



# FOR THE LOVE OF NOODLES

What strange elixir in noodle soup makes it so good for the soul? **STEPHANIE ZUBIRI** takes stock of why this staple, in its many forms, warms the heart of Asia.

Photographed by **SUPACHAT VETCHAMALEENONT**



Udon soup, with its savory stock and ropey noodles, is a Japanese staple, predating the cult of ramen.

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I love the way the long strands slip into my mouth. I love the way the hot broth floods me with happiness. Sound odd? Well I'm in good company—this is a feeling I share with billions of other people throughout Asia. And, it's not too much of a leap to say that all of it can be traced back to the well-preserved 4,000-year-old bowl of noodles unearthed just a decade ago at the Lajia archaeological site in northwestern China. My taste for history—and noodles—inspired a pilgrimage to uncover not only how soups evolved into their various incarnations, but also what carried them through the ages. So I traveled

across Asia to get to, well, the bottom of the bowl.

The earliest strand, if you will, of this tradition in China was actually a different drenched carbohydrate, points out Jen Lin-Liu, in her book *On the Noodle Road: From Beijing to Rome with Love and Pasta*: “The first noodles in China were called *tang bing*, or soup bread.” This predecessor was bits of bread dropped into soup, which then developed into their current form to hold up better against the broth. In a climate that favored cereal crops, bread- and then noodle-making flourished fast in ancient China. Large-scale commercial production

was already well under way by 100 A.D., following the introduction, probably thanks to trade with the Middle East, of wheat milling technology—a concept that adapted easily to whatever crop was available: wheat, millet, rice, barley, mung bean, egg or soy. By the Nara period (710-794 A.D.), the Japanese word *menrui* appears, an adaptation of the Chinese *mian*, which found its way to the Nippon archipelago via imperial envoys sent to the Tang court in the hopes of absorbing Han culture. The first noodles in Japan were wheat udon and buckwheat soba. Only after World War II did the cult of ramen take off.

Whether it's soba in Tokyo, *pho ga* in Saigon, dumplings in Wanchai or a cup of instant *tom yum* spicy noodles from a Bangkok 7-Eleven, I've got great memories of noodle soup. As long as the broth is hot and tasty, and the noodles have the comforting combination of bite and slither, a steaming bowl of noodle soup can always lift my spirits.

**IN THE PHILIPPINES**, where I'm from, noodles are generally referred to as *pancit*, derived from the Hokkien

expression *pian-e-sit*, meaning something conveniently cooked, and the earliest recorded name for restaurants in the Philippines was *panciterias*, a further linguistic twist courtesy of Spanish colonials. Today, the different varieties are still known by their Chinese names: *bihon* (thin rice vermicelli), *misua* (extremely fine, dried wheat noodles), and the mung bean-based *sotanghon*. There's the egg- and wheat-based *miki* used in the most famous noodle soup La Paz *batchoy* from Iloilo. That city is also the birthplace of *pancit molo*, a wonton soup, which is considered a type of noodle in the same sense that tortellini or ravioli are both a pasta and a noodle.

In ribbons, hand-cut strips, pulled strands, shaved, small bite-sized bits, or stuffed, noodles long have been an easy way to turn a simple broth with frugal ingredients into a filling meal. Momofuku Ando, the Taiwanese-Japanese inventor of instant noodles, believed that “peace will come to the world if people had enough to eat,” and his solution in 1958 was the inexpensive, practically imperishable cup-noodles.

So why is something as simple as noodle soup so comforting? In a word, Filipino restaurateur, ramen aficionado and co-owner of Manila's Mendokoro Ramenba Elbert Cuenca says: umami. “When you have an overload of umami and it melts together, it can really spark an emotional response. It's almost like endorphins; all those feel-good chemicals in your body are activated from the flavor, the temperature and the texture of the noodles.”

Almost all noodle dishes, regardless of the quality of the other ingredients, succeed or fail based purely on the noodles themselves and the broth in which they swim, says Cuong Huynh, founder of *lovingpho.com*. California-based Cuong points to *pho*—with its light yet flavorful broth, bright herbs, barely cooked slivers of meat and tumble of white rice ribbons—as the exemplar of a dish that must perfect this combination or die trying.

“The *pho* noodle must be cooked a touch beyond al dente, and the broth should have the proper spiced fragrance, clearness, and uniquely delicious *pho* taste right out of the pot without any need for additional

Vietnamese *pho* noodles should be cooked a little past al dente and the broth should be fragrant and clear.



enhancing sauces, seasonings or condiments.”

### IN OTHER PARTS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA,

namely Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, rice noodles are the classic companion to the richer coconut- or peanut-based soups. They cook quickly and turn to a mush when overdone, so extreme care must be taken. Though tasteless plain, when prepared properly the noodles are firm as opposed to springy or chewy, and have a solid, slippery feel in the mouth, all very different from the wheat or egg varieties.

