

Japanese Food: Ramen

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It's fast, cheap, yummy and everywhere—it's ramen.

Ramen is hot broth with wavy egg noodles, originating in China, though when or how it arrived in Japan is open to dispute. But if you must have narrative with your noodles, a feudal lord called Tokugawa Mitsukuni is regarded to be the first slurper of ramen in 1665, though ramen (or Chinese noodle as it is also referred to in Japan) did not become widely popular until after the influx of Chinese immigrants post the Meiji restoration in the 19th century. In the 20th century, Japanese soldiers returning from China post-war spread the ramen tradition, and now, just about every region in Japan has its own "indigenous" variation—like miso ramen from Sapporo in the northern island of Hokkaido or shio ramen (salt flavoured) from Tokyo.

Originally, eaten at outdoor stalls, ramen is still the most unpretentious of meals, though many people regard it as more of a snack or supper. Especially taxi drivers and students studying into the wee hours can be seen slurping away in local ramen eateries, which are usually badly lit counters with steamed up windows. Ramen is also cheap, and if you are on a tight budget, you can order a second helping of noodles to add to your soup (as usually there's a lot of soup).

The slurping is essential (and considered good manners) for a number of reasons--slurping helps you draw in the soup, which contains all the flavour and goodness with the noodles. Also, ramen must be eaten fast as the noodles soak up the soup quickly and become fat and soggy. The slurping sound is distinctive—it's not sucking but breathing in—like an inverted whistle.

While cheap and quick (there are many stand-up ramen bars around train stations), the ramen broth takes many hours of cooking and preparing. The stock is concocted from a variety of sources, chicken, seafood, vegetables, but the one that seems to be in vogue is tonkotsu, which is made from pork bones and is thick and milky with fat.

Ramen places abound in Japan, but try to find one with lots of people, or even a queue, which is always a good sign. In Tokyo's Tsukiji, the fish market area, the very famous one is called Inoue Ramen, literally a hole in the wall manned by two men, though recently, a youngish man has been employed to maintain the queue (which starts to form around 10 a.m.), and part of the fun is watching the thousand yen notes accumulate in a little container on the counter as you progress in the queue. Chashu men is the regular dish here, which has a few slices of fatty roast pork, some pickled bamboo shoots and shallots on top.

Only if you are ramen obsessive, take a trip to the Ramen Museum in Shin-Yokohama. It's a bit out of the way but here you can brush up on ramen history and learn how ramen is made with wheat, water, salt and kansui, a mineral water (with sodium and potassium carbonate and phosphate). The museum is a re-creation of postwar downtown Tokyo, complete with downtown sounds, and actors selling nostalgic products like the sweet drink Ramune which comes in a special cryptic drinking bottle at not so nostalgic prices. You can sample lots of ramen here too.

In Sydney, there are a number of ramen joints, though most are pretty awful if you ask us. Genki Ramen (6 Wilkes

Avenue, Artarmon, (02) 9410 3777) is popular, though why we don't know as we found the soup so full of MSG that we never went back. Ryotei (Ryo's Noodles, 125 Falcon Street, Crows Nest, (02) 9955 0225) is one of the better ones, and also very popular. Ichibanboshi in Sydney's CBD is another that has a good reputation. We won't be reviewing these however.

The only one we can recommend is Tokyo Roll in the atmosphereless food court in Berry Square in North Sydney. It's only open during the day for office workers, but the ramen here is properly made, and the chef (who is actually an excellent sushi chef) is a friend of Kei's.

Addendum: October 7, 2008: Tachan, the sushi chef who runs Tokyo Roll Ramen joint is going back to Hokkaido with his family, and has sold Tokyo Roll. What a shame...bye bye Tachan. We'll miss you....

Of course, instant ramen is the how most Australians (and Japanese) consume ramen. This year is the 50th anniversary of the invention of instant noodles by Momofuku Ando, who founded Nissin Food Products. He died last year at a ripe old 96. These statistics are evidence of his important contribution to global eating: in 2006, 92 billion packs of instant noodles were consumed globally. 47 billion in China, 14 billion in Indonesia, 14 billion in the United States, and 5.4 billion in Japan.

This blog devoted to ramen is obsessive but fun

by Masako Fukui Copyright Kei's Kitchen (2008)

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