Whether spaghetti-like ramen, grayish buckwheat soba, or thick, snowy udon (pictured here), noodles inspire countless cultural arguments in Japan.

The Obsessive Gourmet

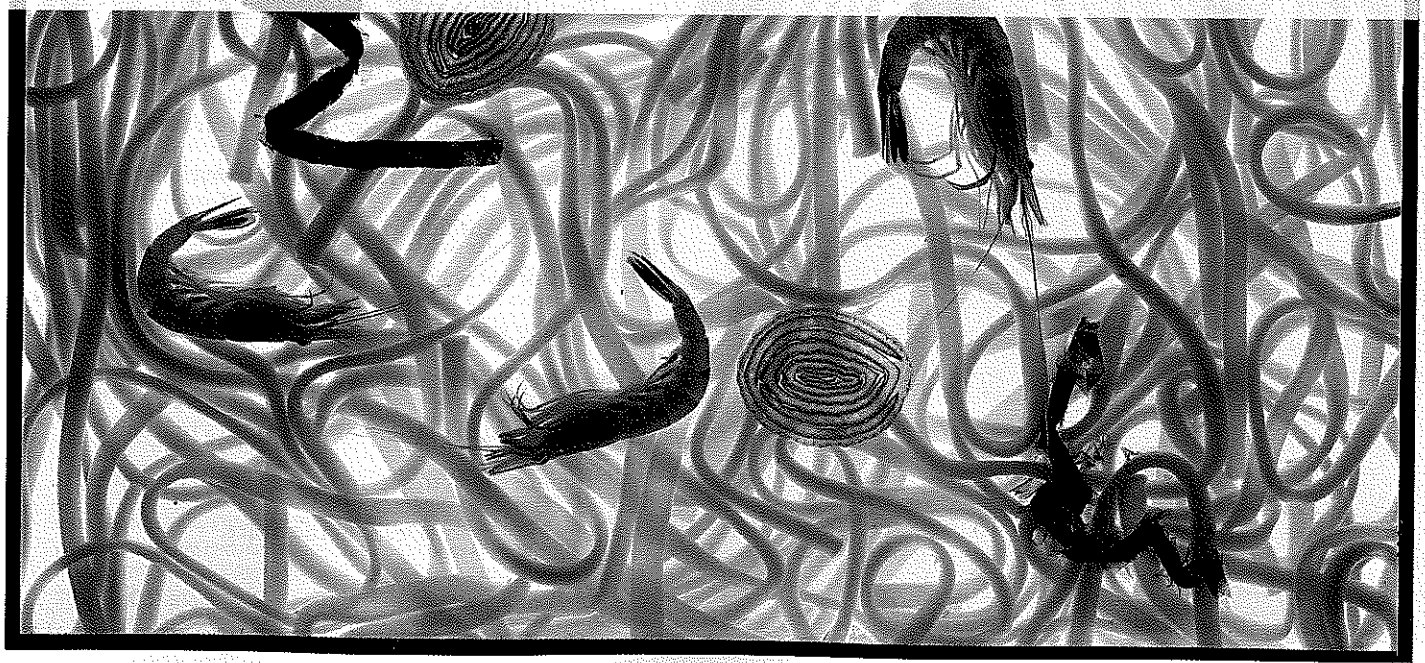
GETTING YOUR UDON

To explore Japan's three great noodle traditions, **JOHN POWERS** goes slurping.

If you are looking for the finest food in Japan, you may well wind up at one of those exclusive Ginza sushi bars, where hundreds of dollars can swim away before you know it, or at Yoshihiro Murata's acclaimed eating house, Kikunoi, in a restored inn overlooking Kyoto's fabled geisha quarter. But if you're looking for the tastiest food, you could do much worse than Nantsuttei, a small noodle shop in the least promising of places: an underground space hugging Tokyo's Shinagawa Railway Station.

I first went there one wintry afternoon on a tip from Carl Stone, an avant-garde composer based in Tokyo who wanders the city searching for good noodles with the ardor of a botanist scouring the Andes for rare orchids. He'd warned me to expect a line, and he was right. Although it was 4 P.M. on a Saturday and I was steps from several noodle shops (each flaunting posters of their chefs in comically macho poses), everybody was waiting to get into this one. The others are mere restaurants. Nantsuttei is a cult.