Then there's Japan, taking noodle precision to the next level. The quality of the noodles and of the soup is one thing, but there's also an ideal eating time. “There is a window of ramen at its peak,” says Ryan Cruz, co-owner of Mendokoro. “Japanese can slurp a bowl of ramen in eight minutes or less. After those eight minutes, your ramen has started to deteriorate, the broth slowly becoming lackluster and cold, the noodles losing their bite.” How do you eat an entire scalding bowl without burning your palate? Take a tip from the Japanese: *zuzutto*, the

act of slurping and inhaling both soup and noodle in one go to aerate the hot broth, achieving the perfect combination of the two key elements.

In some of the best noodle joints across Asia—think your corner *pho* lady or the next-door shophouse dishing up your favorite Taiwanese beef rib soup—a continuously heating pot of stock, where more water is added every day, is not uncommon. Whether crystal clear *sotanghon* or murky *tonkotsu* or creamy coconut *khao soi*, the best broths are made from hours of simmering and stewing. “Even the best noodles will be disappointing if they're in a bowl of badly made soup,” Hong Kong-based food writer Janice Leung tells me. “I love the sensation of slurping the noodles, with the soup just coating the strands, and the delicious steam of hot soup wafting above the bowl. The broth is probably the most important thing for me.”

Founder of the globally present Japanese ramen chain Ippudo and crowned “Ramen King,” Shigemi Kawahara leaves his *shiromaru tonkotsu* to simmer for more than 18 hours. The stock is then reduced

three times. He recommends sipping the soup first to honor it before downing the noodles.

Hideaki Aoyama, who works with Cuenca in Manila, simmers his beef stock for 14 hours. And that's only after the crazy *mise-en-place* that takes place before loading all the ingredients into the big pot. However, despite all this effort put into the broth he believes it is about balance. “Even the toppings are very important,” he says.

That sentiment extends all the way to Chiang Mai, home to food writer and editor Pim Kemasingki. “Like most Thais, I am constantly on a quest to find a great bowl of noodles,” she says. “This lifelong odyssey has brought some remarkable flavors to my mouth but the secret to a perfect bowl of noodle soup is that it is completely personal. You flavor it yourself.”

“It's the whole concoction,” says Singaporean food blogger Dr. Leslie Tay, of [ieatishootipost.sg](http://ieatishootipost.sg), wistfully about a highly charged bowl of fiery Singaporean *laksa*. “It's a very tasty thing. So perfectly balanced, spicy, sweet, everything you ever wanted from a dish.” 🍜



Heaps of seafood, spicy curry broth, thick rice noodles, egg wedges: fiery Singaporean *laksa* soup is all about balancing tastes.

The northern Thai *khao soi* soup simmers for hours, sometimes days, to fully achieve its flavor potential.



## THE DETAILS

### RESTAURANTS

**Deco's La Paz Batchoy** *La Paz Public Market, Huervana Street, Iloilo City, Philippines; special batchoy soup for two P134.*

**Ippudo** *1-13-14 Daimyo, Chuo-ku, Fukuoka, Japan; 81-92/771-0880; shiromaru ramen for two ¥1,500.*

**Janggut Laksa** *This little kiosk has been serving original Katong laksa since the 1950s. 01-59 Queensway Shopping Centre, 1 Queensway, Singapore; 65/9622-1045; laksa for two S\$8.*

**Khao Soi Lam Duan Faham** *The 70-year-old joint is the local's go-to for northern Thai staples. 352/22 Charoen Rat Rd.; Chiang Mai, Thailand; 66-53/243-519; khao soi for two Bt100.*

**Mak's Noodle** *Their springy, thin noodles have impressed Chiang Kai-shek and Anthony Bourdain. 77 Wellington St., Central, Hong Kong; 852/2854-3810; wonton noodles for two HK\$70.*

**Mendokoro Ramenba** *GF, V Corporate Center, 125 L.P. Leviste St., Salcedo Village, Makati City, Philippines; 632/215-1751; shoyu tonkotsu ramen for two P800.*

**Pho Tin** *13 Lo Duc, Pham Dinh Ho, Hai Ba Trung, Hanoi; 84-43/821-2709; pho for two VND100,000.*

**Taishoken** *Here try the tsukemen dished out by its "Ramen God" Kazuo Yamagishi. 2-42-8 Minami Ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo; 81-3/3981-9360; tsukemen ramen for two ¥1,400.*

**Yong Kang Beef Noodles** *Their braised beef noodles with beef tendon is the city's favorite. 17 Lane 31, Jinshan S. Rd., Taipei; beef noodles for two NT\$360.*

### ACTIVITIES

**Black Sesame Kitchen, Beijing** *Owned by author Jen Lin-Liu, it offers private dining experiences and, by request, can organize cooking classes and market tours. [blacksesamekitchen.com](http://blacksesamekitchen.com).*

**Taiyuan Noodles Festival** *Every year around September, the world's top noodle chefs come together in the capital of Shanxi Province to compete, perform and showcase the best noodle dishes from around the globe.*

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