



# San Diego Westways

THE MAGAZINE FOR AUTO CLUB MEMBERS

SPRING 2021

## TRAVEL, REFRAMED

How four globe-trotting  
photographers found  
inspiration close to home

*Plus*

At Home With **Pico Iyer** | Crazy for **Ramen**

**Bon Appétit:** Bargain Bites | **Day Trip:** Oceanside

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## **Ramen Obsession**

What is it about this Japanese noodle dish that has bowled over so many Southern Californians?

**BY RACHEL NG**

# Ramen





# Obsession

For aficionados, this ubiquitous Japanese dish is so much more than a simple bowl of noodle soup



BY RACHEL NG

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JUSTINE WONG



Sweat beaded on my brow as I leaned over my steaming bowl of tonkotsu ramen and studied it: Slices of glistening pork, chopped scallions, and a half-submerged egg all floated languidly in the creamy-white pork bone broth. Using my chopsticks, I picked up a wad of yellow noodles, blew on them, then slurped away—a perfectly acceptable way to inhale a bowl of ramen. The noodles were al dente, each strand slicked with umami broth.

*Oishiii!*

That delicious moment was worth the one-hour wait I endured on a Tuesday night—before the pandemic—to get into Daikokuya, a bustling Japanese eatery in downtown L.A.'s Little Tokyo. Two oversize red paper lanterns and vintage movie posters decorated the interior; a black-and-white noren (a traditional fabric curtain) hung over the entryway. The atmosphere reminded me of the intimate ramen shops I've enjoyed in Tokyo alleyways. Even during the pandemic, new ramen shops are opening up, proving that the ramen craze is chugging full steam ahead.

This is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 1970s and '80s, most Americans' knowledge of ramen was limited to the instant, packaged variety, although a few SoCal establishments stood out, such as Little Tokyo's Kouraku, which has been serving the same ramen recipes since 1976. In Japan, ramen's resurgence as an inexpensive comfort food consumed in specialty shops came during an economic crisis in the late 1990s. The dish's popularity inspired a spate of artisanal ramen shops in Japan, a trend that eventually spilled over to the United States.

Now, ramen shops are as ubiquitous in Southern California as taco trucks. The homegrown Shin-Sen-Gumi Restaurant Group began with a Hakata-style (tonkotsu) ramen shop in Gardena in 1996; popular Hokkaido chain Santouka launched in Torrance in 1998; and Daikokuya opened its first location in Little Tokyo in 2002. And others keep coming, each bringing their own specialties and techniques.

"The United States has embraced ramen more than anywhere else in the world," says ramen master Fumihiko "Foo" Kanegae, who helped launch cult favorite Ippudo in Los Angeles and New York. "For Americans, ramen is one of the most affordable, approachable, and well-recognized Japanese soul foods, after sushi and tempura." Kanegae has since left Ippudo to open his own ramen and izakaya (Japanese pub) restaurant, Karazishi Botan, in Brooklyn.

Whether you're a fan or a newbie, this primer will help you appreciate the endless possibilities of a seemingly simple bowl of noodles.

# Ramen Roundup

From Hakata-style to vegan, here's a list of ramen varieties to try, along with places that sell them.



[ SAN DIEGO ]

## Tajima Ramen House

**Tajima Ramen** with tonkotsu chicken and pork broth, egg noodles, chashu, soft-boiled egg, fried garlic, bean sprouts, bok choy, green onions, and sesame seeds. [TAJIMASANDIEGO.COM](http://TAJIMASANDIEGO.COM)

Westways Magazine features Tajima

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