: The story of the Great Race.

In the time of myths and legends, the Jade Emperor wanted a way to tell the time. Unsure of what to name the years in his new calendar, he decided to hold a race in which all of the Animals in the kingdom would compete. From the order of the race winners, the Chinese Zodiac was born.

This year is the year of the rat, the winner of the Great Race. He convinced Ox to let him ride on Ox's back, up until the end of the race, when he jumped off to dart into first place.

Each person born within the year is believed to share the characteristics their assigned animal. Find your zodiac animal in the chart. Afterwards decorate and construct a lucky envelope (template on next page) like the ones mentioned in Jimmy's story. Given from elders to younger members in the family, the money or fortune shared in the envelopes are supposed to grow as the year continues.



Rat • Clever and Ambitious • Born in 1996, 2008, 2020	Ox • Patient and Hardworking • Born in 1997, 2009, 2021	Tiger • Powerful and Daring • Born in 1998, 2010, 2022
Rabbit • Lucky and Kind • Born in 1999, 2011, 2023	Dragon • Energetic and Strong • Born in 2000, 2012, 2024	Snake • Calm and Elegant • Born in 2001, 2013, 2025
Horse • Popular and Independent • Born in 2002, 2014, 2026	Goat/Sheep • Tender-hearted and artistic • Born in 2003, 2015, 2027	Monkey • Happy and Confident • Born in 2004, 2016, 2028
Rooster • Adventurous and Hardworking • Born in 2005, 2017, 2029	Dog • Loyal and Affectionate • Born in 2006, 2018, 2030	Pig • Helpful and Noble • Born in 2007, 2019, 2031

Vocabulary

- **Homophone:** two or more words that sounds similar but have different meanings.
- **Prosperity:** To have wealth and success, usually in terms of material wealth.
- **Chinese New Year:** A celebration, otherwise known as spring festival, that welcomes a start to a New Year. The date is based on the Lunar or Moon Calendar.
- **Myth:** A story that has been told time and time again that usually tries to explain a part of the world around us.
- **Lion Dancer:** A martial artist who studies the movements and choreography of lion dances, performing in a traditional lion costume.
- **Auspicious:** A promise of success, good luck or fortune.
- **Zodiac:** A pattern or sequence that is used to keep track of time passing and the movement of the moon, planet and stars.
- **“Gung Hay Faat Choy”:** A New Year's greeting and wish that translates to “wishing you great happiness and prosperity” in Cantonese. Cantonese is a version of Chinese, or dialect, that is spoken in Southern China. Many of the early Chinese immigrants settling in America came from Southern China.

