

NEW YEAR'S CELEBRATIONS **NOWRUZ**



NEW YEAR'S CELEBRATIONS: NOWRUZ



People celebrate the new year all over the world. We clean our houses, put on new clothes, eat special foods, and greet friends and family with warm wishes for a good new year. Some people begin the new year on January 1. Others connect the new year not just to the solar cycle but also to the phases of the moon. And some look forward to the spring equinox, around March 20, when the sun is over the equator, and day and night are exactly the

same length of time. The Persian people call that day Nowruz, the New Day of the New Year.

HISTORY OF NOWRUZ

The Persian New Year celebration, Nowruz, started 3,000 years ago in ancient Persia (modern day Iran) and is still celebrated all over the world. Nowruz means “new day” in Farsi, the official language of Iran. The important themes in



these celebrations are reverence for nature, respect for family and community, doing good deeds, and forgiveness.

Nowruz themes and rituals derive from the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest religions, possibly dating back as far as 1,500 BCE. Many Zoroastrian beliefs are based on the tension between good and evil, creation and destruction. Zoroastrians believe in one god,



This silver Zoroastrian ceremonial bowl was made around 1875 CE for a Persian (Parsi) family living in Burma. It shows the winged disc and Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, scenes of Darius I (550–486 BCE) in conquest, and other excerpts from monumental rock carvings on the walls of Bisotun and ancient Persepolis in Iran (approx. 515 BCE). It is thought that during the ancient Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), Persepolis was a place for royal festivals such as the celebration of Nowruz. Persepolis was destroyed during the conquest of Alexander the Great, but is still referred to as the Throne of Jamshid (*Takht-e-Jamshid*). Why do you think these scenes were still relevant subject matter for a bowl made almost 2,000 years later?

Ahura Mazda, the creator and good force, whose prophet was named Zoroaster. The destructive force working against all that is good is called Angra Mainyu. The duality of good and evil exists in many Nowruz traditions. It is believed that even the great ancient Persian palace of Persepolis was built to house royal celebrations such as Nowruz.

Zoroastrianism was the religion of ancient Iran until the 600s CE when an Arab army defeated the Sasanian empire and brought Islam to Iran. Iranians were able to preserve Nowruz as a secular tradition by blending it with Islamic traditions. Today Nowruz celebrations often feature Uncle Nowruz, who, similar to Santa Claus, wears a white beard and brings toys and gifts to children. These adaptations have helped Nowruz survive through the ages without losing its original meanings.

THE STORY BEHIND THE NEW YEAR: KING JAMSHID AND THE FIRST NOWRUZ

According to the *Shahnameh*, the first Nowruz was celebrated by the mythological King Jamshid. Ferdowsi writes that Jamshid brought harmony and peace to his people through his divine right to rule (*farr*). In ancient times in Iran only kings or certain

One of the most frequently cited sources about Nowruz is the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), written by the poet Hakim Abolqasem Ferdowsi (940–1020). The *Shahnameh* is a combination of myth, legend, and historical fact. It was written to preserve Iranian history and identity. At the end of the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi writes:

*Much hard labor have I done for thirty years
In the end I have revived Persia through this
Persian verse.*

*I shall not pass away since I will remain alive
Through the seeds of this language I have
spread everywhere.*

Look at the manuscript page from the *Shahnameh*, when the hero, Rustam defeats the White Demon. How does the artist show us the theme of good conquering evil?



The hero Rustam kills the White Demon, from a manuscript of the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), 1580. Shiraz, Iran. Opaque watercolors on paper. Asian Art Museum, from the Collection of William K. Ehnfeld, M.D., 2005.64.162.

heroes possessed *farr*, which was thought to protect the people of Iran from evil, and keep the country safe and people happy.¹

The story states that Jamshid founded human civilization. He created agriculture, textiles, armor and weapons, medicine, perfume, and all that was needed to form an organized civilization. He established social classes, where everyone had a role in society. He tamed demons and even assigned them work to help build up the community.

When Jamshid had built up his community, it was time to celebrate. This day was the first Nowruz. He created a jeweled throne, which was lifted up to heaven by demons. From his throne, he sat smiling in the sky, and all creatures surrounded him with admiration. It was the first day of spring,

¹ Ferdowsi, Hakim Abolqasem. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Davis, Dick. New York: Penguin, 2007, xxxvi.

² Ferdowsi, Hakim Abolqasem. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Trans. Davis, Dick. New York: Penguin, 2007, 7.

and has remained as the New Year celebration in Iran and many countries with Farsi-speaking people.²

CELEBRATING NOWRUZ: RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

Preparing for the New Year

Nowruz is the most important holiday celebration involving rituals and festivities to say good-bye to the old year and welcome in the new year. In the week prior to the new year, purifying rituals take place that symbolize a fresh start, and the triumph of good over evil. Families conduct a spring cleaning as a symbol of forgiving others. Some participate in a fire-jumping ritual, which was a traditional Zoroastrian rite of purification, singing, “Fire, you give me your redness and energy, and I give you my paleness and sickness.”

