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Know your noodles

By Tim Hayward

Ramen, Japanese noodle soup, is a fast food that should be made, say its connoisseurs, with all the finesse of haute cuisine



The perfect serving

It's too early on a Monday morning and I'm standing with steamed-up glasses in a Soho shop window, trying to drop a pinch of shredded spring onions into the right place on a bowl of ramen soup. My fingers feel like fat frankfurters: first I miss the pork, then the pile isn't high enough. Finally chef Kensuke Yamada, with polite resignation, lifts out my attempt and replaces it with his own, perfectly balanced, mathematically aligned. He breathes a little sigh. These things really matter...

In the UK, there has already been a surge of interest in ramen noodles, which Kensuke tops with pork belly and egg, and garnishes so skilfully. When Alan Yau threw open the doors of Wagamama 20 years ago, we learnt, falteringly at first, the art of queueing, of eating at a communal table, and of slurping our soup. Now a chain of more than 100 restaurants worldwide, Wagamama is a business success but has arguably lost touch with the original ideas of ramen.

A new book, *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen* by Dr Barak Kushner, who teaches modern Japanese history at

Cambridge, both contextualises the soup and hints at some of the reasons behind its global spread. Kushner explains how noodles entered Japan from China and how they evolved in Japanese cuisine in a way that reflected the prevailing feelings of Japan towards its neighbour. It was only during the 19th century, with Japanese cuisine in something of a slump, that the first shops appeared selling “Chinese-style” noodles in broth, initially to workers, students and late-night drinkers – much like the original hamburger or even the doner kebab.

After the second world war, despite famine conditions, Japan was slow to receive a supply of American food aid. When it did arrive, it comprised large surpluses of wheat flour. Though the Japanese Ministry of Health encouraged people to eat bread, there was no indigenous tradition of breadmaking. The sole experience of wheat was the noodle, and so began a second surge of popularity.

As Japan recovered and began to prosper, the people embraced the noodle with enthusiasm. Until around 1950 they were known as *shina* (Chinese) *soba* (buckwheat noodles), and retained a kind of transgressive, foreign glamour which appealed to the young – much as the American burger did to youngsters in austerity Britain – but they were also convenient and functional. Noodles fuelled students through nights of study; drunks reeling home from work could prop up a noodle stand and slurp; but, like convenience foods the world over, they also entered the home kitchen as time-savers.

In 1958, Ando Momofoku, a Taiwanese businessman, discovered a way of treating and packaging the noodles and dried soup flavourings so that they could be reconstituted in hot water. These “Chikin Ramen” (“ramen” might be a corruption of “lamian”, a Chinese term meaning “pulled noodles”) were the ancestors of today’s Pot Noodle.

Today, ramen are everywhere. There are more than 34,000 ramen shops in Japan, serving over 25 per cent of meals taken out of the home. Many Japanese cities have noodle stadiums where competitions can take place.

In one small chain, Ichiran, diners are led to individual booths where they can pass a note to a server hidden behind a curtain, who will pass them their ideal bowl of ramen, which they can then contemplate and consume in reverent silence. Attempts have been made to mass-cater ramen, in restaurants such as Wagamama, but as refinement relies on daily careful preparation of soups, working at this scale tends to produce disappointing results. Good ramen is very good and – quietly turning our eyes from the Pot Noodle – is best made at an artisanal level by a caring and individual cook. It is part of the beauty of ramen that it will never be haute cuisine, but in the correct hands can be no less sublime.

In London, a new ramen bar, Bone Daddies, from ex-Zuma and Nobu head chef Ross Shonhan, is due to open in Wardour Street, Soho, in



Cooking noodles



Basic soup



©Greg Funnell

November. And at Tonkotsu in nearby Dean Street, Kensuke takes his ramen very seriously. Only two types are served, one with a spicy Tokyo-style soup, and the signature *tonkotsu*, after which the place is named. Originating in Kyushu, *tonkotsu* soup is made by boiling pork bones and fat long and hard. The bones yield flavour while the collagen and gelatin allow the fat to emulsify with the flavour-filled liquid in the turbulence of boiling. It has taken them months to perfect the technique, struggling to source the right kind of pork bones and testing batch after batch.



Topping with pork

Noodle shops in Japan tend to be small, independent operations that guard their recipes carefully, so experimentation and refinement are the only routes to a good stock. Today the stock base is exactly as it should be – milky in texture, with a light pork taste but without any hint of “pigginess” in the smell.

The noodles themselves are still handmade elsewhere and shipped in to the restaurant, but they’ve got a noodle machine the size of a small car being imported from Japan at the moment and are in negotiations with British mills to develop exactly the right sort of flour. (Kensuke considers this level of control vital.)



Tim Hayward with Kensuke Yamada

The fresh noodles Kensuke is using are boiled a single serving at a time, using a timer, and constantly agitated in a small basket. Using his free hand he ladles into the large “donburi” bowl a precisely measured shot of “base”. The stock itself is not seasoned – it would be impossible to control flavours while reducing it – so the correct quantity of base is judged in a daily tasting and a suite of measuring ladles are used to portion it out.

Assembly is swift. The base shot is topped with two ladles of stock. The noodles, now à point and shaken dry, are rolled into the hot liquid and topped with two slices of cold pork belly, three strands of *menma*, sesame seeds, a handful of chopped spring onions, some bean shoots and half a soft-boiled egg. Finally Kensuke reaches for a squeeze-bottle containing a black reduction of long-cooked garlic and swirls an artistic trail across the top.

The effect is simultaneously simple and poetic. This is clearly the very speediest of fast food but the simplicity of the presentation and the purity of the ingredients feels much more like something that Michelin gives stars for. Sure, it can be banged out at blistering speed to queues of hungry diners for very little cash, but the care with which the ingredients are set up means that the balance in the bowl is never less than gorgeous.

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Kensuke Yamada

A ramen guide

Ramen differ from other wheat noodles, being made with an alkaline water called *kansui* which gives them their *hagotae* or “tooth feel”. This firm texture is something like the Italian al dente but with a kind of rubbery resistance. Most ramen noodles contain egg, which adds to their yellow colour but those used for *tonkotsu* are made without and are white.

- The name “ramen” may come from the Chinese “lamian” meaning “pulled noodles” although, confusingly, ramen noodles are almost always machine-cut rather than hand-pulled.

- The boiled noodles are served in a soup, usually made with a stock of differing proportions of chicken and pork. The stock is finished with a carefully judged “base” of concentrated seasoning ingredients which may include the fundamental ingredients of the traditional *dashi* stock, *konbu* seaweed and *katsuboshi* (dried bonito flakes) plus soy, miso or salt.

Varying combinations give us the four main types of ramen:

- *Shio* is predominantly chicken-based and seasoned with salt (*shio*)
- *Shoyu* can have chicken, vegetable beef or fish in the base stock but is flavoured with soy sauce (*shoyu*)
- Miso, originating in Hokkaido, blends chicken or fish stock with fermented soy paste (miso)
- *Tonkotsu* is mainly derived from pork bones (*tonkotsu*) with perhaps a little chicken stock added.
- Toppings vary according to region or noodle shop but can include slices of meat or chicken, *charsui* pork, chopped onions, beansprouts, soft-boiled egg, *menma* (dried, fermented bamboo shoot), *nori* seaweed, spinach, *pak choi* or other greens.

Tonkotsu

63 Dean St, London W1; 020 7437 0071; www.tonkotsu.co.uk

Book details

‘Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen’ by Barak Kushner (Global Oriental, £54.67)

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