Some 45 minutes later, I joined it. Though the setting is unglamorous—you order at a ticket machine—Nantsuttei's ramen is swooningly good. For starters, the noodles have the obligatory firmness known as *koshi*, essentially the Japanese equivalent of al dente,



FOOD STYLING BY CHARLOTTE PUCKETTE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Mitchell Feinberg**

which makes them both tender and chewy. And they come bathed in a rich, inky broth made from wild boar and guinea hen (or so it's rumored: The recipe is, of course, secret) and topped with bean sprouts, green onions, and deliciously melting slices of soy-braised pork.

Sipping the broth, I studied the cheery set of wall hangings that explained, in exhaustive detail, how to properly experience the food—from visually taking in the bowl to savoring the aroma to dipping your spoon into the broth and, finally, tasting it. I can't recall the last time an American diner instructed me on how to eat a burger.

Such fetishistic attention to noodles is nothing new. In Soseki Natsume's great comic novel, *I Am a Cat*, written more than a century ago, one of the characters launches into an impassioned lecture on the subject: "A plate of noodles should be consumed in three and a half, at most four, mouthfuls. If you drag out the process longer than that," he asserts, "the noodles will not taste their best."

That sense of obsessive knowingness—the popular term is *otaku*—is stronger today than ever. No matter where you eat noodles in Japan, the next person you meet will tell you they know someplace better. As Web sites meticulously rank the best noodle houses, their chefs become stars with faddish followings. This isn't simply because noodles are "the original Japanese fast food," as Shizuo Tsuji puts it in his classic volume, *Japanese Cooking: A Simple Art*. It's because they're a national addiction, a cornerstone of the country's psyche. Japan's noodle culture embraces both high and low, from the instant packs that are convenience-store staples to the gossamer inventions of Michelin-starred restaurants.

Whether you're paying $7.60 for a bowl at Nantsuttei or $300 for Japanese haute cuisine, the basics are simple. First, there are three major kinds of noodles: the spaghetti-like, yellowish ramen; the grayish soba, made of buckwheat flour; and the thick, white wheat noodles called udon. Second, despite Japan's reputation for refinement and politesse, you are allowed, indeed encouraged, to devour your noodles noisily. The term for that slurping sound is, cutely enough, *tsuru-tsuru*. Finally, a proper noodle must be *koshi* and have a good "bite." After all, if there's one culinary truth that can safely be termed universal, it's that nobody likes a limp noodle.

Like any endeavor that inspires great passion, the noodle world has its snobberies. When it comes to soba and udon, the Japanese tend to be obsessive about authenticity and "correct" preparation. These are the noodles that can be part of fine dining. Ramen, meanwhile, is typically eaten in small, inexpensive shops. Purists suggest that ramen, despite its popularity, doesn't even count as Japanese because it was imported from China at the end of the 19th century. Others simply dismiss it as déclassé. (Japanese friends of mine insist that the best time to eat ramen is at the end of a long night of drinking.) Nonetheless, ramen enthusiasts will wait in line for 90 minutes to gobble down a bowlful in five.

Ramen had its first real boom after World War II, when occupied Japan was starved for nourishment. The situation prompted Momofuku Ando to invent the instant ramen now found everywhere from battlefields to college-dorm vending machines. But the taste for ramen didn't decline with Japan's rise to prosperity, and when the country's economy stalled in the nineties, tasty, cheap ramen grew more popular than ever, tapping into a nostalgia for simpler times. This ramen explosion set off international aftershocks that carried to New York's East Village, where one of America's most celebrated young chefs, David Chang, became a star with his ramen at Momofuku Noodle Bar.

NOODLES AREN'T SIMPLY JAPAN'S ORIGINAL FAST FOOD, THEY'RE A NATIONAL ADDICTION.

Walking around Tokyo, you get the feeling that ramen houses are everywhere, and the proliferation can be confusing, especially given ramen's numerous varieties. The broth can be made with pork stock (clear or milky), soy stock (light or dark), artisanal salt, miso, or shrimp. The noodles can be topped with pork slices that are more or less thick, eggs with yolks that are more or less orange, bamboo shoots that are more or less funky. Or all the above.

Lured by the promise of good ramen from diverse regions, my wife and I headed for the food court at **Aqua City,** a futuristic shopping mall in Odaiba overlooking Tokyo Bay (1-7-1 Daiba, Minato-ku; 81-3/3599-4700; aquacity.jp). The place lived up to expectations, and we spent hours sampling the varieties. Our favorites: the Toyama Black ramen (from the northern city of Tayoma) in a soy broth as dark as petroleum and delicious as sin; the Hakata-style ramen (which originated in Fukuoka) with pork slices as tender as butter; and the curly Sapporo noodles. By the time we left, every shop had a long line outside.

