［研究ノート］

Ramen

── A Dish for All Seasons ──

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Abstract

The author examines the popular dish ramen from historical, political, and gastronomical perspectives. He concludes by speculating on future developments with respect to the foodstuff.

In that sui generis classical Japanese animation entitled *Kinnikuman*, which features a colorful cast of wrestlers, an anthropomorphic hybrid（half human, half bowl of ramen）named Ramenman puts his prodigious martial arts skills to good use entertaining fans of the show and, by so doing, eventually landing his own series, *Tatakae!! Ramenman*. One could not think of a more appropriate representation for such a character or the dish in question than a battling bowl of soup, because the Japanese consider ramen to be a "stamina food." Furthermore, the dish, like the man for all seasons, is multi-talented and steadfast; traces of the sunshine patriot cannot be found lurking among its strands or submerged within its broth: it will serve you well in good times and in bad! Slurp on!

Ramen is closely associated with Japan; hence, it can be considered to be a feature—a prominent one at that—of Japanese foodways, which *Merriam-Webster* defines as "the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period." But labeling it as "Japanese" is too simplistic and not entirely accurate. Considering the fact that an essential ingredient in the dish is the formerly hand-stretched noodles known as *la-mien*, whose provenance is China, one could argue even that the birthplace of ramen may not be the country with which it is closely associated, and like many other dishes that do not remain within the confines of their national borders (e.g., sushi), ramen has become a familiar and popular dish in other lands; it has gone through a process of globalization, a term which may also render a simplistic and inaccurate picture of what has happened to the dish.

The experts disagree with respect to when the steam first rose from this noodle dish. George Solt in his informative and entertaining *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze* gives three possibilities. The first of the origin stories is the one advanced by Keiko Kosuge, a food historian, who claims that it appeared in the 1660s and was first consumed by Tokugawa Mitsukuni, a rather prominent *daimyō*, or feudal lord. This nobleman was assisted in his culinary undertaking by a Zhu Shun Sui, a Chinese refugee and resident of Mito, a city whose name is now closely associated with another Japanese dish, *nattō*. Mitsukuni was rather fond of *udon*, a wheat-flour noodle soup. This was, at the time, consumed with a simple topping of *umeboshi* and garnished with a sprinkling of sesame seeds. Zhu suggested that Mitsukuni enhance his sensory experience and "recommended five ingredients commonly used in Chinese noodle soup that the *daimyō*…could add to improve the taste…. The five ingredients…he purportedly suggested were…*rakkyō*, garlic, garlic chives…, green onions, and ginger (Solt 2014, p. 16)." But, as Solt indicates, there is no way to gauge how closely this dish approximates the one we know today to be ramen.

The second possibility sources the dish to the profound changes that occurred in Japan after the second visit of the arrogant Matthew Perry. Perry's demands on the effete Tokugawa Shogunate were odious in the extreme and eventually resulted in the signing of the even more repugnant U.S.-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce (1858), which included a provision applying a system of extraterritoriality to foreign residents accused of crimes committed in Japan, wherein their respective consulates would adjudicate their cases, thus circumventing the Japanese legal system. Incidentally, one could argue convincingly that this system of extraterritoriality is extant in present-day Japan in the treatment accorded U.S. military personnel accused of crimes—some of which have been horrendous—committed in the country.

Perry's visit set off a chain reaction of sorts, which eventually culminated in the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate and saw the dawn of a new age, which ushered in numerous changes in the formerly isolated nation, some of which were gastronomic in nature. The Japanese were introduced to Western foods, including beer, which eventually came to occupy a prominent place in the beverage market of the country, and, of more relevance here, essential ramen ingredients like pork and wheat became readily available. Furthermore, there was an influx of Chinese tradesmen, some of whom brought with them the culinary skills for which their people are renowned. But consumption of the dish was limited to a few Japanese fortunately situated.

> One of the skills that the Chinese tradesmen brought with them was cooking. A noodle soup known as *lā-mien* (hand-stretched noodles served in a lightly salted chicken soup with scallions) soon became a staple of the Chinese restaurants in Japan. …The dish, which did not contain toppings or sauces at this point, was akin to a plain *shio* (salt-flavored) ramen. Excluding the select group of Japanese familiar with life in the foreign residential districts…few in Japan had the opportunity to taste the food. In these early years [late 19^{th} century] the consumers…were almost exclusively Chinese workers, traders, and students living in the districts for foreign residents in Japan's treaty ports (Solt 2014, p. 18).

The third ramen genesis story identifies a restaurant in the Tokyo neighborhood of Asakusa—home of Japan's first Western-style bar, the Kamiya Bar, and its venerable drink Denki Bran—as the birthplace of the dish. The establishment in question is Rai-Rai Ken, the first Japanese-owned Chinese restaurant in the country, which opened its doors in 1910.

