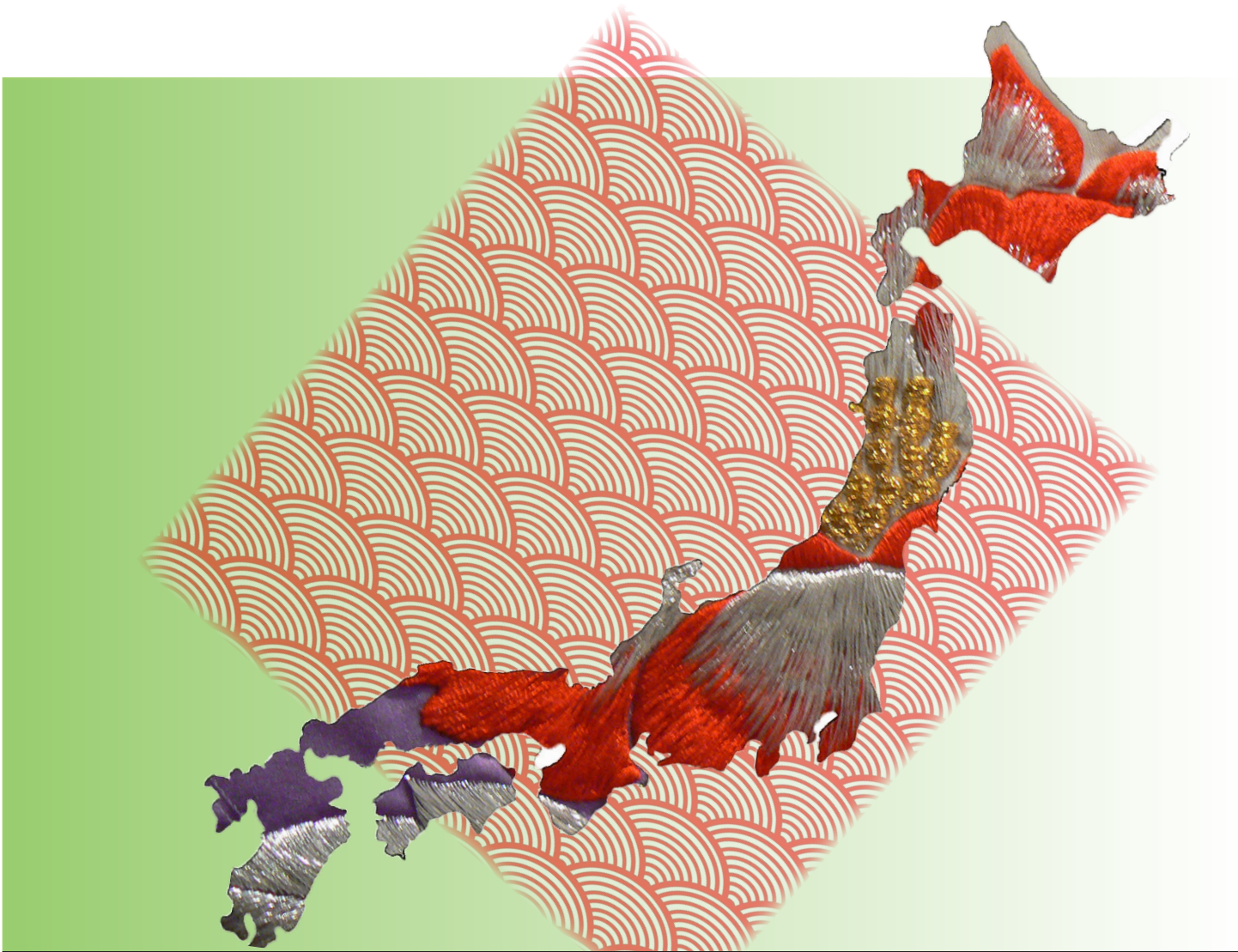




# Japanese New Year

“Akemashite omedetou gozaimasu”  
(Ah-keh-mosh-teh oh-med-deh-toh go-sai-mah-su)



Did you know: In 1873, Japanese New Year began to be celebrated on January 1st? Before, New Year's day was connected to the Lunar Calendar.



Photo Credit: Kenji Theilstrom

# Meet Midori

Learn about Oshogatsu, the Japanese New Year, through the experiences of Midori Kono Thiel. Midori is a Japanese American, born in California and raised in Hawaii. She and her husband, Philip, a third generation German American, have lived in California and Japan before coming to live and work in Seattle.

