



By Krystal Sato

# 国際交流員コーナー

## CIR's Corner

April 2024 – Issue #23



Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

### This Month's Topic: Birthdays

My birthday is April 10, so this month I'm going to write about birthday customs in America.

#### Birthday Parties

In Japan, people usually have quiet birthday dinners at home with their families. In America, people of all ages have birthday parties.

Birthday parties for children are big events. The birthday child mainly invites their friends from school. Nowadays, if a child wants to pass out party invitations at school, they must invite everyone in their class, whether they are friends or not. This rule is to prevent bullying. Americans who live in homes large enough to host an entire class of students have birthday parties at home, but many people rent restaurants or event spaces. Believe it or not, when I was a child, McDonald's was a popular place for birthday parties! I have fond memories of eating hamburgers, chicken nuggets, and French fries with my friends, and then playing at the McDonald's PlayPlace. I have also been to birthday parties held at arcades and amusement parks.



My birthday parties were sometimes sleepovers or picnics at the park, but since my birthday was during spring break, I rarely had parties.

As for adults, they usually have their birthday parties at restaurants and bars. When you go out to eat in America, you can usually hear people singing "Happy Birthday" from other tables.

#### Birthday Cake

Birthday cakes are regularly eaten even in Japan, but the custom started in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Japanese birthday cakes are generally white sponge cakes covered with whipped cream and plenty of fresh fruit, American birthday cakes are usually butter cakes with butter cream frosting. You hardly ever see fresh fruit on American cakes. Also, rather than round cakes, rectangular sheet cakes that feed many people are more common. And you can't eat birthday cake without ice cream!

The flavor of the birthday cake depends on the birthday person's taste. There are familiar flavors such as vanilla and chocolate, as well as flavors you don't see in Japan, such as lemon, carrot, and red velvet. A



particularly popular cake flavor for birthdays is *funfetti*. Funfetti is a portmanteau of *fun* and *confetti*, and is a white cake with lots of rainbow sprinkles mixed in. When baked, it looks like someone threw a

handful of colorful confetti into the cake, which makes it perfect for birthday parties!

By the way, Americans are generally fine with artificial colors and eat sweets containing them without batting an eyelash. When my husband first saw a red velvet cake in the US, he was disgusted. In Japan, I wanted to make a funfetti cake for my daughter, but Japanese sprinkles are not vivid enough, and the colors mostly disappeared upon baking, so it didn't turn out well. I don't think that Japanese people like artificial colors in their food.



### Piñata

Piñatas are originally Mexican culture, but they are quite popular with American children, too. The piñata is a papier-mâché vessel, often shaped like a star or horse, stuffed with treats, and hung from a high place, such as a tree. Children are blindfolded, and one by one, they try to hit the piñata with a stick. Once the piñata breaks, the treats scatter everywhere, so the children scramble to pick up as many as they can.

I have some happy memories of piñatas at birthday parties. You can't find them for sale in Japan, but you can make one using papier-mâché. The Ebetsu International Center makes piñatas every year for the Winter Fest. This year, my daughter tried hitting one, and it looked like she enjoyed it!



### Birthday Punches

In this case, I'm not talking about the drink, but physical punches! Birthday punches are a custom where the birthday person is punched the same number of times as their age. For example, a 10-year-old kid would be punched on the arm ten times. After the punches, they get "a pinch to grow an inch." Like I said before, my birthday was almost

always during spring break, so luckily, I was usually safe from birthday punches.

### Special Ages

In Japan, there are special ages such as three, five, seven, and twenty. America has special ages too. For example, when an American turns 16, they can get their driver's license. Some teens get their first car for their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday present.

For young Latinas in the US and across Latin America, 15 is the most special age. A coming-of-age party called a *quinceañera* is held to celebrate a girl's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday and transition to womanhood. Parents of the birthday girl often hire a party planner, and rent a venue, DJ, and photographer a year in advance. The cake has three, four, even five tiers. Quinceañera dresses are particularly glamorous and resemble the colored dresses worn by the bride at Japanese weddings. Quinceañeras rival weddings not only in scale, but also in price. The average cost is about 3 million yen! Many parents begin to save for their daughter's quinceañera as soon as she is born, and relatives also help foot the bill. I suppose you can't put a price on your daughter's happiness!



Finally, 21 is another special age in America, because it's the legal drinking age. When I was in college, many people had their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party at a bar or club. However, I read that Gen Z is more concerned about their health and finances, so they don't drink much. I can't imagine how one would celebrate becoming an adult without heading to the bar, but everyone is free to celebrate as they like.★

#### Contact Information

Ebetsu City Board of Education  
Takasago 24-6, Ebetsu, Hokkaido 〒067-0074  
Tel: 011-381-1049 Fax: 011-382-3434

Pictures: r/90s by u/theheartlessnerd, pillsburybaking.com, cookingclassy.com/birthday-cake/, flickr user vnysia, irasutoya.com, Christopher Michel - commons.wikimedia.org