

Chinese priority—get new year started right

By SUSAN TAUBER

Last Saturday was a special night for Chinese families throughout the world. It was New Year's Eve night—a time to welcome in the Year of the Goat with traditional festivities.

Chinese families in the Rochester area participated in their own celebrations, often with thoughts of family members back in China doing the same.

For Paul and Amy Leung, Saturday night meant taking time from their restaurant, Oceanic Inn at Meadowbrook Village Mall in Avon Township, and spending a traditional evening with the immediate family, including their two children, Jennifer, 4, and Jason, 2.

"In China, we celebrate the New Year for 15 days, beginning with New Year's Eve. It's a religious holiday, based on beginning the new year right," Leung said.

To prepare for the festival, people thoroughly clean their homes, buy new clothes for the children, clear all debts, and go so far as to shake their enemies hands.

"We start the holiday with a special nine-course meal. Nine is a lucky number to the Chinese because it's never-ending. We eat all kinds of meat—chicken, pork, beef and shrimp—because if we eat the food on New Year's Eve, it means we'll have it throughout the year."

THE DINNER ITSELF is a long meal, beginning with members of the older generation "making a lesson"—wishing everyone good luck, wishing farmers a good year of harvest and

that children do well in school.

The meal then begins, usually with homemade rice wine.

On the table are platters filled with the different symbolic dishes. They include Sechuen Chicken (with green pepper, onion and mushrooms); shrimp served in the shells to preserve natural flavors; beef with green onions; Chinese fried chicken (marinated and cooked whole to preserve the natural taste); sweet and sour fish served with pineapple, tomatoes, green pepper and Chinese cucumber; baby shrimp with peas; beef in oyster sauce, hot Sechuen beef and a dish with eight or nine different vegetables.

"We serve one vegetarian dish because Chinese Buddhists are vegetarians. Also, we use a lot of baby corns and green pepper in dishes because they add color," Leung said.

With the main courses, white rice was served along with lots of cakes and pastries, often decorated with red coloring for the New Year.

"We try to eat the best on New Year's Eve," Leung said.

In China, Leung and his wife remember how everyone visited the flower market after the meal.

"There is entertainment in the market—Chinese operas and magicians. We used to go and spend four or five hours there, getting all the good things to buy. We always bought flowers, which were beautiful.

"There was a lot of competition among the farmers. Some of the flowers were very expensive, costing thousands of dollars. The farmer who grew the best flower got a price, some-

times \$5,000. Some flowers were grown in the Chinese symbol for Happy New Year," Leung said.

New Year's Eve also involves more than observing the traditional family meal.

The Chinese visit all their friends during the New Year, bringing gifts to the parents and red pouches filled with lucky money for the children.

RESPECT IS shown to older people. Children kneel before grandparents and bow when they see older people, wishing them a Happy New Year. Women kiss older women's hand to show respect.

But there's always a bright side to keeping tradition alive. Children take their lucky money and buy firecrackers

or go to the park or a movie, which is a special treat in China.

People also listen to upbeat music and watch the traditional Lion's Dance or Dragon's Dance.

"It takes 40 people to handle the dragon costume," Leung said, "and only two people for the Lion Dance. Depending on how rich the area is (determines) which dance they have."

Leung is sponsoring the Lion Dance from 4-8 p.m. today at Meadowbrook Village Mall. There will also be movies and slides from Tai Wan, a Chinese music concert by Don and Judy Louie, a Kung Fu or Chinese boxing demonstration from 4-6:30 p.m. and free candies and cookies.

"The words 'New Year' mean bad

animal. The lion or dragon in the dances eat the bad animal. He bows his head and tries to eat the year. Masks are worn to frighten away the bad spirits. That's why firecrackers are used. The noise is supposed to scare away the bad spirits," Leung said.

THE YEAR OF the Goat has already been a good year, according to Leung.

"The goat is a good animal to the Chinese. It's peaceful, kind and gentle. We've already started the year off right, making friends with Red China, bringing peace to the world."

Every Chinese year is named after an animal. Last year was Year of the Horse.

Chinese tradition dictates that the 12 animals associated with the years were selected because they were the ones who responded first when Buddha called together all his animals.

The 12 that responded were the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, ram (goat), monkey, rooster, dog and boar.

The Chinese New Year falls on a different day each year because Chinese months are based on the lunar calendar. A Chinese month dates from new moon to new moon and is 29½ days, making a year 354 days instead of 365 days like the Gregorian calendar includes.

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