## NEW YEAR TRADITIONS

Even though she didn't grow up in Japan, Midori remembers performing "Yukiyama" (snow mountain), a special New Year dance about Mount Fujii, at a theater in Seattle's Japantown. Midori recalls the symbolism of the first performance of the year. "The beginning of the year is a time to encourage yourself to be better, no matter what discipline you follow. In Japan, it is the tradition for groups to gather for the first dance, music, martial arts, calligraphy brush painting – the first practice or performance of any art form - to encourage improvement and bring good luck into the new year."

As an alternative to a first performance of the year, many Japanese American organizations here host a new year's dinner for Oshogatsu called Shin Nen Kai (or first gathering of the new year). Japanese Americans may also eat special foods for the new year – such as ozoni, a warm soup featuring pounded rice cake (mochi) that melts in your mouth. Midori notes that several organizations in the Seattle area still make mochi traditionally, pounding the rice with a large blunt wooden mallet and a stone or wooden mortar.

Japanese Americans may also carry on traditions of cleaning their homes and themselves before the new year begins. Midori explains the origins of these practices, "Rooted in Shinto beliefs, the idea is that by cleaning or bathing, you purify yourself. You sweep out the old spirits and put up new year's decorations of pine and bamboo to welcome the good energy. Also, in Japan, people used to make brand new kimono (Japanese dress) as a symbol of a fresh start."

Midori has observed that current generations of Japanese Americans sometimes observe the New Year with a slight twist. "My nephew and his family participate in an annual New Year party that has gotten so big that they need to rent out the gym at our church. The four main families involved take turns doing all the planning and then they bring all the food, set up the volleyball net or board games for the kids. Everyone has a good time," explains Midori.

## BEING UNIQUELY AMERICAN

Midori initially moved to Japan to study woodblock printing, but her interest in Japanese culture was fueled even more by her exposure to Japanese masters and the encouragement of her husband, Philip. Today, Midori continues to practice Japanese dance and visual arts and has served as the artistic director for the Japanese Performing Art series for 20 years.



# Celebration Story: Moon Rabbit

When you look up at the moon, what do you see? For folks in Japan, when they gaze up at the moon they see a rabbit making mochi or rice cakes. What a perfect story to share as families sit down to eat mochi for the New Year. The story is a folk-tale from Japan that has been shared from generations to generations.

Long time ago, there were three friends who lived in the forest, a fox, a monkey and a rabbit. They would play and enjoy each other's company. High above in the sky, there was a wise old man who lived on the moon. Wanting to learn more about the creatures below he changed into a beggar and went down to the forest. The disguised man saw the three friends playing with one another. Walking towards them, he asked for charity and kindness.

"Please! I'm so hungry, would anyone be able to share their food with me?", he said to the friends.

Looking at the man's appearance, the animals were eager to help the sad and hungry person before them. The animals agreed to search in the forest to share what they found with the person.

Monkey climbed up into the trees and spotted a grove of fruit trees. Their fruits were ripe and ready to eat. Monkey began to pick the fruits gathering enough for a feast for the group. He gathered up his bounty and bounded towards where the friends were meeting up.

Fox was an expert hunter as well as a great gatherer. Fox went towards the river where she spotted a few fish by the banks of the shore. Fox leapt and jumped down on the fish, startling them and allowing Fox to seize the opportunity to catch them. Proud, fox was able to bring back two large fishes back to the group of friends.

Rabbit went back the fields where he enjoyed eating his meals. Rabbit, you see, ate the grass, flowers and plants that grew in the fields. Thinking back to the man, Rabbit's spirit dropped as he realized the old man couldn't eat his food. Sadly, the rabbit hopped back to the gathering spot just as the others were preparing their dishes. Fruits were peeled and the fish was cooking over the fire. The old man was pleased at the animal's kindness. But noticed that the rabbit looked very sad. The rabbit began to explain that he could not find food like the others but wanted to help like his friends.

"I was not able to find you a meal but I will offer myself up instead," said the Rabbit as he threw himself onto the fire cooking the fish.

Before a single hair could be burnt, the rabbit began to glow as the old man used his powers to spare the thoughtful and dedicated rabbit. As he did his appearance changed revealing his identity as the man who lived on the moon. To thank the rabbit for his sacrifice and selflessness, the man shared that the rabbit would be rewarded. The man asked the rabbit to come with him to the moon and become immortal, reminding all who saw him about his sacrifice.

That is why as you look up towards the full moon, you may be able to see the rabbit looking down below at you.