It must be said that a hearty bowl of ramen, with its rush of big flavor, is not exactly what anyone would call light fare. At the famous Tokyo chain **Kyushu Jangara Ramen** (dinner, $10; kyusyujangara.co.jp), the pork-bone (*tonkotsu*) stock is so delectably unctuous that having a bowl at 11 A.M., when it opens, will keep you full well into the evening.

Because ramen lacks the pedigree of soba and udon, it provides chefs with something of a blank canvas. "Ramen," Chang says, "offers you the most creative freedom." That's one reason it's the noodle of the moment and an emblem of globalized cooking.

Few places symbolize this trend better than **Ivan Ramen,** a ten-seat restaurant in the Tokyo suburbs that's become a sensation (■ dinner, $12; 3-24-7 Minami-Karasuyama, Setagaya-ku; 81-3/6750-5540; ivanramen.com). Its owner, Ivan Orkin, is a native New Yorker. Of course, for an American chef to set up a ramen shop here is a bit like a Japanese chef opening a barbecue joint in Kansas City. "I thought if I could make ramen that a Japanese person would call tasty," Orkin says, "I'd break down some barriers."

One morning I took the train out to his noodle shop in Setagaya-ku, a short walk from the Rokakoen Station. If you didn't know better, you'd certainly think the place was Japanese-owned. It has the requisite counter, backless stools, and queue of eager diners. It also has top-notch ramen, wonderfully *koshi*, with soy and salt broths much lighter than their lethal counterpart at Kyushu Jangara.

The 46-year-old Orkin, who has worked at such vaunted Manhattan restaurants as Mesa Grill and Lutèce, is a longtime Japanophile obsessed with noodles. "I had an idea of what the perfect ramen shop would be," he says. First of all, he does something most Jap-

Japan's noodle culture embraces both high and low, from instant ramen packs to the inventions of Michelin-starred chefs.

YOU ARE ALLOWED, INDEED ENCOURAGED, TO DEVOUR YOUR NOODLES NOISILY.

anese ramen shops don't: He makes his own noodles. And in addition to a rigorous attention to detail, he has a freewheeling sense of possibility and loves pushing the envelope, making noodles from corn flour or creating something he calls cheese soup ramen. "I don't want to be a soba or udon guy," he tells me, "because they tend to be traditionalists with strict ways of doing things. With ramen, there are a thousand ways you can do it."

Indeed, soba and udon rank higher in the culinary calculus than ramen because their simplicity makes them hard to do well. "Udon and soba are very minimal," says Chang. "There's little room for mistakes."

A feeling of austerity and purity is part of the appeal of snowy-hued udon, which was brought from China in the eighth or ninth century. Not that there's anything ethereal about these thick wheat noodles, often referred to as Japanese soul food.

Like ramen, udon inspires countless cultural arguments (Osaka proudly claims to make it better than Tokyo) and comes in scores of regional versions—there are as many shapes and thicknesses as there are prefectures. You can eat udon cold in the summer with a light soy dipping sauce called *tsuyu*. But these noodles are less austere when served in a warm, mild stock and topped with, well, almost anything: seaweed, green onions, fish cake, raw egg, shrimp tempura, even the peculiar Japanese version of curry.

Because udon usually lacks the salty, porky jolt one gets with ramen, it can be disappointingly bland if you don't go someplace good. On my last trip to Tokyo, I asked the concierge at the Peninsula hotel for directions to an udon restaurant in Asakusa. "But there is a much better place nearby," he said with infinite politeness, and sent me on a five-minute walk to **Sato Yosuke,** a lovely little restaurant with a waterfall on a side street in Ginza (dinner, $20; 6-4-17 Ginza, Chuou-ku; 81-3/6215-6211). To my delight, it turned out to be famous for its Inaniwa udon, a regional variety I'd never encountered. Enlivened by several glasses of chilled sake, I devoured a plate of cold udon with a tempura of immaculate lightness. I wish I could tell you everything that makes Inaniwa udon unique—it remains firmer after cooking than other types—but the important thing is that the noodles are thin and flat, like Vietnamese pho, with a better bite.

Of Japan's big three noodle varieties, soba is most closely associated with haute cuisine. This buckwheat noodle isn't merely the oldest, it's suffused with an aura of ritual. In Old Kyoto, people left soba offerings at the graves of their ancestors. In Tokyo's now vanished Floating World, soba was used to mark a geisha's first time wearing one of those orchidaceous nighttime outfits. Today, many Japanese eat soba to celebrate New Year's Eve.

