



No, Not Much ...

Summer is approaching, and this means that the 'o-chugen' season is upon us once again. Westerners sometimes like to 'complain' about the burden of having to prepare Xmas gifts for many people, but for the Japanese, gift seasons come *twice* annually, here in summer, and again at the end of the year, when the gifts are referred to as 'o-seibo'.

Unlike the Xmas gifts prepared in the West, these seasonal gifts aren't for family and friends. For the most part they are sent as a token of appreciation for a favour done, or for the continuation of a business or professional relationship. I receive them from the companies or craftsmen from whom I purchase my business supplies. These people send the gifts to show that they value my custom, with the implicit message, "We hope that you will continue to do business with us ..."

In recent years, a strong feeling has grown that gifts should not be wasted, so senders sometimes check first to see if their proposed present will be acceptable. One of my suppliers called last week to find out if I drank wine. I answered in the affirmative, and a couple of days later a very nice bottle showed up on the doorstep.

And I had to smile because that bottle will cause me an ever-so-slight little problem a few weeks from now, once I have finished drinking it.

I am really not much of a drinker. I have no whiskey or other hard drinks in the house at all, only drink beer during the hot season, and in a typical year might go through three or four bottles of wine at the most. But some months back, after hearing the same advice from a number of people (family and friends) to the effect that "a glass of wine late in the evening is both very pleasant and good for your health ..." I thought I would give it a try. I went to an internet wine shop and ordered one of their special offers - a selection of six different bottles of red wine for a reasonable price.

The wine arrived and I began drinking it, in the recommended way - a small glass late in the evening. But before I knew what had happened, the carton was empty. It seems that six bottles of wine don't actually last very long - each bottle will provide five or so glasses, so a six bottle carton is basically a month's supply. But I had enjoyed the drinks, and it wasn't so expensive, so when the box was done, I re-ordered.

The empty bottles began to pile up. Garbage collection here in Ome is quite strict, and divided into nearly two dozen categories. Bottles are picked up once a month, on the second Tuesday. Miss it, and you have to hold onto the stuff until the next pickup day comes around. So you can see where this story is going. I missed a bottle collection day, and on the next one, I dutifully put out my garbage; nearly a dozen empty wine bottles.

My neighbour Yamaguchi-san was sweeping the street in front of our houses as I did so, and his question was obvious, "Had a party?"

I *should* perhaps have just said 'yes', but didn't think of the consequences, and told the truth. "No. These are just from me ..."

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We both looked at the collection, and then at each other. It would be no use at all to protest, "Oh, I don't drink much at all ..." because the contrary evidence was there for both of us to see, and I can well imagine the conversation with his wife when he went back indoors. "I think we had better watch out for Dave; he might be under more stress than we thought ..."

So a short time later, when I came to the end of my supply, including the gift bottle, I refrained from going back to the wine shop to re-order. I don't want to put myself in the situation of being the person who skulks around hiding his garbage so the neighbours don't see it.

And anyway, beer season is nearly here, and you can stomp those cans *flat* and hide them easily!

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