[Take a look at this version of the story that is told through animation.](#)

[The rabbit story was inspired by another Chinese folktale. Watch this Chinese folktale version and see what is similar and different between the two stories.](#)

# Taste the New Year: Mochi Recipe

Oshogatsu is an occasion for merriment and enjoying time with your loved ones. Some of the customs from Japan have continued in the United States, including foods that are shared with family during the holiday. Many families prepare osechi (special New Year foods) that they hope will bring good health and peace. For example, long noodles made from buckwheat called soba are eaten on New Year's Eve to ensure a long life, black soy beans called kuromame assure good health, and a fishcake called kamaboko is served because it is pinkish/red and white, which are considered lucky colors.

One popular traditional New Year food is mochi (rice cakes). It is made from sweet rice, which is an important food in Japan. After the rice is cooked and steamed, it is pounded with a heavy wooden mallet in a curved bowl made of cement or in older days, made from a tree trunk.

Some families still make mochi this way, but there are also machines that can cook rice and grind it into mochi. Everyone helps to form the mochi into smaller balls, flattening them down a bit, or wrapping the mochi around sweet pastes made from beans and sugar.

Some mochi will make their way into bowls of ozoni. Ozoni is a mochi dish that changes depending on which family makes it. Different families have their own version of the dish depending on which part of Japan they are from. From sweet red-bean ozoni to a savory light broth with Japanese herbs, ozoni is the flavor of the New Year for many.

Another type of mochi is made with glutinous rice flour called mochiko and baked in the oven instead of pounding. You can make a dessert mochi at home with this recipe!

## Apricot Mochi

Ingredients:

1 box mochiko (or any glutinous rice flour & use 3 cups plus 1 T.) *plus a few teaspoons more to sprinkle on after baking if desired.*

2 1/4 cups sugar

2 3oz package apricot jello (or can use peach or orange)

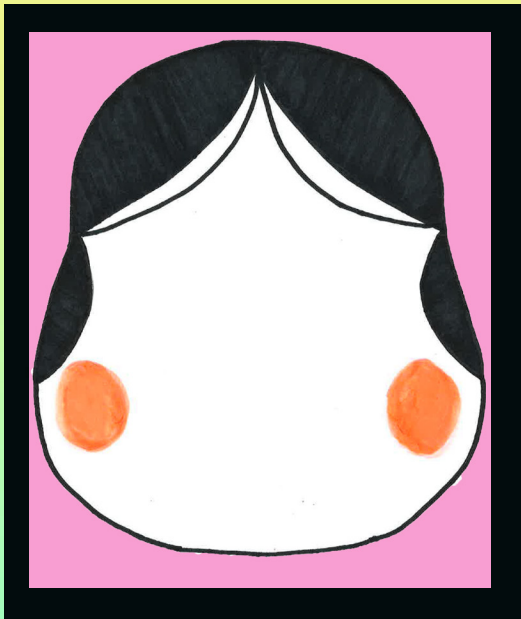
1 1/2 cup water

12 oz can apricot nectar (or other types of juice depending on the jello)

Mix all ingredients well (use beater or wire whip). Pour into 9x13 inch pan well coated with cooking spray. Cover with foil and bake in 350° oven for 55 minutes. Remove from oven but leave foil on pan for 15 minutes and don't peek. Cut up. Sprinkle with mochiko. (Tip: Use a plastic knife for easier cutting).