Because of this ceremonial nature, as well as the cardboard blandness of mass-produced versions, I prefer eating soba in restaurants that are themselves out of the ordinary. In Kyoto, I sought out **Misoka-An Kawamichi-Ya,** a warren of small rooms with three gardens (dinner, $44; Sanjo-agaru, Fuyamachi-dori, Chukyo-ku; 81-7/5221-2525). Built in 1710, the restaurant has a reputation that goes back to when it provided sustenance to pilgrims en route to the Buddhist temple atop Mount Hiei. Hundreds of years later, its handmade noodles remain supple and refreshingly modern, eaten warm or cold and dipped in a simple soy-based sauce.

The soba was even better at **Kanda Yabusoba,** a traditional Tokyo house opened in 1880, with shoji screens and a garden courtyard (dinner, $14; 2-10 Awaji-cho, Kanda, Chiyoda-ku; 81-3/3251-0287; yabusoba.net). Noodle restaurants are rarely so charming—waitresses sing your order to the kitchen—

and there is perfection in Kanda's pairing of soba with a side of sweet, creamy Hokkaido *uni,* or sea urchin, more complex than any I've tasted in the United States.

Like udon, soba can be served in a warm, mild broth, but owing to the noodles' fragility when fresh, it is never finer than when presented cold atop the bamboo draining basket known as a *zaru* and accompanied by a gentle dipping sauce. Depending on the level of refinement—in general, the paler, the more expensive—soba can range from buckwheat gray to bright green (if flavored with tea powder) to a whiteness reminiscent of udon. Such gradations have made this noodle a favorite of chefs who enjoy riffing on tradition.

Soba worship takes its most exalted form in what's known as soba *kaiseki,* a series of small, exquisite plates ending in the noodle course. My first experience in this style of dining was with Taro Morishima, a film executive at Sony who suggested we head to **Okina,** a Michelin-starred oasis in the raucously hip neighborhood of Ebisu (dinner, $220; 1-3-10 Ebisunishi, Shibuya-ku; 81-3/3477-2648). Stepping down the stairs to its entrance, we were greeted by owner Madame Kimiko, a matron of the old school, dressed in a kimono and prone to amiable bossiness.

As we sat at a long counter made from a single beautiful piece of wood, the dishes started coming, with Madame Kimiko instructing us how to eat each one. Sipping gentle, icy sake from handmade cedar boxes, we reveled in dish after dish: lightly smoked oysters with eggplant, grilled fatty tuna, mushrooms in blowfish stock, and steamed yam shoots that tasted like delicate baby artichokes.

After seven or eight courses, the meal culminated in the pièce de résistance and Okina's claim to fame: a soba of such purity that if it were any whiter or lighter it would disappear. I greedily slurped down the cold noodles with my best *tsuru-tsuru,* and Madame Kimiko asked if I wanted more. I did. When I finally finished, she brought out a nightcap: the hot water used to cook the soba. It was a rustic touch, and Taro used the cloudy, wheat-scented liquid to cut his glass of *shochu.*

Eventually it was time to go, and as we left, Madame Kimiko asked how I liked the soba. I replied with a single word: *Koshi.*

Giving me the contented smile of one who's heard the correct answer, she bowed goodbye as we left her elegant soba shrine and stepped into the cold and roaring Tokyo night.

Noodlin' the U.S.A.

Japan is noodle nirvana, but you can also get superb soba, ramen, and udon without hopping on a plane to the Far East. (These are budget-conscious times, after all.) And the greatest concentration of Japanese noodle restaurants this side of Tokyo can be found in Los Angeles and New York. A short list hints at the options.

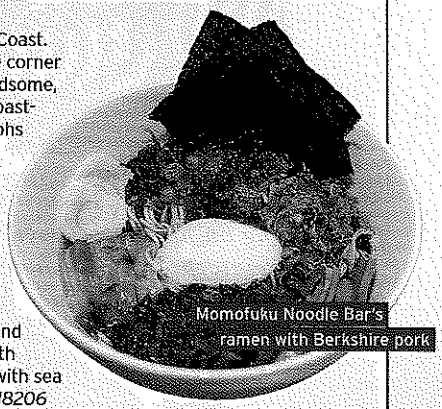
LOS ANGELES

GONPACHI
Opened in Beverly Hills in 2007, this is the $6 million outpost of the Tokyo restaurant that served as the model for the House of Blue Leaves in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill.* From the moment you enter you'll be dazzled by the design—the lovely courtyard, the elegant bar. Stick to the grilled *sumiyaki* menu and revel in the terrific soba made fresh by a hardworking chef behind glass. *Dinner, $50. At 134 N. La Cienega Blvd.; 310-659-8887; globaldiningca.com.*

