

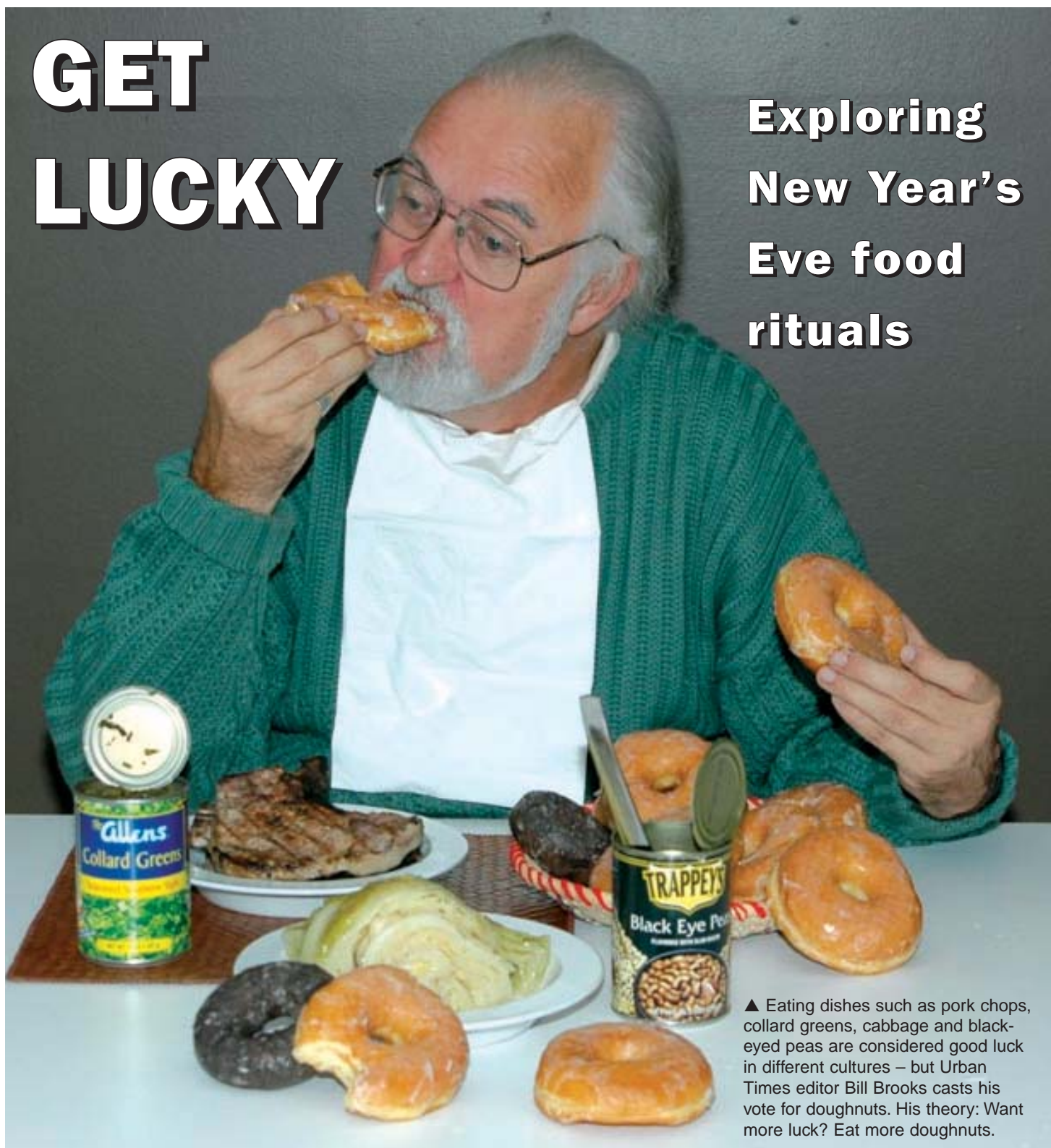
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# ARCHIVES

## GET LUCKY

**Exploring  
New Year's  
Eve food  
rituals**



▲ Eating dishes such as pork chops, collard greens, cabbage and black-eyed peas are considered good luck in different cultures – but Urban Times editor Bill Brooks casts his vote for doughnuts. His theory: Want more luck? Eat more doughnuts.

BY KIM GALEAZ

**D**EC. 30, 1998. I WAS HAPPY, SUCCESSFUL, single and completely obsessed. After reading an article about eating specific Italian good luck foods on New Year's Day, I consumed every hour (aka, became obsessed) with planning, shopping and cooking that perfect Good Luck Meal. All for myself. Even though I've never been superstitious and I'd never eaten good luck foods any other New Year's Day, I was hoping this extra effort would boost my chances of eliminating that single status. After all, it couldn't hurt and it was an excuse to cook and eat great foods, something I thoroughly enjoy.

So on Jan. 1, 1999, I overate lentil soup (coin-shaped for financial security) with Italian sausage (fatty sausage symbolizing abundance), a mixed green salad topped with dried figs and oranges (sweet fruits for the promise of love) and a homemade raspberry vinaigrette made with honey (honey for love).

