

What is up with that?
Oh no! Not soy beans!

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Q: A couple of weeks ago, I saw soybeans littering the ground everywhere I went — on the sidewalks, and even the halls of my apartment building. Did everyone in Japan spill their groceries? What's up with that?

A: In the immortal words of John Belushi: "Food fight!" Well, sort of. Your neighbors did throw soybeans — but not because anyone was imitating "Animal House."

Instead, they were celebrating Setsubun, a holiday that marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. (Yes, it still feels like winter in most of Japan, but on the Japanese lunar calendar, spring officially started Feb. 4.)

Americans literally clean house when spring arrives, but the Japanese do a more figurative cleaning, by purging their homes of evil spirits or ogres, known as oni. That's where the soybeans come in, as part of a ritual known as mamemaki. Someone in the household — usually the man of the house or a male born in the animal sign of the current lunar year — throws the beans while chanting "oni wa soto; fuku wa uchi" (get out ogre; come in happiness). The beans are either thrown out the door or thrown at a family member wearing an oni mask.

Then it's customary for everyone to pick up and eat the beans — one for each year of their age — to bring good luck.

Setsubun is an excuse for a big party at Shinto shrines, which often bring in celebrities or sumo wrestlers to throw the beans, along with sweets and money, into the crowds.

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