


CORONADO ISLAND

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FORKS & CORKS 

**Here's to The Henry
Chef Matt Sramek of Blue Bridge
Sweet Side of Island Walking Tours**

PRICELESS

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Ramen

Slurpable Art

Photos and Story by Clyde Van Arsdall IV

"The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know." Albert Einstein is known for using his noodle, but I am almost certain he wasn't talking about ramen when he made this statement. My son Charlie and I love noodles and we thought we knew what a good bowl of ramen was. Yet it seemed the more we ate it, the more there was to learn about it. It wasn't until we had a good Japanese-style craft bowl of ramen with fresh noodles and broth layered with flavors, that we realized what we had been eating was simply noodle soup. The real stuff blew our minds, the hype was justified, and the spark was ignited in both of us.

Ramen to so many of us was and maybe still is freeze-dried noodles with a flavor packet. This is so far from the craft ramen that people in Japan stand in six to 10-hour lines to experience. The broth in craft ramen alone makes it one of the most complex soups in the world. This doesn't happen with a flavor packet. If you have had ramen that was simply a small part of a larger menu, then I would argue that you have not experienced good craft ramen.

Our quest was on to find the best ramen in San Diego. Over a four or five month period, we did our research, asked a lot of questions and ate a lot of bowls of ramen. We studied the vernacular and learned how to order what we liked. We discovered different styles and broke each bowl down into its various components to figure out how they were made. I dove deep into the noodle bowl and

A bowl of ramen called Smoke Bomb Black, served at Nishiki Ramen in Hillcrest.



A bowl of Spicy Sesame Ramen at Tajima in Hillcrest.



Two of my children Charlie and Josie enjoying slurping one of their first bowls of ramen in 2017.

watched a documentary about ramen, *Ramen Heads* (2017). I read a book on ramen by Ivan Orkin, an American that became a true ramen master in Japan. I discovered and watched the ramen-themed movies *Tampopo* (1985), a cult comedy, and the deeply moving 2018 drama, *Ramen Shop*. This quest became an obsession — to coin the title of the documentary, we became *Ramen Heads*.

Why this obsession? As a chef, I have always admired the desire to achieve perfection. I love places that specialize and strive to be the best. The best, whatever that may be, always comes from a shop that specializes and focuses on one thing. The same is true of ramen. Different shops specialize in different broths and various styles and it is a never-ending quest to find the best of each.

Even in Japan, not all ramen shops are craft shops; for example, of the 5000 or more ramen shops in Tokyo only a few hundred are considered craft ramen and garner a cult following. A bowl of craft ramen can take days to make. That is why shops often specialize in ramen alone and in some cases only a specific style of ramen.

When it comes to ramen, there is a tsunami of information and the nuances are endless. I will attempt to keep things simple and give you an overview of ramen

as a whole. Let's start with a brief history, then break down the different parts and lay out the different styles. I will tell you how to eat a bowl of ramen and give a few etiquette tips. There is so much to learn so let's get started before our noodles get soggy.

Ramen History

Today, ramen has a cult following; it has risen to become one of the most popular foods in Japan, second only to sushi. There are tens of thousands of shops serving ramen all over the Japanese archipelago, one has even earned a Michelin star.

Ramen is relatively new to Japan. It originated in China and made its way to the island a little over 100 years ago. This may seem like a long time, but Japanese cuisine began developing thousands of years ago. The Japanese adopted this simple noodle dish and made it their own. As ramen spread throughout the country each prefecture gave it its own twist. The dish was exciting, new and gained popularity slowly over time. World War II however marked a turning point for ramen. It was in the aftermath of that war that this bowl of noodles cemented itself into the collective souls of the Japanese. This beloved dish was filling, fatty and inexpensive. It served to nourish a population that was devastated morally and financially. The people quite literally lived off of ramen — in many cases, it was all they had. As the Japanese fought their way back to economic stability they took their beloved ramen on the ride with them, tweaking, improving and elevating it along the way. It makes sense now that Japan has become one of the largest economies in the world, and its beloved ramen has risen in stature as well.