**Reprinted with permission from the Seattle Betsuin Buddhist Women's Association Centennial Cookbook 1901-2001.**

# Craft Activity: Fukuwarai



Fukuwarai Face

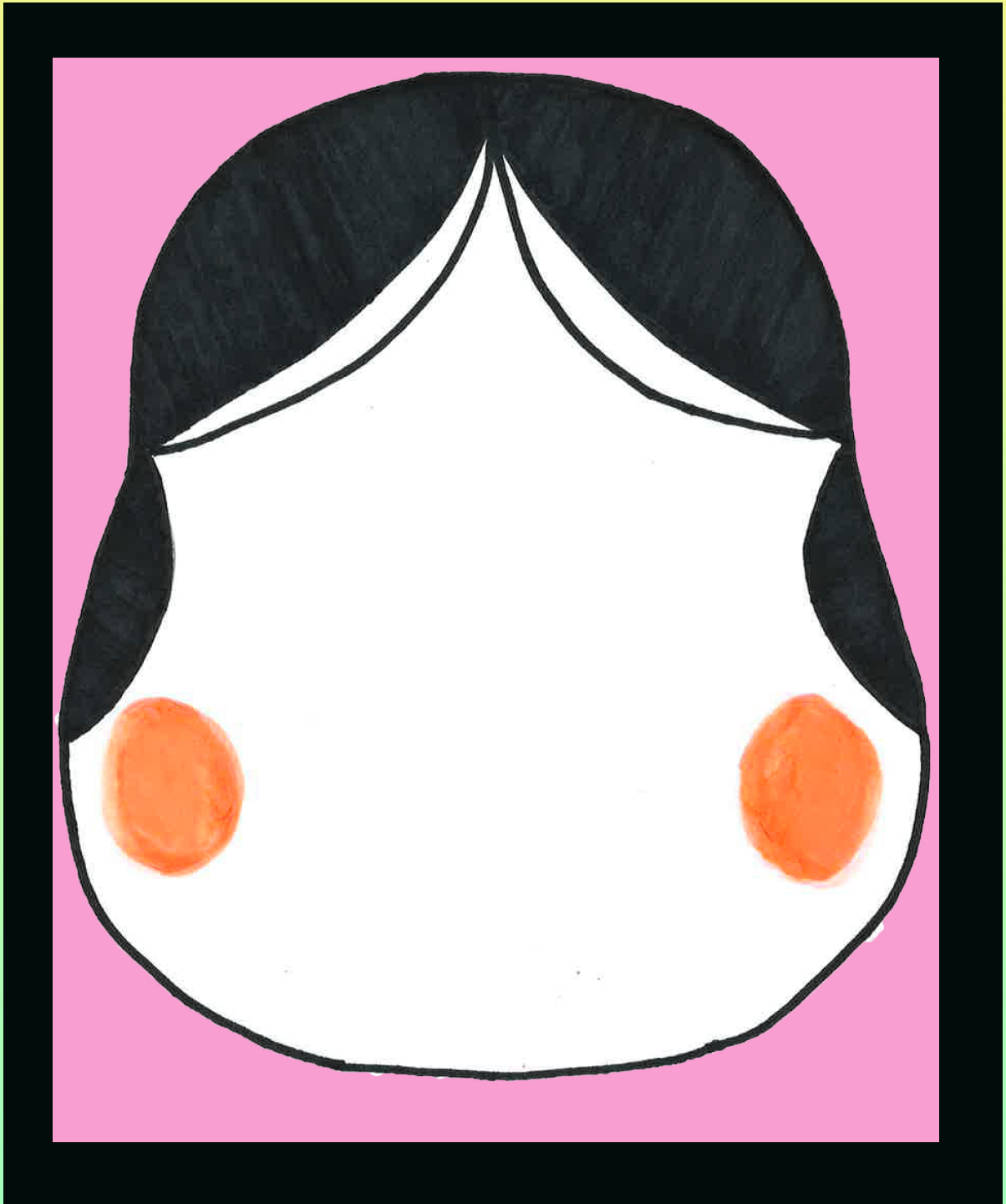
Start out your New Year with a hearty laugh. According to Japanese traditions, as you laugh at the start of the year good luck and fortune come to you.

Fukuwarai or “lucky laugh” has been making families laugh together for generations. Like pin the tail on the donkey, you try to make the face by placing the features on one-by-one BLINDFOLDED! Print out, cut and try out our fukuwarai face and facial features. Play with friends or family and take turns creating funny

