





BOBBLES OF NOODLES

When it first came to these shores, ramen was instant, cheap and filling. It's still filling, but as the higher expression of the Japanese dish has established itself, Calgary diners have gained a new appreciation of what might be the ultimate comfort food.

BY JOHN GILCHRIST PHOTOS BY LEAH HENNEL

Most days, the lineup outside Shiki Menya starts at about 10:30 a.m., half an hour before the tiny Bridgeland restaurant opens. Ramen aficionados are there—snow or shine—because they know that the early bird gets the noodle. They know there's a limited amount of noodley goodness available at Shiki, and they want their fix of pork broth, ramen noodles, and toppings of negi (Japanese green onion), mustard greens, tamago (Japanese omelette), barbecued pork and black garlic oil.

Many days, late-arriving ramen loyalists are sent home hungry and sad. But they're back soon, and earlier, to catch their favourite bowl of soup.

When it opened in 2014, Shiki Menya was not the first ramen house in Calgary, but it rode the rising ramen tide. And it had a smart concept. Each day Koki Aihara and his team cook up a huge pot of pork broth, and work it into a variety of ramen variations, including the classic tonkotsu broth topped with roast pork, a spicy chili goma and a black tonkotsu version made with squid ink. They add housemade noodles and even a few vegetarian options with a miso base.

The stock pot holds enough broth for about 150 bowls, and when the broth runs out, Shiki Menya closes. No reservations, no credit cards, no dinner service, no takeout. Shiki devotees like the exclusivity and the feverish dedication to a limited-access product.

Smart.

So why all this dedication to noodles and broth, to what one local ramen cook calls “just a noodle soup”? Why has ramen displaced sushi as the top Japanese dish? And will Calgary's ramen lust dim over time?

A LITTLE HISTORY

Ramen has only been around for a little over a century, having been brought to Japan by Chinese food vendors. After the Second World War, with an influx of cheap wheat flour from the U.S. and the return of Japanese soldiers who had enjoyed Chinese-style noodles in China, ramen became popular as a fast-food, dine-out option.

In 1958, instant ramen noodles were developed, allowing home cooks to prepare a reasonable version of ramen just by adding hot water. (Instant ramen was named the No. 1 Japanese invention of the 20th century in a poll of the Japanese public.) Ramen is popular not only at lunch and dinner; it is the most popular choice for late-night diners in Japan. For many, a salty, fatty bowl of ramen at 3 a.m. is the best way to end the evening.

Ramen is ubiquitous in Japan, best served in dedicated *ramen-ya* restaurants but also available from food kiosks, street vendors, corner stores and even vending machines. In a very short time it has become embedded in Japanese culture, and has spawned anime and manga characters, video games and even ramen museums.

One of these—the Shinyokohama Raumen Museum—bills itself as “the world's first food-themed amusement park” and showcases ramen from regional Japanese restaurants. Visitors to Shinyokohama learn the minutiae of ramen, and are expected to purchase at least one bowl of soup during their visit. The museum's eight ramen shops are “showcased in a streetscape replication” from 1958, the year instant ramen was invented.

In recent years, the ramen rage has swept across

Before the customers form a line outside Shiki Menya, Koki Aihara must go round and round.



Anna Brownell demonstrates the traditional slurping method at Muku.

North America, and for many it's become a favourite midday meal. But we're still neophytes on this side of the Pacific when it comes to embracing the broth, with many of us caught in the early days of conversion zealotry (like the Shiki Menya acolytes), and still more never having slurped a single noodle.

That's changing as ramen itself changes.

The Broth

Watch *Tampopo* (the 1985 film was restored and re-released late last year) to gain a clear understanding of the quest for the perfect ramen and the broth behind it. Without the perfect broth, ramen is impotent.

Ramen broth started out as a simple pork-bone stock (tonkotsu) simmered for a day or so, like they do at Shiki Menya. But Tomo Mitsuno, the executive chef at Goro + Gun (also the names of the two main characters in *Tampopo*), says things have changed. "When I was in high school in Japan, I had a part-time job in a ramen house," Mitsuno says. "It was all

pork broth, all the time. Now it's all about variation—chicken, beef, seafood broth." There are also different vegetarian broths, including mushroom-seaweed and those that are miso-based. And there are broths that blend different meat stocks, "tare" or "seasoned" stock such as the crab- or kimchee-flavoured stocks at Eats of Asia, and even cold ramen with little stock at all.