MISHIMA
Probably L.A.'s most beloved noodle restaurant, not least because it's family friendly, this sleek little café just east of Beverly Hills is the sort of place where you drop in for a nice clarifying bowl of cold, seaweed-topped soba and an order of tofu salad or salmon. It's cheap, clean, and unpretentious (which, for once, is not a euphemism). *Dinner, $12. At 8474 W. 3rd St., Ste. 108; 323-782-0181; mishima.com.*

SANTOUKA
There are those who say this city's best ramen is downtown at Daikokuya, but if you can only go to one place for noodles, it should be this stall in the Mitsuwa Marketplace in West L.A. Its killer dish, the *shio* ramen with special pork, is an explosion of rich, pungent flavors that your cardiologist might warn you off. Ingest in moderation, enjoy immoderately. *Dinner, $10. At 3760 S. Centinela Ave.; 310-391-1101.*

SANUKI NO SATO
Some 15 minutes south of LAX, in Gardena, lies the best noodle restaurant on the West Coast. Although plopped in the corner of a mini-mall, it's a handsome, traditional restaurant boasting photos and autographs of famous Japanese customers like Red Sox pitcher Daisuke "Dice-K" Matsuzaka. The celebrities come for the majestic bowls of hot udon (wonderful when topped with tempura) or the cold udon and soba (austerely good with seaweed and luxuriant with sea urchin). *Dinner, $30. At 18206 S. Western Ave.; 310-324-9184; sanukinosato.com.*


Momofuku Noodle Bar's ramen with Berkshire pork

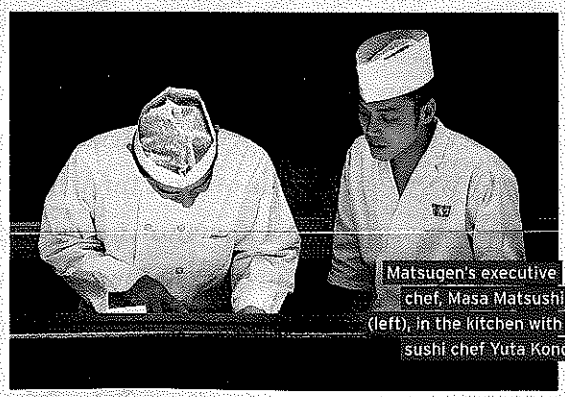
NEW YORK

MATSUGEN
Ever since the closing of Honmura An, the city's high-end soba fans had been yearning for a replacement. Enter this TriBeCa restaurant created by Jean-Georges Vongerichten on the glossy ashes of his Chinese-themed (and Richard Meier–designed) 66. The soba here is sensational, especially the cold version. It comes in three varieties—coarse, medium husk, and no husk—and is served with a choice of delicious broths, sauces, and mix-ins. *Dinner, $45. At 241 Church St.; 212-925-0202; jean-georges.com.*

MOMOFUKU NOODLE BAR
Perhaps the most modest restaurant ever to make any chef a star, David Chang's innovative East Village noodle shop (its name means "lucky peach") helped to fuel New York's ramen boom. It's easy to see why. Chang knows how to blend the intense flavors of rich stock and Berkshire pork belly with such lighter grace notes as sliced snow peas and crunchy corn. Leave room for the steamed pork buns. *Dinner, $20. At 171 First Ave.; 212-777-7773; momofuku.com.*

SAKAGURA
Even noodle fanatics sometimes want to eat at a place where they can also do some seriously pleasurable drinking. Hidden beneath a midtown office building, this upscale *izakaya* is known for its small dishes and expansive sake list. You can finish off your meal with excellent handmade soba that will steady your walk home. *Dinner, $40. At 211 E. 43rd St.; 212-953-9253; sakagura.com.*

SOBA-YA
This pleasant East Village spot is known for the freshly made noodles that have established it as a home away from home for countless Japanese in the city. The soba (made with Azumino buckwheat imported from Nagano) has a firm bite, both hot and cold, while the udon is flat-out delicious, especially the hearty *nabeyaki,* which comes in a pot with shrimp tempura, chicken, and mushrooms. *Dinner, $30. At 229 E. Ninth St.; 212-533-6966; sobaya-nyc.com.*


Matsugen's executive chef, Masa Matsushita (left), in the kitchen with sushi chef Yuta Kono