> Unlike the plain noodle soups with no toppings other than scallions that had been served…during the 1880s and 1890s, Rai-Rai Ken incorporated a soy sauce-based seasoning sauce and served its noodle soup… with *chāshū* (roasted pork), *naruto* (fish-meal cake), boiled spinach,

> and *nori* (seaweed)—ingredients that together would form the model for authentic Tokyo-style ramen (Solt 2014, p. 19).

Solt mentions a bifurcation with respect to the consumption by the Japanese of wheat-based products, one linked to vicissitudes in the international arena, of waxing and waning powers. China, vanquished in the Sino-Japanese War and clearly in decline, was associated with the wheat-based ramen, a dish consumed primarily by the Japanese working class, whereas cake and bread, associated with the Western powers, appealed to the elite. In contemporary Japan, the status of ramen has been elevated (see below), which might be partially due to China's current economic and political status, which is beginning to eclipse that of the United States.

It was Japan's defeat in World War II and the subsequent Occupation of the country that brought increased significance to the dish.

> The cessation of rice imports from the former colonies of Korea and Taiwan, rice crop failures in the Japanese countryside in 1944 and 1945, and the importation of wheat as an emergency measure by the U.S. military all contributed to a reliance on noodles as an alternative to rice after the war (Solt 2014, p. 44).

The Allied Occupation of Japan, which was largely a U.S. undertaking, is characterized by two significant policy reversals, the political, which is fairly well known, and the gastronomic, which is not. In the former case, the U.S. initially sought to keep Japan weak in perpetuity, so as not to have it compete with its own imperialistic ambitions. To achieve this objective, it drew up the Constitution of Japan, with its contentious Article 9, but soon it reversed course and embraced former militarists, who would prove instrumental in facilitating sundry American objectives and ensure that Japan would remain firmly under American control. With respect to food aid, the U.S. at first provided as little as possible, but then decided to promote wheat—American wheat, of course—in a big way.

> The resurgence in ramen in Japan was the result of a strategic U.S. de-

> cision to prioritize food aid in the form of wheat to allies in Asia. After initially treating the acute food shortage in Japan as the responsibility of the Japanese themselves, the U.S. government changed course and began exporting large amounts of wheat as part of its program to rebuild the Japanese economy beginning in 1948. The U.S.-grown wheat took on an important political function in maintaining and strengthening the corporeal composition of the workers who would rebuild what remained the largest non-Communist economy in East Asia despite the destruction caused by the war. In this way, U.S. food policy during its occupation of Japan shifted from providing only begrudging emergency assistance to *offering both political and economic support with strategic geopolitical objectives* [emphasis added] and commercial export interests as the Cold War intensified in East Asia (Solt 2014, p. 45).

From the above citation, one could argue that the existence of the Soviet Union was at least one impetus behind America’s “largesse” with respect to Japan.

In the above paragraph, the word *largesse* is set off by quotation marks, because American “generosity,” which the United States did much to publicize and of which many Japanese who lived through the period in question believe to be the case, was, well, *not* generosity at all.

> The Americans diligently advertised their own purported generosity in providing their recently defeated foes with emergency food aid. Beginning in 1948, for example, the Office of the Supreme Commander initiated a publicity drive to inform households that the imported food was purely the result of American beneficence…. To this end, the Americans “advised” the Japanese government to announce each arrival of wheat cargo in newsreels and press releases to remind the Japanese of their generosity (Solt 2014, p. 62).

Solt cites a leaflet published by the Civil Information and Education Section, entitled “How to Cook Your Food Ration,” which contains this rather haughty and deceitful message: “Wheat flour contains 50% more protein than rice. America is spending $250 million for your food. Learn to use it properly to get the full benefit" (Solt 2014, pp. 62-63).

But the truth is quite different from the hype. "The Japanese government eventually repaid the United States for the food and other aid it received during the occupation. In January 1962, the Japanese government agreed to reimburse the United States $495 million…for the food, raw materials, and fuel that it had imported during the occupation…" (Solt 2014, p. 63). More disturbingly, "the American narrative about its generosity in Japan's greatest time of need became *a foundational part of Japan's own official postwar history* [emphasis added] as well" (Ibid.). The discerning student of Japan-U.S. relations in the postwar period can descry an unsettling pattern running from the Occupation to today. When the U.S. proposes a policy (e.g., TPP) or a purchase (e.g., F-35) that is adverse to Japanese interests or does something unseemly (e.g., failure to pay rent on the land occupied by its embassy[1]), the Japanese political elite can be relied on to run interference for its counterpart. Sometimes this is done through secrecy and obfuscation; sometimes through unrealistically optimistic interpretations of the facts; and sometimes through stony silence. The end result of such behavior has been to leave the general public with a more favorable impression of the United States than is warranted by the facts.

