

あけましておめでとうございます！ Happy New Year! I hope this year brings everyone happiness and good health. I am feeling rested and relaxed after my long weekend holiday. I hope you are too!

I enjoyed the last week of work at Tsu Nishi before my vacation, racing to catch up on grading papers and enjoying the chance to study Japanese. For the holiday, I spent 4 days with my brother's old host family in Aichi prefecture, who I consider my "Japanese family." My brother lived with them for one year about 5 years ago when he studied at Nanzan University, and ever since, they have been like part of my extended family. Especially after living with my own host family in France, I am convinced that this family is the best host family around. Before they even met me, they sent my family a video to show us Kevin's life in Japan, and they called me their "American daughter." Since my brother lived there, they have stayed with my family in the United States, and I had been to their house to visit when my brother was living and working in Japan. I find it eerie that Papa-san in my Japanese family and my real Dad share the same birthday!

Since the happy phone call that I got from them the day after I came to Japan, I have always known that I am welcome to visit them anytime. Since I hadn't seen them in a few months, I took up their invitation to visit for New Year's. Just like a family holiday at home, I spent my weekend helping in the kitchen, watching TV, playing games and relaxing. They have three daughters who are a little bit older than I am who also came home for the holiday, so I was happy to spend time with them. I only see them every month or two, so it always seems like I can understand twice as much as what they were saying since the last time I visited. When I first came in August, I struggled to communicate in awful broken Japanese and never had any idea what was going on. Although I am still struggling to speak Japanese, I felt much more at ease because I could understand a lot more of what they said to me.

On New Year's Eve, we ate dinner that I prepared under Okaa-san's instruction. They know that I really want to learn Japanese cooking, so everyone was patient while I prepared everything, and then enthusiastically named the dish "元気もりもり鍋." I spent the evening trying to learn how to play Mahjong and watching the New Year's Eve music special on TV. At midnight, we got bundled up to go out in the cold and ring the bell at the temple nearby. It was cold and we had to wait in a long line, but I eventually got up to the front and rang the bell. It was pretty exciting. We also went to a shrine in their neighborhood, heated up by a big bonfire and drank some amazake before we headed home.

On the 1st, I donned my kimono and we headed out to Asuta jingu to celebrate

the New Year. I didn't particularly want to go to such a crowded place, but it ended up being an interesting experience. It wasn't so cold since we were packed in like sardines waiting for our chance to get to the front. Then on the 2nd, I got to take part in the annual extended family New Year's party at their house. I drank sake with gold in it and ate my weight in sushi. I also tried osechi and shabu shabu for the first time. I loved everything!

This all probably sounds pretty routine to you, but it was a really fun and exciting New Year's for me. At home, I usually stay at home on New Year's Eve, playing cards with my parents. Every year in New York there is a giant illuminated ball that drops at midnight, and although it is not remotely entertaining, it isn't New Year's Eve if you don't watch the ball drop and count down the last 10 seconds of the year. There are a few foods that we traditionally eat on New Year's Eve, but only because my whole family likes them, not because they have any significance to the holiday.

I am so lucky to have a family in Japan that I know and can visit at times like this. They have always made me feel so welcome in their home, and are already putting me down for next year too, even though I don't know yet if I'll be living here or not. I think the best way to learn more about Japanese culture is just to take part in typical celebrations like this. I don't have to travel the whole country or be able to speak Japanese perfectly to make the most of my year in Japan (even though I dream of doing both). Even though most of the weekend was dedicated to watching New Year's programs on TV and learning the true meaning of 寝正月、I had a great holiday and came back to Mie feeling better than ever and ready to take on 2005!