My business grew even more, I was still very happy, but very, very single. Never one to give up too soon, I continued my obsession with these Italian Good Luck foods for the next four years, but often wouldn't get around to it until mid-January, February and even March. (Better late than never, right?)

Fast forward to Dec. 31, 2003. It's about 4:30 in the afternoon and Jeff and I are frantically driving around Indianapolis looking for homemade baklava to satisfy the "honey and sweet" portion

Lentil soup, especially with sausage, is one of the favored New Year's meals among the Italians. The coin-shaped legumes symbolize financial security. ►

of our New Year's good luck meal. We'd been dating for a couple months and he seemed eager to partake in this obsession of mine. Jeff is now my wonderful husband, and although he finally admitted he's not real keen on the lentil soup, he is more than happy to eat his fair share of all things rich and fatty every New Year's Day. (Much like my esteemed editor, no doubt, based on the overwhelming number of doughnuts in the front-page photo.)

If you want to increase your good fortune this coming year, create a New Year's Day meal with foods from these six categories: legumes, greens, fruit, pork, fish and cakes. While traditions and foods vary around the world, these six foods

seem prevalent in nearly every culture and country. And here's the amazing thing: With the exception of the cake category, all these foods are inherently nutrient-rich! So, in my dietitian opinion, if you start the year with foods that have known health benefits, that in and of itself is lucky! Don't skip those cakes, though. Sweets are symbolic of pleasure and pleasure is an essential part of a longer, happier life.

Join me as we travel the globe for foods that will boost your odds for a better New Year.

**I**taly. The Italians seem to have the most variance when it comes to foods for good fortune. Risotto, made with traditional Italian Arborio rice, is thought to bring good luck in the Piedmont region of northern Italy. Sicilians believe you should "spend money to make money" and serve store-bought pasta on New Year's Day. The Romans eat plenty of nuts, dates, figs, honey and round cakes for a prosperous New Year. Some Italians believe gnocchi (small potato dumplings) will bring good luck. *Cotechino con lenticchie*, which is pork sausage over lentils, seems to be served in Tuscany. Green coin-shaped lentils – one of the most nutrient-rich legumes, by the way – symbolize money and fatty rich pork sausage represents abundance. The Italian good luck fish is dried salt cod, or *baccala*. When it comes to good-luck sweets for the promise of love, the Italians





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seem to like oranges or anything served with figs, dates, or honey. Some Italians serve *chiacchiere*, which are honey-drenched balls of pasta dough fried and dusted with powdered sugar.

**Japan.** Noodles, fish and beans all bring good fortune in Japan. Long soba noodles represent long life, so at the stroke of midnight the Japanese eat, or suck up, actually, these traditional noodles. The key is to keep those noodles whole and unbroken, so don't even think about biting a noodle in half or cutting them up before eating, lest you possibly end up with a shorter life span. Herring roe is consumed for fertility, shrimp for long life and dried sardines for a good harvest. Apparently sardines were once used to fertilize the rice fields. And with the hopes of financial rewards during the year, kuro-mame, a sweet black bean dish, is eaten during the first three days of the New Year. No doubt about it, the Japanese are giving their hearts a big boost of protection on New Year's Day by eating all that omega-3 rich fish.

**China.** Many Chinese celebrate their New Year for a span of two weeks. Spring rolls are thought to bring wealth and prosperity, because the color and size of these crispy, fried rolls is reminiscent of the size and color of gold bars. Sweet oranges and tangerines are enjoyed because their Chinese name sounds like luck and wealth. Whole fish is often served at the New Year's Eve evening meal; the whole fish, from head to tail, symbolizes a good beginning and a good ending for the New Year. Sticky rice cakes are thought to bring high steps for people's careers, wealth and health. By the way, the Chinese New Year is January 26, 2009, and it's the year of the Cow. Beef, it's what's for dinner.

**Spain.** The Spaniards eat 12 grapes at midnight, one for each stroke of the clock. Each grape symbolizes one month; if you eat one that's sour or rotten, supposedly that particular month will be a bad one. I got to thinking about this and wondered how in the world can you ring in the New Year with a champagne toast, kiss your sweetheart *and* eat 12 grapes all in the course of one minute? And furthermore, how do you begin to remember which grape was bad so you can track it during the year? You know what I mean. Say April ended up being a tough month. How many of us would remember "oh yeah, that fourth grape on New Year's was extremely sour." I suppose it doesn't matter if you do what the Peruvians do: they insist on eating a 13th grape for good measure.

**Greece.** All around the world, round or ring-shaped foods symbolize the continuity of coming full circle during the New Year. The Greeks enjoy a traditional round cake or bread called *vasilopita*, which is baked with a coin hidden inside. Lucky is the person who gets the piece with the coin. A special note about that coin. I was relieved when I found one reference to "washing" the coin before putting it in the cake. All this dirty-money-in-food was making me queasy. One extremely sanitary-minded reference even said the coin should be "wrapped" before it went in the cake. That's better.