Children also participate in a tradition similar to trick-or-treating. They dress in a white and visit their neighbors. They bang pots and pans with spoons to get rid of the past year’s bad luck, and ask for treats that symbolize good luck. The customary treats are an assortment of seven dried nuts and fruits: pistachios, roasted chick peas, almonds, hazelnuts, figs, apricots, and raisins.

My Childhood Nowruz

My most memorable Chahar Shanbeh Soori was when I was sixteen years old. My thirteen-year-old brother bought some firewood and convinced my parents to let us create a bonfire in our front yard to jump over. What a joy it was! Then as we were eating the noodle soup in our living room, we saw through the windows the blue garbage bag was up in the air in flames, which fortunately, we were able to extinguish very quickly. The memory of that inflamed blue garbage bag has become my most vivid memory. —Nasrin Naraghi, San Francisco, California

The Beginning of the New Year

Families gather around, waiting for the exact time of the New Year (*Saal Tahvil*) and the official first day of spring. As soon as the new year is announced, families hug, take pictures, and eat sweets or special dried nuts. Nowruz festivities begin right after Saal Tahvil and last for thirteen days with special rituals and festivities.



The Haft Seen

What holidays do you celebrate that incorporate food that has a special meaning? At Nowruz, people celebrate with a special table, the Haft Seen Table. On it are seven things that start with the letter “s” in Farsi. These items are in honor of the gifts given to the people by King Jamshid. The themes of Nowruz are also celebrated through these symbolic foods. Usually they include:

- sabze (sab zuh), wheat, barley or lentil sprouts grown in a shallow plate: rebirth
- samanu (sah mah noo), pudding made from wheat germ: wealth
- senjed (sen jed), dried fruit of the lotus/oleaster tree: love
- sīr (seer), garlic: health

- sib (seeb), apples: earth, beauty and health
- somaq (so moch), sumac berries: sunrise
- serkeh (sir keh), vinegar: patience.

Other common items are coins (*sekke*), the Quran (Muslim holy book), a book of Persian poetry such as the *Shahnameh*, flowers, mirrors and candlelight, painted eggs, goldfish, and special sweets. Zoroastrians today practice slightly different traditions from Muslims. For instance Zoroastrians grow seven herbs representing themes of renewal.

Thirteen Days of Celebration

The first day of new year immediate family members stay inside the house and spend time together. The first evening, it is customary for each family to have a dish of fish and herbed rice, called Sabzi Polo Mahi. Historically fish had been a luxury only available in spring, but the tradition of serving fish for this special occasion continues.

From the second day until the thirteenth day, families participate in Deed-O-Bazdeed, which is when they reunite with their families. After this first meeting, those visited return the gesture. This is called Bazdeed, which means seeing again or visiting again. On day two each family goes to visit in this order: grandparents, uncles, aunts, distant relatives, neighbors, and friends. The younger people receive Eidi, or gifts of money, from their elders.

My Nowruz Celebration

When I was a child in Iran I was so excited for Nowruz because it meant wearing new clothes and new shoes and not going to school for fourteen days. My mom started preparing for Nowruz by cleaning the house and growing lentil seeds for the sabze, which she said has been a tradition in her family. We gathered around the Haft Seen table with some of the traditional seven “S”s. My mom thought sabze, the holy Quran, and a mirror were the most important items to have on Haft Seen table.

Since I came to America I have been celebrating Nowruz with family and friends. I prepare the lentil sabze at home as the symbol of the new year. As I wash the seeds I pray for a new season in life, with a clean slate for myself and family and friends. —Nasrin Naraghi, teacher, Diablo Valley Community College.

After the New Year

Sizdah Bedar, or “thirteen outdoors,” takes place on the thirteenth day after the New Year. Families celebrate the thirteenth day of spring by having a picnic and staying outside of the house. Why do people stay outside on this day? Thirteen is also considered an unlucky number. Staying outside on this unlucky day is thought to bring luck to the home for the rest of the year. After Sizdah Bedar, students return to school and the new year’s holiday comes to an end.

LESSON: OUT WITH THE OLD ... IN WITH THE NEW

Objective:

Students will create a Fresh Start journal in which they will observe and record the progress on their sabze plant each day. On the opposing page, they record their progress towards achieving their new year’s resolution.

Grades: K–6

Duration: 20 minutes per day for 2 weeks

Materials: Image of bowl with landscape, lentil seeds, cups, water, pencils, paper, paper towels, Fresh Start journal for each student: 7 pages of white folded in half and stapled to make a journal.