Debate rages over how long to cook the broth, too. Tsukasa Aihara of Shikiji simmers bones (pork or chicken, depending on the stock) for eight hours. His son Koki triples that time to make a richer-tasting pork broth at Shiki Menya. Mitsuno takes his bones to seventy-two hours, extracting as much flavour as possible.

Regardless of time in the pot, all the cooks agree that the broth is the backbone of any good ramen. Taste the broth; if it's not good, the ramen is lost.

The Noodles

Want to drive your ramen chef over the edge? Cut your noodles with a knife and fork. Al-

most all ramen cooks cite noodle-cutting as the most serious crime a customer can inflict on ramen. Use your chopsticks and your teeth instead. (See "Slurping," below.)

Ramen noodles are made from wheat flour, salt, water and kansui, an alkaline mineral water containing sodium carbonate. The kansui imparts a firmer texture to the noodles and turns them a light yellow. Sometimes, if kansui is not available, eggs are added; they add structure and colour.

The resulting noodles are thinner and firmer than udon, another wheat noodle. They are also distinct from soba noodles, which are made from buckwheat; vermicelli noodles, which are made from rice; and glass noodles made from bean flours. (They're called glass noodles because they turn transparent when cooked.)

Very few Calgary ramen cooks prepare their own noodles, saying it takes too much time, effort and skill. Owen Wong of Ike-men says, "We're good at broth, not so good at noodles." Even at Shikiji, where Tsukasa Aihara has been making ramen for 15 years (and for eight years before that in Banff), the noodles are imported from Japan.

But ramen noodles *are* made in Shikiji's kitchen. Aihara's son Koki rolls out two sizes of noodles daily and sends them down to Shiki Menya. "Too much work," says the elder Aihara, happy with his imported noodles. Meanwhile at Ookin, noodles are made off-site to order, using chef Jason Zhang's recipe in an attempt to be as authentic as possible. And at the Crossroads Market, a unique arrangement has been made between Eats of Asia's Jay del Corro and Jebb Fink, who runs Jebb's Joint. In addition to a mostly Italian list of pastas, Fink produces fresh ramen noodles for del Corro's shop.

The noodles are also behind the "no takeout" policy at Shiki Menya and other places. "The noodles get soggy," says Shiki's Koki Aihara. "Ramen doesn't work as takeout food."

The Toppings

Ramen shows regional variations. Nagasaki is all about seafood. Sapporo favours a miso broth topped with chopped pork. Tokyo goes for dashi-flavoured chicken broth with a variety

At Shiki Menya, manager Jared Tobias Herring, left, and owner Koki Aihara use their noodles.



