

Japanese Culture Now

日本のファーストフード その2: 麺編 Japan

In this issue we introduce some of the most popular noodle dishes. Which one would you like to try?

Udon noodles are made from a mixture of water, salt, and wheat flour that has been kneaded, ripened, rolled flat, and cut into strips. The noodles are then boiled and served in hot broth or with a dipping sauce. Udon as it is eaten today is thought to have originated around 1450, and restaurants specializing in udon began appearing in Edo (present-day Tokyo), the imperial capital of Kyoto, and Osaka during the Genroku era of the Edo period (1688-1704).

People in the Kanto region around Tokyo have traditionally preferred soba, while those in the Kansai region of Osaka and Kobe favor udon. Because of this, fewer restaurants in the Kanto region specialize in udon. Recently, however, Tokyo has experienced a craze for *sanuki udon* (讃岐うどん) that has completely transformed this image.

Sanuki udon has become so popular it ranked in the major daily newspaper *Nihon Keizai Shimbun's* list of top "hit" products in Japan for 2002. Sanuki is the old-world name for present-day Kagawa prefecture (on Shikoku island), which is said to have nearly 800 udon shops. The number of pilgrims to the udon mecca of Kagawa has reportedly been on the rise, many of them prompted by Tao Kazutoshi's best-selling book series *Osorubeki Sanuki udon* [The Awesome Saunuki Udon] (Hot Capsule, 1993),



うどん
Udon

which explores the secrets of these thick white noodles and carries detailed information on shops for udon connoisseurs.

In September 2002, Hanamaru Udon, a Kagawa-based udon franchise, branched out into the Kanto region, opening its first store in Tokyo's Shibuya district. Popular enough to generate a line of customers even in its home prefecture, this chain's udon received rave reviews in Tokyo for its low price and convenience.

No one seats you or brings food to your table at a Hanamaru Udon shop. Instead, customers take a tray, order and pick up their own udon, put their favorite toppings on it, and pay their bill at a cashier in cafeteria style. With a menu of over 15 kinds of udon and an array of tasty toppings, it is fun to mix and match to suit your taste.

The standard options include *kake udon* (かけうどん), a bowl of hot udon in clear soup stock made from small dried sardines (small, 100 yen; medium, 200 yen; large, 300 yen).

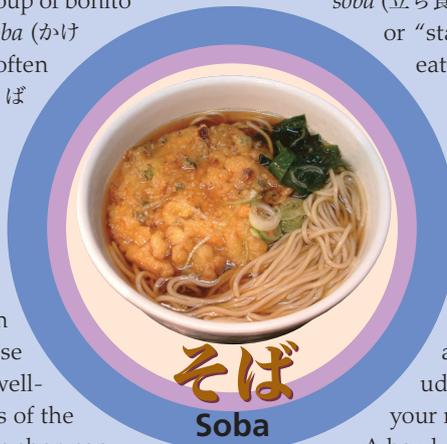


Hanamaru Udon website (Japanese): <http://www.hanamaruudon.com/>

Photos: Hanamaru

Along with udon, soba is one of the most common types of noodles in Japan. Made using a base of buckwheat flour, soba enjoys great popularity as a health food because it is high in protein, low in calories, and filled with vitamin B, dietary fiber, and other important nutrients. It is commonly eaten as cold *zaru soba* (ざるそば)—noodles dipped in a soup of bonito broth flavored with soy sauce; or as *kake soba* (かけそば)—noodles in a bowl of hot broth—often with such toppings as tempura (天ぷらそば *tempura soba*).

There are many soba restaurants in the Kanto region. So many, in fact, that there is certain to be at least one in any shopping arcade or train station plaza. In the quality of the cuisine they serve, some well-established soba restaurants can match even the highest class Japanese restaurants. On the other hand, soba is a well-loved fixture in the daily lives and customs of the Japanese, with the local neighborhood soba shop conveniently offering delivery service (出前 *demae*) to one's home or office. People also partake of *hikkoshi soba* (引越しそば) "moving soba" given to one's new neighbors after moving to a new residence) and *toshikoshi soba* (年越しそば) "year-crossing soba" eaten on New Year's Eve as a prayer for a life



そば
Soba

that is long and unbroken like a soba noodle).

As a fast food, the most popular kind of soba would have to be *tachigui soba* (立ち食いそば), or "stand and eat soba."



As the name indicates, there are no chairs at this type of soba restaurant, but simply waist-high counters where customers stand and eat. Often found inside train stations, they are convenient for people who have to eat in a hurry. Upon entering, you purchase a meal ticket from a vending machine, take it up to the kitchen counter, and tell the cook whether you want soba or udon. It then takes only about a minute for your noodles to be served.