Approximately, thirty years ago this writer found himself in the Canadian Arctic town of Resolute, an Inuit community. One day he walked into a grocery store there and was astounded by what he saw: shelf upon shelf of instant ramen! The sight was both evidence of the commodification of ramen and a sad testament on the state of indigenous gastronomy. Laura Delind, citing S.W. Mintz, writes "…cuisines, first and foremost, are dedicated to local or regional use, for collective identity and sustenance, rather than for market or commodification. 'The regional foods most likely to remain more authentic are exactly the ones that can not be shipped, or can not travel well, or are either difficult or impossible to copy'"(Delind 2006, p. 137). Though not in the same class as *casu marzu*, the maggot cheese of Sardinia, the fresh version of ramen does not travel with the ease of the instant variety, which pretty much has put ramen in kitchen cupboards around the world. For that, the world must be grateful for the efforts of Momofuku Ando, the inventor of chicken-flavored instant ramen, *Chikin* Ramen, and founder of Nissin Food Products Co., Ltd.

Globalization of ramen in its instant form has led to localization/adaptation, with different cohorts tweaking the dish to make it more appropriate or appealing to local palates. Indeed, among one demographic instant ramen has gone beyond being simply a dish and has assumed a completely different status.

The United States enjoys the dubious distinction of being the most incarcerated nation in the world. There are over 2,300,000 people in prison in the U.S. in a variety of institutions (Wagner 2017). Among these hapless individuals, instant noodles are not only a foodstuff but a currency, as well. Indeed, it is the "prison currency of choice," according to a recently published report by NPR. Citing Michael Gibson-Light, a doctoral student at the University of Arizona, there is "an entire informal economy based on ramen (which the men [in prison] often referred to as 'soups'). Prisoners use it to hire other inmates for services, like cleaning out there bunk or doing their laundry, or purchase goods on the black market, like fresh fruits or vegetables, which aren't sold in the commissary but are sometimes smuggled from the kitchens…" (Godoy 2016). What are the attractive attributes of this pedestrian dish? The article lists several: "It's supercheap, supertasty, rich in calories and readily available in prison commissaries—at a time when cost-cutting at detention facilities has many inmates complaining they're not getting enough to eat" (Ibid.). More information regarding the last-mentioned point will help to convey the dire situation that some of America's prisoners face with respect to food. In an article published as part of the Marshall Project's "Life Inside" series, the writers reveal that human rights attorneys investigating Calhoun, Georgia's Gordon County Jail, where inmates are fed two meals a day, heard reports of prisoners consuming toilet paper and toothpaste to quell the hunger pangs. In the same article readers learn that "a group of prisoners at the Schuylkill County Prison in Pennsylvania filed a federal civil rights lawsuit claiming the portions they received are 'not even enough to fill a 5-year-old child'" (Santo 2015).

Perhaps the best evidence for the importance of the dish among this cohort is the publication of a cookbook entitled *Prison Ramen: Recipes and Stories from Behind Bars*. One gets the distinct impression that the primary market for the book is not among the incarcerated but among those fortunate enough never to have served time—the curious—and those who were once behind bars but are now free—the nostalgic, if you will. As the authors devote one page to informing the reader about restrictions placed on those pursuing the culinary arts from the confines of a jail cell, the former group—the curious—appear to be in the majority.

> …Food items at the commissary are nothing like you'll find in a gourmet shop. Obviously, we didn't have anything that came in a metal can—it would need to be opened with a weapon and then it would become a weapon itself….
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> …Microwaves in prison are weak, so the timing should be adjusted for more modern microwaves. Bags from pork skins or rinds were a useful cooking tool because boiling water never melted the bag. Large buckets lined with plastic trash bags would be used to cook huge spreads.
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> …strawberry jelly mixed with soy sauce made a pretty good teriyaki sauce. Sometimes we'd melt cheese by putting a jar of cheese in boiling water… (Collins 2015, p. xxi).

One noteworthy recipe in this otherwise rather lackluster collection is the one for Sweet and Crunchy Salad. The resulting dish would probably send shivers up and down the spines of such luminaries as Alice Waters and Michael Pollan but would most likely appeal to the palates of many of the people who sampled it. The ingredients are as follows: "2 packs chili flavor Ramen [sic], 1 cup water; ½ can…Coca-Cola; 1 packet Sweet'N Low; Pinch of garlic powder; ½ cup pork skins or rinds; 2 tablespoons honey; 1 tablespoon butter; 1 tablespoon strawberry jelly; 1 tablespoon soy sauce; 1 tablespoon chili garlic sauce; 1 cup packaged salad mix (carrots and cabbage with lettuce works well)" (Collins 2015, p. 17). One might find the product placement somewhat disconcerting and the use of saccharin, as opposed to sugar, to be an exceedingly retro and unhealthful inclusion, but the saltiness provided by the soy sauce, the sweetness imparted by the honey, the Coke, and the strawberry jelly, coupled with the flavors added by the spices and the residual lard from the skins or rinds are almost guaranteed to yield a sweet and piquant sauce and a tasty dish.

