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Pass the pork and sauerkraut

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The new year brings new hopes and outlooks -- and plenty of old traditions and superstitions.

It all starts with the kiss at midnight, which supposedly increases affections and bolsters relationships that will continue throughout the year.

Wind direction at sunrise on Jan. 1 is believed to determine the luck for the coming year. A south wind means joy and prosperity, but a north wind predicts bad weather. Wind out of the east is a sign of natural calamities ahead, while a west wind predicts wealth but the death of a person of great national importance.

Traditional New Year foods are also thought to bring good luck.

"Eating sauerkraut has long been associated with luck and prosperity," said Otto Hirzel, corporate chef at Hirzel Canning Co. & Farms, Toledo. "We generate approximately 25-30 percent of our sauerkraut business for the year during December."

Pork and sauerkraut are among the featured specials for today and Thursday at Cosmos Restaurant in Defiance.

"Customers ask for this for the new year and we're happy to please them," said John Vourvas of Cosmos. "These foods are a sign of good luck."

Pork is actually a symbol of prosperity in many cultures. Pigs are considered good luck because they root forward, symbolizing progress, and the fatty meat is also symbolic of fattening wallets in Italy where pigs trotters with lentils or Zampone is a traditional New Year's dish.

Many parts of the U.S. celebrate the new year by consuming black-eyed peas. A traditional Southern New Year's meal includes ham, corn bread, black-eyed peas and collard greens. Black-eyed peas are thought to bring wealth because they look like little coins, while collard greens are considered lucky because they are green, like greenbacks.

Many cultures believe that anything in the shape of a ring is good luck, because it symbolizes "coming full circle," completing a year's cycle. For that reason, the Dutch believe that eating doughnuts on New Year's Day will bring good fortune.

Besides eating certain foods to begin the year, other Jan. 1 "practices" include paying debts, giving gifts and wearing new clothes. Many reflect a common theme that activities engaged in on that day set the pattern for the entire year. Others relate to warding off evil spirits or attracting luck.

For people who put more stock in faith than superstition, several area churches offer New Year's Eve and New Year's Day services.

"We've always had a New Year's Eve service (at 6:30 p.m.)," said Rev. Don Luhring at St. John Lutheran Church in Defiance. "It's very well attended."

Luhring said his message typically centers on God being the center of people's lives.

"We have free will, but God is in control," he stated. "People may be worried about the economy or losing their jobs, but in spite of everything God will bring his goodness and blessing. Everyone goes through difficulties in life, but God has the ability to turn our crucifixions into resurrections."

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