A bowl of soba costs about 400 yen at a *tachigui soba* shop. At about one-third to one-fourth the price at a restaurant specializing in soba, this is cheap. The difference, however, is accounted for in the flavor and texture of the noodles and the flavor of the broth, which a patron of *tachigui soba* shops cannot expect to be as refined.

Photos: Hongo Jin

ese Fast Food Part 2—Noodle Dishes

Photo: Kondo Yumiko



As with *kare raisu* (カレーライス), ramen is loved with an extraordinary passion by the Japanese people. Ramen shops are frequently taken up in magazines and on television programs, and there are countless self-styled “ramen lovers,” who will try every shop

they can find seeking subtle new flavors they have never tasted before.

Ramen is a noodle dish of Chinese-style noodles that are made from a dough of soda water (かんすい *kansui*) kneaded into wheat flour. These stretchy yellow noodles are said to have been brought to Japan from China when Yokohama port was opened to foreign ships in 1859. It appears ramen caught on while being adapted to suit the tastes of the Japanese. The word “ramen” supposedly comes from the Chinese characters 拉 (*la*), meaning “to stretch out,” and 麵 (*mian*), meaning “noodle.”

There are as many varieties of ramen as there are ramen shops, the flavor largely determined by the individual cook. In general, though, ramen can be categorized according to three



Ramen

photo: T.J.F. Photo Beta Bank

features: thickness of the noodles, type of soup stock, and richness of the soup’s flavor. Noodles come in thick, average, and thin sizes. Some common soup stocks include soy sauce, miso, pork marrow, and salt, and

flavors range from rich to standard to light. You might say, for example, “You know the ramen at Rairaiken that everyone is talking about? It’s the one that has thin noodles in a light pork marrow broth.”

Costs vary from store to store, as well, but a bowl of ramen with simple toppings will run about 500 to 600 yen. When special toppings like vegetables, smoked eggs, and *chashu* (チャーシュー slices of roast pork) are added, the price increases to about 800 to 1000 yen.

Ramen is also eaten on a daily basis at home in the form of instant ramen, invented in Japan in 1958, and “cup ramen,” to which one need only add hot water. Convenience stores often provide hot water free of charge, and hungry high school students and other customers are known to stop for a cup of ramen to tide themselves over before heading home.

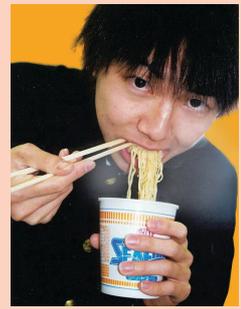


Photo: Kobayashi Nagisa

Yakisoba is often sold in the snack section at large-scale supermarkets and department stores. Unlike udon, soba, and ramen, there are not many restaurants specializing in yakisoba. Since most Japanese yakisoba is flavored with thick Worcestershire sauce (known simply as “sauce”), it is also known as “sauce yakisoba” to distinguish it from the Chinese fried noodle dish of the same name.

The noodles used for yakisoba are similar to the Chinese style noodles used in ramen, but they have been pre-steamed and lightly coated in oil. Every local supermarket carries packages of fresh yakisoba noodles for about 250 yen for three-servings. To make yakisoba, you need only sauté the noodles in a frying pan along with a bit of sliced pork, diced cabbage and onions or other vegetables, and then sprinkle them with the powdered sauce enclosed in the package. Yakisoba is an easy meal that anyone can make because it doesn’t require the trouble of preparing a soup. It is easy to fry up for lunch on a day off from school or work, adding nutrients with whatever leftover vegetables and meat can be found in the household refrigerator.

Among the foods served at local festivals, moreover, yakisoba is a standard item, and when your nose catches the tangy

sauce’s sweet fragrance, it’s difficult to resist buying a serving. One tray costs about 400 yen. Since the stands selling yakisoba at festivals try to economize



on the cost of ingredients, their noodles rarely contain much in the way of vegetables or meat. They do, however, thickly season their yakisoba with sauce, and as a result, unlike other noodle dishes, the difference between high quality and low quality ingredients and between a skilled and unskilled cook is less noticeable. For the cook, yakisoba is a cheap and easy dish to make, and the flavor is so simple and standard that it rarely turns out to be unpalatable.

Cup yakisoba, like cup ramen, is also a popular food item at convenience stores. Cup ramen is ready to eat three to five minutes after hot water is poured on the noodles. For cup yakisoba you pour hot water on the noodles, and then get to enjoy draining it out and mixing in the flavorings and sauce before eating.



Yakisoba

Photos: Hongo Jin