Common Core Standards

4.9. Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

History-Social Science Standards

1. Recognize the ways in which they [students] are all part of the same community, sharing principles, goals, and traditions despite their varied ancestry; the forms of diversity in their school and community; and the benefits and challenges of a diverse population.
2. Compare the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, traditions, and social practices of the varied cultures, drawing from folklore.

Procedure:

1. Discuss the common practice of creating a new year’s resolution as a way to make a fresh start.

2. Students create their Fresh Start journal.
3. View the “Bowl with Wheat” image. Ask student to share what these objects have in common (designs of plants and decorative writing). Have students choose one object and practice observing by sketching the designs onto the cover of their Fresh Start journal for at least 15 minutes. Ask students to discuss what more they discovered by looking closely.
4. On the left side of the journal, observe, sketch, and label the progress of the sabze. On the right side, record the progress on their new year’s resolution.
5. To make a sabze:
 - a. Soak one cup of lentil seeds (or wheat) in a bowl.
 - b. Fill the bowl with water one inch above the seeds. Keep the bowl in a well-lit area inside of the house for two days.
 - c. Remove the contents and spread it on a flat plate. Cover the plate with cloth. Keep the cover moist. After a few days you will start to see sprouts.
 - d. Remove the cover and water the sprouts a few times a day. The sabze will grow to be a few inches tall (Iranian grocery stores in the US sell prepared sabze).
6. After thirteen days, throw the sabze into the water or garden.
7. Write a reflection on the progress made towards your new year’s resolution. Discuss why making a resolution is a common practice among people celebrating the new year.

This bowl shows springtime plants such as sprigs of wheat. The relationship of Nowruz to the spring harvest time is also seen on the Haft Seen table with the creation of a sabze, or sprouting plant of lentil or wheat seeds.

What do you notice?

This plate was made in China for a Persian nobleman. Do you have any special dishes in your house? What makes them special?

LESSON: NEW YEAR’S INVESTIGATIONS: TABLESCAPES

Objective

Compare and contrast the different ways in which people commemorate the passing of a year by interviewing their families,



Bowl with landscape, approx. 1600–1700. Iran. Glazed fritware with luster decoration. Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1985.



Plate made for Mas'ud Mirza Zill al-Sultan of Persia, 1879. Qing dynasty (1644–1911), reign of the Guangzu emperor (1875–1907). Jingdezhen, China. Porcelain with “rose canton” decoration. Asian Art Museum, 1999.40.

creating a tablescape, and sharing their traditions with their classmates.

Grades: K–6

Duration: 45 minutes preparation; independent research; 120 minutes student presentations.

Common Core Standards

4.9. Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (e.g., opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (e.g., the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

History-Social Science Standards

1. Recognize the ways in which they [students] are all part of the same community, sharing principles, goals, and traditions despite their varied ancestry; the forms of diversity in their school and community; and the benefits and challenges of a diverse population.
2. Compare the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, traditions, and social practices of the varied cultures, drawing from folklore.

Procedure

1. Look closely at the plate made for Mas'ud Mirza Zill al-Sultan of Persia. What do you notice? What more can you find? This plate is from a large dinner service made in China for a Persian nobleman. We know who it belongs to because his name is written in Arabic in the middle of this dish. Do you have any special dishes in your house? When do you use them? What makes them special? Gathering around the table for special meals is something that all people have in common, and is a common practice to celebrate the new year.
2. Discuss: How do you celebrate the passing the changing year? Find commonalities: Clean house, family gatherings, resolutions, feasts, stories, songs. What other holidays do you celebrate that use symbolic food?
3. Introduce the *New Year's Investigations* graphic organizer. Model research questions as you explore the customs of Nowruz. Have students complete the graphic organizer.
4. Watch an Asian Art Museum storyteller present "King Jamshid and the First Nowruz." (www.asianart.org/educatorresources) and/or view "The Persian Rite of Spring: Nowruz" by Niloufar Talebi (www.persianriteofspring.com); or www.pbs.org, Tehran Bureau)



5. Students complete the Nowruz column in the graphic organizer.
6. Ask students to use the *New Year's Investigations* graphic organizer to interview their parents and/or grandparents to learn about the roots of their own family's new year traditions.
7. Students create a tablescape displaying the symbols of their own new year's traditions. Method of display can include collage, tabletop place setting, centerpiece, watercolor painting or drawing. Include an accompanying label description. Students may present or create a classroom gallery for independent viewing.

NEW YEAR'S INVESTIGATIONS

Compare how different people celebrate the passing of a year. Interview your family to find out the origins of your own New Year's traditions. Use the back to sketch ideas for your tablescene.

Questions	Nowruz (Iran)	Family Tradition Name: Culture:	Family Tradition Name: Culture:	Other:
When does New Year's take place? Why?				
How is the home decorated? Why?				
What food is prepared? Why?				
What stories are told? Why?				
Other traditions?				

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