

PRIORITY

EXCLUSIVELY FOR PPS CLUB MEMBERS 

JAN-MAR 2017

SYDNEY'S HIGH LIFE

RAMEN REVOLUTION
THE ART OF SELLING
ULTIMATE EXPEDITIONS

Ramen revolution

Kim Reyes slurps her way through the best bowls of next-generation noodles – inventive, impeccably crafted and exploding with umami

In December 2015, a nine-seater Japanese ramen shop outside central Tokyo became the first *ramen-ya* to receive a coveted Michelin star. It was the dining world's official acknowledgment of what ramen connoisseurs had known for years – that, in the right hands, ramen can truly be a gourmet affair. For some chefs, that means elevating traditional Japanese recipes using regionally sourced ingredients to get the best flavours. For others, it's about interpreting ramen through their own experience, creating uniquely personal bowls.

At the one-Michelin-starred Tsuta, the handmade noodles comprise four kinds of stone-milled flour, the soy base features a blend of custom-brewed shoyu from Wakayama and chef Yuki Onishi's in-house formula, and the delicate yet nuanced dashi stock is made from chicken, vegetables and seafood. The signature Shoyu Soba is finished with a dollop of Italian black truffle purée.

Tsuta is arguably the most high-profile *ramen-ya*. Their overseas expansion to Singapore in November 2016 made front-page news and drew a line of 200 people on opening day. Yet they were hardly the first – and certainly won't be the last – to display such masterful dedication in a ¥1,000 (about US\$10) bowl of Japan's most popular noodles. →



This spread, from left: Chef Yuki Onishi of the one-Michelin-starred Tsuta; "I wanted to make a one-and-only," Onishi says of his signature Shoyu Soba recipe. People are known to queue for hours for a bowl





This spread, from left: Ramen Keisuke Lobster King's speciality ramen uses two to three lobster heads for a single bowl of its creamy broth; hand making Japanese ramen wheat noodles – increasingly more chefs consider ramen a culinary blank canvas and the ideal dish for experimentation



RAMEN'S ROOTS

Statistics vary, but current industry estimates put Japan's total number of ramen shops at around 60,000, with over 20,000 in Greater Tokyo alone. Brought to Japan from China by migrant workers in the 1880s, ramen's humble beginnings as a meat-based noodle soup served from Chinatown pushcarts belied its eventual rise as the staple soul food of industrialised postwar Japan. It became ubiquitous in mainstream Japanese food culture and, by the late '90s – while the rest of the world still associated ramen with the cheap instant variety – a growing number of Japanese chefs were treating ramen-making like a serious craft.

From fixating on the noodle's flour-water ratio to concocting 'double soups' that blended meat and fish for a more complex flavour, these chefs radically raised ramen's

culinary standards – but not its prices. This ramen movement became centred around a passion for quality and obsessive attention to detail, known in Japan as *kodawari*. Following a basic DNA – noodles with *kansui* (an alkaline bicarbonate that gives ramen noodles their springiness), *tare* (seasoning), and soup – ramen is essentially a culinary blank canvas; the ideal dish for maverick experimentation.

Embodying the *kodawari* spirit, today's best ramen chefs create dishes that are distinctively, undeniably their own. Every element of the dish is meaningful and part of a greater whole.

"There's always a thought process behind why good ramen chefs do what they do," says Tokyo-based ramen aficionado Brian MacDuckston, who runs the popular blog and YouTube Channel, *Ramen Adventures*. "But their ultimate goal is to hit you with umami."

Today's best ramen chefs create dishes that are distinctively, undeniably their own – no matter where they hail from



TOKYO'S TOP BOWLS

With the most widespread offering of ramen varieties in Japan – and hence, the world – Tokyo is home to some of the world's best and most groundbreaking *ramen-ya*.

At Konjiki Hototogisu – said to be the favourite of celebrated Noma chef René Redzepi – the lighter-style *assari* soup base is famous for its use of giant hamaguri clams. They add depth to the chicken-and-pork broth, giving it a shellfish kick, balanced with a dot of olive, mushroom, anchovy and truffle sauce. Meanwhile in upscale Ginza, Kagari's refined bowl of silky collagen-laced *tori paitan* ramen echoes elegant kaiseki-style dining in its artful presentation. Here you're served seasonal vegetables on top of the noodles – okra and eggplant in summer, pumpkin and sweet potato in autumn.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

SINGAPORE SLURPS

In another Asian city saturated with ramen restaurants, Tsuta's Singapore outpost distinguishes itself as the city's front-runner in high-quality ramen with a clear, light soup base – a growing trend in Japan, according to MacDuckston. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the rich, hearty style offered by Ramen Keisuke, founded by Japanese Ramen Champion chef Keisuke Takeda. With eight shops in Singapore and 23 in Japan, Ramen Keisuke is a chain, but each shop boasts a unique concept and menu. For his 20-plus soup varieties, chef Keisuke insists on creating a specific noodle to pair with each.

Ramen Keisuke Lobster King's speciality is its creamy lobster broth, made from simmering crushed French rock lobsters for up to 10 hours. A nod to chef Keisuke's French culinary training,

the ramen soup's velvety texture and piquant crustacean taste is more akin to a bisque.