**Holland.** The Dutch believe their *Olie Bollen* or "oil balls" bring good luck. Olie Bollen are sweet, puffy, fritter-like doughnuts filled with apples, raisins and currants. A dietitian's delight, actually, in that you get nutrient-rich fruits along with all that decadent, oily fat. Yum. Is anyone in Downtown Indy making Olie Bollen this New Year's? Please give me a call, because I'm afraid *not* eating one will be bad luck.

**Denmark.** Leafy greens mean the promise of wealth and money, so the Danish eat stewed kale sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar on New Year's Day. So *that's* how they get their kids to eat those nutrient-rich green leafy veggies; they sprinkle it with cinnamon and sugar! Very clever. Hopefully more of us here in the U.S. will try kale – or collard, mustard or turnip greens for that matter – in the new year, because greens are practically the most nutrient-dense vegetable around. The Danish also serve boiled cod for good luck.

**Austria.** Austrians seem to start their New Year by "pigging out" on pork. The significance of pork is based on the idea that pigs symbolize progress because they push themselves forward by rooting in the ground before moving. (Isn't this similar to stubbornness?) Some Austrians even decorate the table with miniature pigs made from marzipan. Marzipan is a decadent mixture of almond paste and sugar, so I sure do hope the Austrians eat those little pigs, too.

**Germany.** Carp is one traditional New Year's Eve fish eaten in Germany. In fact, many Germans place some of the fish's scales in their wallets as a way of ensuring financial wealth and good luck. Hmmm. This is somewhat out of my area of expertise, but doesn't fish smell? And wouldn't those scales smell a little bit, too? Herring is another fish Germans eat at midnight to bring good luck. They also pair legumes and pork just like the Italians, typically serving a lentil or split pea soup with some type of sausage.

**Poland.** The Polish eat herring for their good luck New Year's food. Herring is believed to bring abundance, because they are "silvery." I think herring just might bring an abundance of good health, because herring happens to be one of the richest sources of those heart-healthy omega-3 fats. Yes, even far more than salmon.

**The Philippines.** The type of food doesn't matter here, just the quantity. The Filipinos believe it's important to have a huge spread of food on the table at midnight to help encourage an abundance of food all year long.

**Switzerland.** Of all the food customs I came across, this one is the most disturbing to me. Apparently the Swiss drop or toss whipped cream, which symbolizes surplus wealth, on the floor at midnight. Are you *kidding* me?! The *floor*?! Whipped cream is one of my top ten foods and the only place it should be dropped is on a rich brownie, on top of an ice cream sundae or on a spoon. And besides, I doubt many of us – including the Swiss – have surplus wealth at this point, given this precarious global economic situation.

**Vietnam.** The Vietnamese eat plain rice cakes and/or rice cakes stuffed with bean paste and minced pork. According to folklore, these foods once brought happiness to a king and may do the same for you.

**United States.** The U.S. ranks right up with Italy when it comes to a wide range of customs and traditions. Southerners eat a traditional dish called Hoppin' John, which is made from black-eyed peas (representing coins like pennies and dimes with wealth) cooked with salt pork (fatty abundance) and seasonings and served with cooked rice.

According to some, you should eat 365 black-eyed peas before noon on New Year's Day to ensure good luck each day of the coming year. I have but one word for this bloated idea: Gas-X. And while I'm at it, let me confess I truly don't think black-eyed peas look like tiny coins and I'm struggling to understand why these very inexpensive and economical protein-rich vegetables imply wealth.

Luckily, one reference I came across described it succinctly: Black-eyed peas and all legumes (beans) swell when they cook. And we all want our savings to swell. Knowing this, which makes perfect sense naturally, I predict bean-eating will peak in 2009, given the turbulent and volatile financial markets.

Collard greens, representing green paper money, are paired with Hoppin' John to bring maximum wealth and prosperity. Some Americans enjoy cooked cabbage for good luck on New Year's, thinking the cabbage leaves symbolize folded paper money. Or as Jeff, my dear husband, informed me, "Cabbage is slang for money." Americans of German descent prefer beef short ribs with sauerkraut for their stroke of good fortune in the coming year.



**What not to eat:** Don't reach for lobster on New Year's Day or you might have an unlucky year. Lobsters move backwards, not a good thing if you're aiming for progress and prosperity.

And skip the chicken while you're at it. The Hungarians avoid chicken on New Year's Day because if you eat chicken, you'll be

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**- Kim Galeaz**

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scratching around for money all year like a chicken scratches for food. The Hungarians are extremely concerned they'll lose their money in the New Year, because they apparently also avoid fish on New Year's, the belief being your money might swim away like a fish.

I'm adding one of my own *not-to-eat* foods on New Year's Day and *all* days of the New Year. Don't eat foods you really don't like but force yourself to eat because you think you "should" since they're healthy. Many of you would list oatmeal, broccoli or salmon in this category. Well, just stop eating it forever if you don't like it. And get those health benefits from other foods. I'd like to think this simple step will help you have a more pleasurable dining experience, which will undoubtedly have a positive impact on your health and longevity.

Here's to a happy, healthy New Year for all my neighbors. May your 2009 be filled with good fortune and great flavors!