

Narita evolves into new world gateway  
Find out more ▶



The World's Window on Japan  
The Japan Times ONLINE  
10 東洋経済  
Toyo Keizai Online

NEWS OPINION LIFE IN JAPAN ENTERTAINMENT SPORTS BLOGS SEARCH SITE MAP E-MAIL NEWS RSS FEEDS

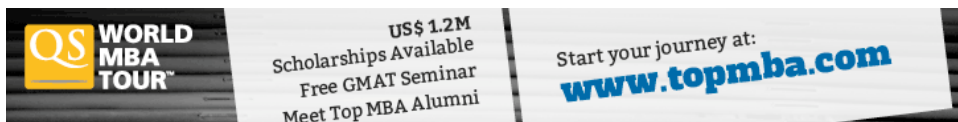
CAREER DEVELOPMENT SPECIAL

 Search

Advertising || Jobs 転職 || Shuikam ST || JT Weekly || Book Club || JT Women || Study in Japan || Times Coupon || Subscribe 新聞購読申込

Home > Entertainment > Book

Snap your way into The Japan Times



QS WORLD MBA TOUR™  
US\$ 1.2M Scholarships Available  
Free GMAT Seminar  
Meet Top MBA Alumni  
Start your journey at:  
[www.topmba.com](http://www.topmba.com)

PRINT E-MAIL

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

### Japanese Knotweed Removal

All methods of removal - herbicide, dig, barrier. Success guaranteed.  
[www.tpknottweed.com](http://www.tpknottweed.com)

### Remove 10lbs of Belly Fat

Start today with the latest way to effectively cut off excess fat!  
[HelioFitness.co.uk](http://HelioFitness.co.uk)

### Recipes At ASDA

Great Range of Quick & Easy Recipes Online At ASDA. Try It Today!  
[ASDA.com/TheCookBook](http://ASDA.com/TheCookBook)

Learn, Experience, Lead  
The new generation Leeds MBA. [詳細・予約 ▶](#)

**英国国立リーズ大学MBA**

日本で説明会/個別相談会、開催決定！

国際的に高い評価を受ける英国伝統校で  
1年間でMBAを取得。

10/28(日)・29(月)  
新宿 UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS  
Leeds University Business School

100  
Next-Era  
CEOs  
— IN ASIA 2012 —

Stay connected with  
The Japan Times



NEWSmart

FINAIR  
BUSINESS AIRLINE TO EUROPE

Business Class from 343,000 JPY  
Economy Class from 49,000 JPY



TOPMBA CONNECT 1-2-1

HOW DO I KNOW WHICH BUSINESS SCHOOL IS BEST FOR ME?

Ready to expand your horizons and study in Japan? A GUIDE TO Japanese Colleges AND Universities

Here's your resource for locating the educational institutions and curriculum best suited to you and your goals.

**Meiji University**

Founded in 1881, Meiji University is one of Japan's premier educational institutions.



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!

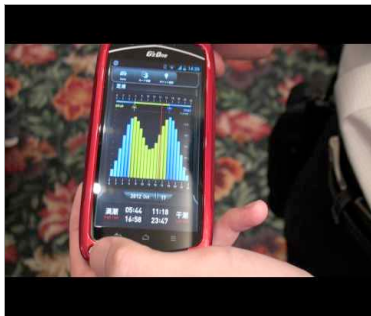
Kushner has also much of interest to say about the role of food in Shinto and in the ritual of Japanese life.


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.

**Au's 2012 winter product lineup**  
3:03



**JT** thejapantimes  
Subscribe 

 Gadgets powered by Google

[Poll](#) [Most read stories](#) [Editors' picks](#)

A piece of your mind  
**Atomic contradiction?**

Japan will not join a U.N. initiative against nuclear weapons, out of concern it would affect Tokyo's security arrangement under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. What's your take?

- This is appalling. Japan has a special responsibility to help reduce nuclear weapons.**
- This points out a certain hypocrisy in Japan's security agreement with the U.S. I feel that Japan truly wants to eliminate nukes, but this isn't the right forum to work toward that goal.**
- I'm glad Japan has a robust ability to defend itself, whatever that takes. Japan is the world's third largest economy. It should have its own nuclear weapons if it wants to.**

**VOTE**

Total Votes : 1483

[View past polls](#)

 PRINT

 Tweet 20

 E-MAIL

 Like 34

**[Lose 4 Stone in 3 Months?](#)**

Discover the Shocking Truth About Britain's Hottest Diet...

[NonDietWeightloss.co.uk/Diet](http://NonDietWeightloss.co.uk/Diet)

**[49 Y/O Mum Looks 29](#)**

Mum Reveals 2 Simple Steps! Doctors Hate Her.

[RevitaSkincare.net/AntiAging](http://RevitaSkincare.net/AntiAging)

**[Food Lovers' Heaven](#)**

Authentic Sushi, Sake, Green Tea & More! J-Culture & Food Event

[www.hyperjapan.co.uk/](http://www.hyperjapan.co.uk/)

AdChoices 

 We welcome your opinions. Click to send a message to the editor.

The Japan Times  
(C) All rights reserved

This site has been optimized for modern browsers. Please make sure that Javascript is enabled in your browser's preferences.  
The Japan Times Ltd. All rights reserved.