Bacon wrapped mushrooms is a fun add on to any bowl of ramen at Underbelly in NorthPark.

Four Parts to Ramen

Broth: Ramen broth is made by combining several stocks. The most common combination is either pork or chicken stock with dashi. Dashi is a stock that is made by combining kombu (kelp) and katsuobushi (dried bonito). Broths range from light and clear to thick and cloudy.

Noodles: Ramen noodles originally came from China; they vary in size and texture and are usually paired to a particular style of broth. Thick broths usually use thin noodles and thin broths use thicker noodles but there is no hard and fast rule. Ramen noodles are made using alkaline water which helps them hold up in the hot broth.

Tare (Flavoring): Tare is the ramen's seasoning and defines the type of ramen. There are three major flavorings: shio (salt), shoyu (soy sauce), and miso (fermented soybean).

Toppings: Proteins usually take center stage. Chashu pork is roasted and often charred with a torch before serving. Chicken, pork belly and seafood are also popular. Eggs are a ramen classic,

either hanjuku style which is simply soft boiled or Ajitsuke Tamago which is a soft boiled egg that has been marinated in soy sauce and mirin. Fresh vegetables such as scallions, cabbage, spinach and mushrooms are added raw. Simmered corn and cold pats of butter are popular in the northern prefecture of Hokkaido. Preserved vegetables such as menma (bamboo shoots), kimchi and pickled ginger add texture and flavor. Nori and wakame are two types of seaweed that are well liked garnishes; they add a subtle ocean-like aroma.

Ramen Styles

There are many different styles of ramen and most are named after the tare that flavors them like shio, shoyu and miso ramens. Tonkotsu and Tori Paitan are named for the type of broth.

Shio Ramen, flavored with sea salt, is the oldest form of ramen seasoning. Usually paired with lighter broths.

Shoyu Ramen is flavored with Japanese soy sauce. It is a popular ramen seasoning usually paired with clear to brown broths of chicken and seafood. But increasingly it is found paired with Tonkotsu or Tori Paitain broths.

Miso Ramen is flavored with miso and is often used in heavier broths. Miso is a traditional Japanese seasoning produced by fermenting soybeans with salt and koji, a mold used to ferment food.

Tonkotsu is a rich, milky pork bone broth that is boiled — not simmered — often for 24-48 hours, producing its milky appearance. This is a widespread style and is defined by its broth, not its flavoring.

Tori Paitain is the chicken version of Tonkotsu.

Eating and Etiquette

Ramen is meant to be served extremely hot and should be eaten as fast as possible so as not to let the noodles get soggy. Slurping your noodles shows you are moving at a respectable pace and is considered a sign of respect. The contents of a bowl of ramen are eaten much like pasta, but chopsticks are the delivery device rather than a western-style fork. A spoon called a rengo is used to help combine noodles and toppings. The broth, however, is meant to be enjoyed straight from the bowl. Simply pick it up and drink the broth directly. This is expected and not considered rude. Chopsticks need to be set down beside the bowl or across its rim, never leave them stuck into the noodles so that they point out at an upward angle. Leaving your chopsticks in such a fashion is rude. It is seen as a symbol of death as that is the way the Japanese leave food offerings at graves. Just remember that slurping noodles and drinking from the bowl is good, poor chopstick placement is bad 🙄



A bowl of Shoyu Ramen with spinach as a topping at Hiro Nori in Hillcrest.



A bowl of Tonkotsu Ramen at Hiro Nori, Hillcrest, that has some of the best pork chashu in San Diego.

Craft Ramen Spots in San Diego
Happy Slurping!

Tajima Ramen - Locations:

Convoy, Mercury, Hillcrest,
North Park, College Heights.
Best Bowls: Tajima Ramen,
Spicy Sesame Ramen. Special
Features: Spinach noodles, nice
selection of craft beers and
sake. Fun Sides: Garlic edamame
Notable Toppings: Steamed and
fried tofu.