For much of its history ramen has been associated with people of low socio-economic status. It has been food consumed, often on the street, by blue-collar workers, students, the destitute in the days immediately following World War II, and by people living on the edge, as in the case of the inhabitants of America's prisons. The status of ramen is not static, though, and, as alluded to earlier, its image is improving in contemporary Japan. Indeed, one researcher has labeled ramen a "B-grade gourmet food." Fukutomi categorizes Tokyo's ramen shops, of which there are about 40,000, into three categories: "new-wave shops, old-school shops, and franchises" (2014, p. 67). The first-mentioned are attractive establishments that cater to the middle class. The last-mentioned are chains, whose approach to the culinary arts relies heavily on food assembly and recipes compiled in home offices. Fukutomi, however, is primarily interested in the old-school shops, establishments that have been around for a while, maybe the worse for wear and tear, but whose chefs display traits of the artisan, as they tap their knowledge and skill to conjure perfection in a bowl.

Ramen gained its middle-class credentials in the 1960s. "The emergence of an industrialized food market and presentation of its commodities in the mass media in the 1960s pushed ramen from the margins to the center of Japanese consumer culture. …Ramen crossed class boundaries to enter middle-class Japanese foodways" (Fukutomi 2014, p. 69). But it was in the aftermath of the collapse of the bubble economy, circa 1990s, that ramen's elevation to "B-gourmet" status was facilitated.

> Ramen shops benefited from the bursting of the economic bubble in the late 1980s. As Japan entered the post-bubble-economy…ramen aficionados appeared among the legions of office workers, with people con-

> suming entire systems of meaning with their food. White-collar consumers increasingly aestheticized ramen. By aestheticize I mean to add aesthetic characteristics to products to increase their value. …Chefs and aficionados then began obsessively treating this formerly mundane food as an artisanal product.
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> …
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> Generating individual obsession around ramen appreciation is part of a self-conscious, cultural phenomenon known as the "B-grade gourmet" movement in Japan. B-grade gourmet developed as part of a larger "B-grade" phenomenon that emerged in reaction to the luxury consumer culture that flourished during the glory days of Japan's bubble economy in the 1980s (Fukutomi 2014, pp. 69-70).

What changes will the next phase in the evolution of ramen bring? It is hard to predict this with any degree of certainty, but adumbrations can perhaps be descried in the creations of Ivan Orkin, of Ivan Ramen fame. The Culinary Institute of America-trained former English teacher and entrepreneur owns establishments in Tokyo and New York. Orkin has the talent and the wherewithal to elevate ramen's status to A-gourmet, to truly patrician, but whether he exploits this possibility or moves in the opposite direction—towards franchise—is anyone's guess.

One can also expect that ramen shops in Japan will begin to give serious consideration to ramen and wine and beer pairings. This should be done to enhance the sensory experience of the diner, to be sure, but also for the purpose of increasing sales. The undertaking may be more difficult then it seems, as a suitable wine for each of the many varieties of ramen must be found. As for beer, it is true that it is a common practice to order beer with ramen in Japan, but the brew served is invariably a lager from a major commercial brewery. This is, of course, not inappropriate, but at a time when craft beer is enjoying increasing popularity and the output of some breweries is of the highest caliber, it would be prudent for ramen shops to offer their discerning customers a few carefully chosen craft beers that complement their fare.

Finally, it is reasonable to assume that steps will be taken to address some of the negative characteristics of the non-instant variety of the dish, for the dual purposes of ameliorating some of its non-healthful aspects and broadening its appeal, thereby enhancing its marketability. The high-calorie count may have been a plus in the hardscrabble days following World War II, but it is not now. For those who are obsessively concerned about salt intake, LDL, and other matters, a bowl of steaming ramen may appear to bear a disturbing resemblance to the witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*. To keep the pot boiling, toil is unavoidable, but trouble can be trumped by creating new, healthful varieties of ramen and adapting current recipes to suit the needs and desires of this health-conscious cohort.

Note

1) On October 30, 2007, the English-language version of *The Asahi Shimbun* published an astounding story with the title of "Japan Seeks Rent from U.S. Embassy." Masaaki Shoji, the author, reported that at the time the Japanese government was considering "suing the U.S. government *over 10 years* [emphasis added] of unpaid rent on state-owned land in the heart of Tokyo...." It is doubtful that any other country, especially a Third World one, would be extended a decade-long grace period on rent payment. Unfortunately, this writer cannot provide his readers with the dénouement to this drama, for the story and its outcome, if there ever was one, appears to have gone down Orwell's memory hole.

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