

Life in Japan

How KFC made Christmas all about fried chicken – in Japan



KFC has become a Christmas tradition in Japan.

This is largely thanks to Takeshi Okawara, who managed the first KFC restaurant in Japan.

These days, Japanese people could end up waiting in long lines if they don't pre-order their Christmas meals from KFC.

While Christmas in the US may conjure up visions of sugarplums and holiday hams, in Japan a certain fast-food staple takes center stage – and it's all thanks to a clever marketing ploy by KFC.

Over the last four decades, KFC has managed to make fried chicken synonymous with Christmas in the country. An estimated 3.6 million Japanese families eat KFC during the Christmas season, reported the BBC. Millions of people weather long lines to order fried chicken weeks in advance to carry on the tradition.

Here's a look back at how KFC became a Christmas tradition in Japan.

KFC's Christmas promotion was the brainchild of Takeshi Okawara, who managed the first KFC restaurant in Japan. He would go on to become

CEO of Kentucky Fried Chicken Japan from 1984 to 2002.

Just a few months after the first KFC opened in Japan in 1970, Okawara had the idea to sell a Christmas "party barrel," inspired by the elaborate American turkey dinner, but with fried chicken instead of turkey.

The promotion went national in Japan in 1974 under the name Kurisumasu ni wa Kentakkii: Kentucky for Christmas.

The party barrel campaign "filled a void," Joonas Rokka, associate professor of marketing at the Emlyon Business School in France, told the BBC. "There was no tradition of Christmas in Japan, and so KFC came in and said, this is what you should do on Christmas."

Since only about 1% to 2% of the Japanese population is Christian, the country didn't have many established Christmas traditions. KFC helped build secular and commercial traditions with the simple message: "At Christmas, you eat chicken."

Today, KFC's Christmas meals contain more than just fried chicken.

Many packages contain cake, which has been an important part of Christmas in Japan since before KFC's expansion in the country. Premium barrels include options such as ribs or roast chicken with stuffing. You can even pair your party barrel with Christmas wine that's sold at the fast-food chain.

At many Japanese Christmas parties, KFC is just one part of the Christmas feast.

Another major part of KFC's Japanese Christmas strategy is Colonel Sanders. Across the country, KFC locations dress Colonel Sanders up in Santa Claus gear for the holiday season.

If you want to get in on the festive fun, however, you need to plan ahead. People are forced to wait in lines for hours on Christmas if they don't pre-order their holiday meals.

KFC may never be the Christmas meal of choice in the US – but in Japan, it's crucial.

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