MISO RAMEN
at Goro + Gun



SPICY MISO RAMEN
at Gagana



SPICY EGOMA RAMEN
at Menyatai



SPICY MISO RAMEN
at Ikemen



WHERE TO START SLURPING

Eats of Asia

Crossroads Market
1235 26th Ave. S.E.
403-801-9453

Gagana

101, 5421 11th St. N.E.
403-452-3826

Goro + Gun

245, 225 7th Ave. S.W.
(Plus-15 level, Scotia Centre)
403-237-5596

Hapa Izakaya

816 11th Ave. S.W.
403-452-6737

Ichi Rock

923 6th Ave. S.W.
403-453-0852

Ikemen

217 10th St. N.W.
403-452-2148

Japanese Noodle House

1120 13th St. S.W.
403-228-9582

Jinya Ramen Bar

1800 4th St. S.W.
587-356-0721

Menyatai

24 12th St. N.W.
403-263-3666

Muku

326 14th St. N.W.
403-283-6555

Ookini

2215 33rd Ave. S.W.
587-353-6961

Ramen Ichinen

3132 26th St. N.E.
403-454-2646

Shiki Menya

827 1st Ave. N.E.
403-454-2722

Shikiji

1608 Centre St. N.E.
403-520-0093

Shokunin

2016 4th St. S.W.
403-229-3444

Umami Noodle Bar

305 16th Ave. N.W.
403-454-8383



SPICY SOYA RAMEN
at Japanese Noodle House



MEZE CHILI GOMA
at Shikiji



KURO-TON RAMEN
at Muku



CHILI GOMA
at Shiki Menya

of toppings. Slices of roast pork, cooked egg or omelette, green onions and greens are all classic toppings. Ookini's Jason Zhang prepares his ramen as close as possible to those of Osaka, infused with seafood powders and more than 15 oils and sauces, including the black-garlic oil and black-sesame paste used in its tonkotsu ramen.

But variety is key. "Anything goes," says Mitsuno, the chef at Goro + Gun. "You don't have to be authentic. You just have to be good."

Calgary has yet to define its style, but one flavour is present at almost all local ramen outlets: chili goma ramen. Based on any broth, the chili goma ramen includes a hearty dose of chilis and goma (sesame paste) along with toppings either meaty or vegetarian. Most have a kick, adding heat to the already hot broth. It's the most popular ramen at many shops.



The Slurping

Ramen is meant to be eaten quickly, while it's still hot. And with a fair bit of slurping. This might run counter to Western manners, but it is the best way to eat it. First, inhaling while stuffing your mouth with noodles will cool them off a bit. Second, as with wine, a little oxygen helps open the ramen flavours, allowing the palate to fully appreciate the dish. And since it's typically a late-night dish, served at a time when normal dining conventions have drifted off to bed, a bit of communal slurping can be a bonding ritual.

"Sometimes foreigners in Japan are offended by the loud slurping," Mitsuno says. "Some even complain about it. We call that 'noodle harassment.'"

The Temperature

As mentioned, ramen is meant to be eaten hot and fast. The noodles cook quickly, some in a single minute, and can go soggy if left in the liquid too long. "It drives me crazy when I see customers not diving into their ramen," says Koki Aihara. "It's time-sensitive food. When we serve it at Shiki Menya it's at its best right then. Japanese businessmen eat it in five minutes." So don't let it cool off. Start slurping.

At the other end of the spectrum is cold ramen, an alternative that has emerged as a summer treat. Often served with seafood and

a dearth of broth, cold ramen focuses on the noodles and the toppings.

The Popularity

In a global poll conducted by CNN, with over 35,000 respondents, ramen was declared No. 8 on the list of the World's Best Foods. (Sushi was No. 3; maple syrup, Canada's lone entry, was No. 48.)

Mitsuno has a simple explanation for the current ramen passion. "Everyone loves ramen," he says. "It's the most popular food in Japan. And, unlike many Japanese dishes, ramen is open to constant interpretation, with each region putting forward its own variation.

Ikemen's Owen Wong agrees. "There are over a hundred kinds of ramen in Japan. You can customize it the way you like." The creativity is engaging, and so is the casual tone found in ramen houses. "You don't stress out about ramen," Wong says. "You just enjoy it."

At Shokunin, Darren MacLean has a simpler explanation. "Ramen is the perfect post-everything food," he says. "It's accessible. It's not complicated. What's not to love?"

The Future

As ramen becomes the rule in Canada, its exotic cachet will wane and it will become an everyday dish. Instant ramen has already fuelled the diets of many young adults, as both a study stimulant and hangover cure. It's become currency in American prisons where food quality has deteriorated. This mainstream shift added a plot line to *Orange is the New Black* when a group of inmates attempted to corner the commissary's ramen supplies. And *Breaking Bad's* Walter White presented his former partner with a pack of noodles as a symbol of their economically challenged youth.

More ramen shops will open, more loyalties will be formed and more varieties will be created. Eventually lineups will shorten and ramen will become just another good meal option. But for now, it's fun and a badge of honour to hang on the sidewalk with other ramen devotees and wait for your bowl. **S**

Above: Customers line up to get inside Shiki Menya.

Below: Tomo Mistune stirs large bowls of broth at Goro + Gun.

