

Japanese national cuisine; Ramen

Ramen is so popular in Japan that it would only be a minor exaggeration to say that not a single Japanese person dislikes it. Its popularity derives from the pleasure of savouring the diversity of flavours according to the region. The quick and easy *Instant Ramen* is somewhat less stylish, but equally interesting.

Ramen is a noodle dish made with Chinese noodles in a soup made with a base of soy sauce, Miso, or light spices, and is one of the most popular dishes in contemporary Japan. Since ancient times, Japanese food culture has been strongly influenced by Chinese imports. In its original form, Ramen was a noodle dish brought from China. After that, the particular noodle cuisine of Japan was developed, affected by the lifestyle and palate of the Japanese, and a new Ramen was born.

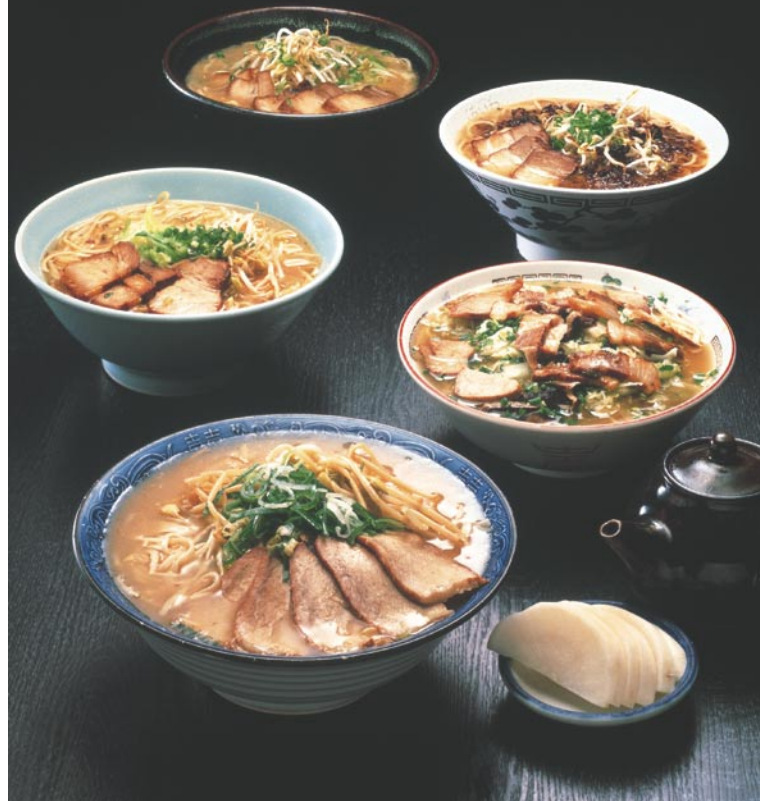
Ramen basically consists of firm noodles and sauce in a meat or fish-based broth, with unique characteristics according to the geographical region. The sauce is usually prepared with either a soy sauce, light spices, or Miso base, which is blended with ingredients such as chicken consomme, onions, spring onions, Shiitake mushrooms and apple to make a broth, which is beaten to make soup. According to the complementing flavours of the sauce and broth, a variety of delicious soups are produced.

On top of this, the particular recipes of each Ramen shop deliver strange and glorious results such as tomato-based Ramen, and the remarkable Ramen with mountains of cheese.

There are districts, known by such titles as 'Ramen Battlefield' and 'Ramen Road', where many competing Ramen shops are in close proximity, and customers gather in legions. In recent years, places have arisen where connoisseurs can go to eat the varied delights of specialist Ramen without having to visit their areas of origin. These are known as 'Ramen Museums'. In a Ramen Museum, you can compare the flavours of Ramen from anywhere in Japan, advance your knowledge of Ramen at the Ramen exhibitions, and purchase Ramen-related merchandise at the souvenir shop. It is, in a manner of speaking, a Ramen theme park.

There is also a plethora of Ramen guide books featuring specialist food writers and critics who introduce Ramen shops and the particular Ramen to be found there. Eating Ramen has practically been deemed a form of entertainment in Japan; "My hobby is Ramen shop-hopping" proclaim some, and Ramen-related journalistic-style reports are displayed on others' personal homepages and blogs.

Incidentally, it might interest you to know that the inventor of instant noodles was not in fact a middle-aged woman called Maggi (which



Ramen: one of Japan's favourite dishes.

Photo: © Kagoshima Prefectural Tourist Federation / © JNTO

those of us who ran home to Maggi noodles after school might have assumed) but a Japanese man by the name of Ando.

These days, instant Ramen is a simple and common household item, but in the past Ramen was something that in Japan could only be eaten at a restaurant. After World War Two, having seen lines of hungry people waiting outside a Ramen shop, Momofuku Ando, the founder of Nissin Food Products Co. Ltd. wondered if there weren't an easier way of making Ramen at home. He invented instant noodles he named *Chicken Ramen*, which could be prepared by boiling dry noodles for only 3 minutes. In 1958, his *Chicken Ramen* was released throughout Japan. Its simplicity and excellent flavour earned it the nickname, 'Magic Ramen'.

Following the invention of *Instant Ramen*, during a trip to the U.S., Ando saw Americans put their instant noodles into a cup, pour boiling water over them, and eat them with a fork. This was the inspiration for *Cup Ramen*, which was later sold as *Cup Noodles*. The finished product was a cup-like insulated and waterproof container filled with dehydrated noodles and other ingredients such as dehydrated vegetables and stock. At present, aside from Australia, *Cup Noodles* are an international hit, exported worldwide to countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and so on. Japan is proud to have invented such a culinary treasure.

At the same time as being a kind of national food for Japan, Ramen is a well-known part of Japan's food culture all over the world. When people from other countries bring to mind Japanese food, Sushi, Tempura, and Sashimi are certainly very famous, and perhaps in the future Japan's Ramen will join their lofty ranks. 