Also adapting his ramen from French influences is chef Melvin Ang of Kanshoku Ramen, which opened in 2014. Inspired by a French fine-dining restaurant's angel hair pasta with caviar and truffle oil, Ang sought to recreate the delectable dish using Hakata-style noodles he makes in-house. After months of experimentation, Ang launched the Dry Truffle Ramen. With noodles coated in truffle oil-infused kombu and topped with a runny sous-vide egg and slices of truffle, the brothless *mazemen*-style ramen captures the gourmet essence of the posh pasta at a fraction of the price. His next endeavour is to create a refreshing ramen flavoured with yuzu.

For non-Japanese ramen chefs like Ang, outsider status might be deemed a disadvantage, but it also affords them greater freedom to exercise creative license. "At first, people didn't take us seriously because we aren't Japanese," he says, "but it also meant I could take risks."

STATESIDE NOODLES

In the US, this no-holds-barred approach distinguishes certain *ramen-ya* from the plethora of shops that have opened in the past decade. One of America's most well-known ramen iconoclasts is Ivan Orkin, who had successful ramen shops in Tokyo before moving back to open Ivan Ramen in 2013. At his two New York locations, he whips up innovative, off-the-wall noodles that combine his Jewish-New Yorker upbringing with his Japanese experience. A summertime Cold Lemon Shio sees rye noodles swimming in a citrus broth, while the 8AM Ramen is a ramen-lover's dream substitute for a ham-and-egg breakfast with its chewy noodles, and Taylor ham and omelette strands in a cheddar-dashi fondue.

At Ramen Shop in Oakland, California, ramen-making reaches artisanal heights, where the chefs – alumni of Chez Panisse – apply the same market-driven approach to their ramen. Each bowl is crafted with local organic and sustainable ingredients, such as Meyer lemons to perfume shoyu broth, and foraged oyster mushrooms and Jimmy Nardello peppers as toppings. This means a daily changing menu is dictated by freshness and seasonality.

"I think it is fantastic to make ramen that matches one's culture that is important to him," says Onishi-san of Tsuta. "This can only be done by that person himself." →

Below, from left: In Paris, stepping into Kodawari Ramen will transport you to a typical Japanese alleyway; Kanshoku Ramen's chef Melvin Ang was inspired by a French fine dining dish when he created Dry Truffle Ramen



Below: One of America's most well known ramen chefs Ivan Orkin pouring a bowl of his innovative noodles



When asked how far ramen experimentation can go, MacDuckston insisted on a caveat: “You can go as far as you want, you can get crazy! But it’s about balance – it has to have umami and match with the process of eating noodles.”

PARISIAN KODAWARI

Cities like New York, Singapore, Hong Kong, London and Sydney have all experienced a ‘ramen craze’ in the past few years, and continental Europe is also poised to join the ramen revolution.

Paving the way for a ramen boom in Paris is Kodawari Ramen, opened in March 2016. In true *kodawari* fashion, founder Jean-Baptiste Meusnier toiled over every detail, from the food to the interiors. Indeed, stepping through the doorway feels like you’ve been teleported from Saint-Germain-des-Prés to a Japanese *yokocho*.

There was no suitable flour in France for the noodles he wanted, so Meusnier insisted that Kodawari make it themselves. Now, they grow their own speciality wheat, milled into custom-blended flour by an artisanal French miller in

Château-Landon, 100 kilometres south of Paris. Other ingredients are similarly exceptional – farm-raised chickens for the broth, *chashu* made with specially sourced pork from French Basque Country. Taking a cue from Japan, Kodawari also embraces a seasonal menu – a *hiyashi* (cold) ramen with black sesame for summer, and a vegan ramen with pumpkin broth and porcini mushroom oil for autumn.

“We are at the beginning of a new era in Paris,” says Meusnier. “The French are starting to discover real ramen. We want to raise the quality and taste level.”

THE FUTURE OF RAMEN

As the ramen renaissance expands, and other ramen styles like *tsukemen* (dipping noodles) and *mazemen* gain global popularity, the concept of ramen-making as a gourmet craft to be mastered will undoubtedly continue for years.

“In 10 years, ramen will be quite different than what we have today,” Meusnier says. “[Ramen] is a real culture. Without evolution, the ramen scene wouldn’t exist.” ■

World of ramen

NEW YORK

Ramen Lab

A rotating roster of guest chefs offer up limited-time ramen dishes at this tiny counter shop, opened by the country’s top craft noodle-maker, Sun Noodle. ramen-lab.com

PARIS

Kodawari Ramen

Boasting homemade noodles and authentic Japanese flavours, the French capital’s best *ramen-ya* conjures up memories of Tokyo in the heart of the City of Light. kodawari-ramen.com

SINGAPORE

Tsuta

The first overseas location of the only *ramen-ya* to hold a Michelin star retains the impeccable quality of the original’s signature light broths, with modernised interiors for a more upscale experience. tsuta.com

TOKYO

Soranoiro

A pioneer in broadening the appeal of the salaryman’s comfort food, this shop’s signature vegetarian ramen and spicy vegan version are tried-and-tested palate-pleasers. *Blue Bldg 1B, 1-3-10 Hirakawacho*