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Sunday, Oct. 21, 2012

## Using the noodle to gain insight into Japanese culinary culture

By **HUGH CORTAZZI**

**SLURP! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen — Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup, by Barak Kushner. Global Oriental, 2012, 289 pp., \$90 (hardcover)**

Under the heading "Ramen is Japan" Barak Kushner asserts: "Ramen (regular and instant) permeates all features of contemporary Japanese life." He goes on to declare that a lifestyle investigation in 2004 showed that an overwhelming majority of Japanese prefer ramen to other noodle dishes including *soba*, *udon* or pasta. As someone who is particularly fond of *zaru-soba* and who is conscious of the pride of various regions such as Nagano in their own special varieties of *soba* and *udon*, I find this surprising.

Kushner, who teaches modern Japanese history at Cambridge University, is a ramen enthusiast who clearly enjoyed greatly doing the research needed for this fascinating book. In delving into the history of ramen, Kushner throws light on many interesting aspects of Japanese social and political history as well as on Japan's lengthy and complex relationship with China.

Where did ramen originate? he asks. When he put this question to Hiroshi Osaki, who established the Ramen Data Bank, the answer began: "Ramen represents Japanese culture in that the main pillars of its origin are Chinese but later, Japan nurtured these elements for itself and created something completely different from Chinese culture." This is true of many other aspects of Japanese culture.

In his further investigations Kushner tries to discover the origins of the term "ramen" and notes that before the Pacific War peddlers with their food carts used to call their noodles "*Shina* *soba*" (Chinese *soba*). One theory is that the word "ramen" came to be used because Japanese cannot pronounce the consonant "L," which was used in "*la-mian*," the Chinese term for pulled noodles.

One important postwar development was the invention of instant ramen by Momofuku Ando, who apparently found how to develop the product by looking at how tempura was made. "The trick is to fry the noodles quickly enough and in hot enough oil that they fuse into a hard block." Kushner declares that "instant ramen helped to spur Japan's third food revolution." The product is one of Japan's

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contributions to the world's inventory of convenience foods.

What is the difference between "washoku" and "Nihon ryori"? Kushner explains that "washoku" is used to describe traditional homegrown cuisine while "Nihon ryori" includes dishes imported from abroad and adapted to Japanese tastes. Tempura and sukiyaki fit into this category. "Washoku" reflects the austerity that Japanese had to endure because of the vagaries of the Japanese climate and the unsuitability of much of Japan's terrain to agriculture.

Among the interesting historical facts that emerge in Kushner's survey of Japanese food culture are his comments on the Heian court. The members of the court produced fine literature and poetry, but their quality of life "was less than brilliant. They gorged on rice with a few pickled side dishes and rarely exercised. ... The men drank large quantities of a sweet alcoholic drink and developed a range of diabetic-related illnesses."

A modern Japanese would have found Japanese food and cuisine in all periods up to that of the Tokugawa shoguns almost unbelievably poor. No meat, limited vegetables and fish unless you lived by the sea. Rice was a luxury. Millet, which was turned into soba, was the staple diet. In the war years and after even the sweet potato was a luxury.

Buddhist precepts forbade the killing of animals. Fish were not "killed"; they died from being brought out of their natural watery environment. The casuistry, which allowed such an exception, led in Tokugawa times to *inoshishi* (wild boar) being referred to as *yama-kujira*, mountain whales!

Kushner has also much of interest to say about the role of food in Shinto and in the ritual of Japanese life.

I would have welcomed a comparison between the spread of ramen culture with the development and role of pasta in Italian cuisine and its spread through Europe and North America, but this would perhaps have made the book too weighty a tome.

I also missed any reference to Morioka's *wanko-soba*. How many cups could Kushner manage to consume?

Japanese food in recent years has become hugely popular in Western countries. Paris has even more Japanese restaurants than London. Sushi is now the luncheon choice of many Western office workers. Kushner's book should ensure that ramen becomes equally popular.

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