## Vocabulary

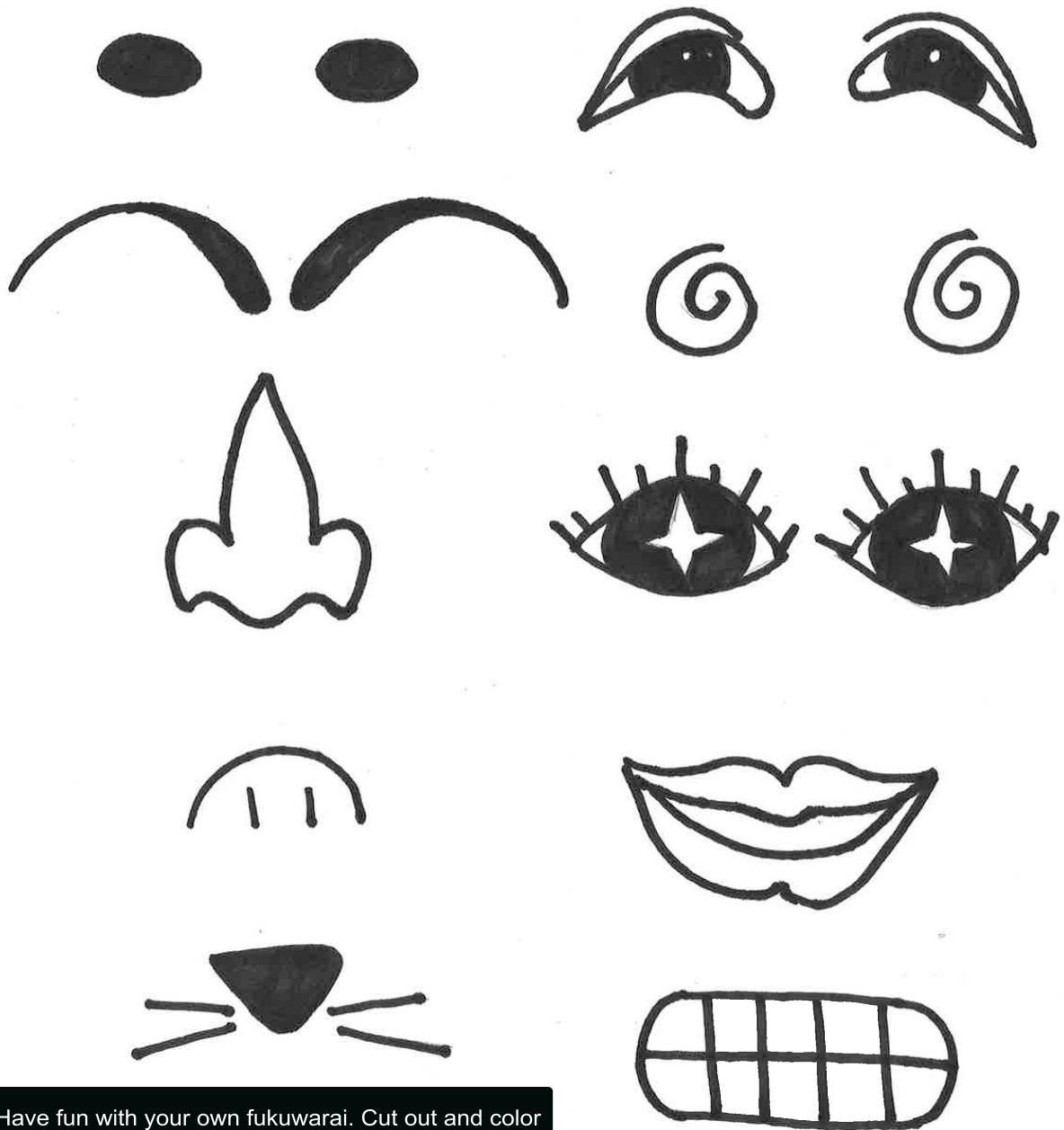
- **Calligraphy:** the process of writing words in Japanese (or any language) in ink by brush or by pen. Calligraphy can be very artistic and stylish, sharing the meaning of the words by how the characters are written.

- **Japantown:** A neighborhood where there is or historically was Japanese businesses, grocery stores, restaurants and families. In Seattle, our Japantown or Nihonmachi, is located in the Chinatown International District was one of the largest ethnic neighborhoods in Seattle before World War II and the Japanese American Incarceration.
- **Kamaboko:** Fish cake that has been de-boned, lightly flavored and then steamed into cakes. Kamaboko are usually decorated with images of the New Year season and/or colorfully patterned with the design revealing itself as it is cut into slices.
- **Kuromame:** A popular osechi food, the dish is made from Japanese black beans that have been simmered in a sweet soy sauce. The dish is said to represent wishes for good health and hopes for hard work.
- **Mochi:** Steamed sweet sticky rice that has been pounded to form a cake. For some families coming together to make mochi, mochi-tsuki (or making), is yearly get together at the new year.
- **Oshogatsu:** the Japanese name for the New Year and its associated traditions.
- **Osechi:** Traditional New Year foods that are typically served in beautiful lacquered boxes. Some of the dishes have special meanings that share wishes of good luck for the next year.
- **Ozoni:** A traditional soup/stew that contains mochi within it. The style and flavor of the dish depends on the region and household that prepares the dish with many different varieties.
- **Purify:** To make ceremonially clean either through ritual or thought.
- **Shin nen kai:** Translates to “New Year Gathering”, it is a party with coworkers and family to celebrate the New Year.
- **Shinto:** A religion in Japan made up around specific rituals and traditions that celebrate one’s ancestors and nature. Many shinto practices make up how Japanese New Year is celebrated.



Fukuwarai Face





Have fun with your own fukuwarai. Cut out and color the eyebrows, noses and mouths to add to your fukuwarai. Close your eyes or put on a blindfold and try to put the face together without looking. Have a friend or family member play with you for extra laughs as the faces come together with very funny results. Draw and color your own faces pieces too!