

Tokyo stores cash in on 'Megaton Xmas'

Japan marks Christian holiday with plastic snow, trees, chicken, champagne

By Patrick Johnston

IF YOU THINK Japan's cultural fortress represents an impenetrable barrier to Western imports, think again. It's Christmas time in Japan and there's no shortage of good cheer.

Of course, this does not mean the Christian custom is about to supplant the millennia of Buddhist and Shinto tradition ingrained in the society, but Japanese retailers know a good thing when they see it and are exploiting it to the fullest.

Department stores lead the way. Mammoth hanging banners, with eye catching alterations of the standard Christmas slogans, hang outside their doors. A simple "We wish you a Merry Christmas" simply won't do for the ever-adapting Japanese. Instead, they offer a "Marui Christmas," a "Fantasy Christmas," a "Princess Christmas," and, for that explosive appeal, a "Megaton Christmas."

Inside, holly and ivy deck the walls; upbeat synthesized carols sing through the P.A. systems; and Christmas trees, sparkling with buying incentive, fill just about every conceivable empty space of the shopping floor.

The tactics seem to be working. A recent survey by a major Japanese department store indicates that 78 per cent of Japanese will be celebrating Christmas this year. In other words, it's become a custom.

There is certainly no shortage of things to buy. In addition to the endless supply of consumer products crowding store shelves,

Christmas goods sections of department stores are stocked to the ceiling and bustle with activity.

If you're dreaming of a white Christmas in mild Tokyo, you can brighten your life with a product called "Real Plastic Snow," presumably to go with your real plastic Christmas tree. In fact, you could pick up a sound-sensitive tree, complete with sunglasses and snowman companion, that dances in response to any noise. If you combine his with a Santa that walks, shakes a bucket, and sings carols, you could have some real Christmas mayhem on your hands.

Not all Japanese are so eccentric in their choice of trees; there is no shortage of the standard, pre-decorated issues. One such artificial product advertises itself as a "Canadian Tree."

Unless you are willing to pay \$150 and give up a quarter of your living space, wood trees are pretty much out of the question in Japan. This is not to say that all the plastic replicas are really much of a savings. One shop was selling a 1.5 metre version for \$500.

For all the hype, gift giving celebrations on Christmas Day are still somewhat low key in Japan. "Christmas presents are for the kids," explained a young housewife. "After they reach junior high school age, that's it."

Teenagers do sometimes give gifts to each other, as might young married couples, but only rarely do you find a full family exchange as takes place in North America.



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While presents are not always on the Christmas schedule, dinner usually is. But get rid of any ideas of quaint sushi dinners,

delicate pastries and warm sake. Chicken is the dish of choice in Japan on Christmas Day, and most buy early as the birds are in

hot demand. So much so, I was told by a young office worker, that it is now necessary to reserve a seat at Kentucky Fried Chicken if you want to enjoy Christmas dinner there. (He has already booked.)

Christmas cake and champagne are also hot items on the 25th of December. The cake, however, is not the fruit-filled delight that lingers uneaten until mid January. Rather, it is any pastry you choose to indulge in. One bakery was promoting an unusual phenomenon known as *Anpanman*. An is a sweet bean paste popular in Japan; pan is the Japanese word for bread, taken from the French *pain*; and man, well, the bread is shaped like one.

And if you want everything thrown together in one hedonistic package, it is possible to enjoy Japanese Christmas at a hostess club. A middle-aged worker told me that, for \$250, he would spend Christmas evening "eating chicken, drinking champagne, and talking to pretty girls."

As Christmas in Japan has to compete with a far more established New Year's holiday, it is unlikely that the event will ever become as popular as in Western countries. It might be given a boost, however, by the fact that the new emperor's birthday, a national holiday, is on the 23rd of December. Could this bring about a peculiar re-deification of the emperor in a Christian context? Maybe, if it sells.

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