



Feature

Feeding an obsession

Ramen is cheap, delicious and comforting, but is that enough to warrant an obsession?

Text & images: Carla Avolio

We know how to eat in Kansai, and it doesn't have to come with Michelin stars. This is the home of cheap yet satisfying food – be it the doughy goodness of takoyaki or the mayonnaise-slathered garbage heap that is okonomiyaki. And B-kyu (literally “B-class”), no-frills dining is perhaps most purely embodied by Japan's enthusiasm for ramen. This simple bowl of soup, noodles and toppings has spawned devotees who have created guidebooks, rating sites, blogs, magazines – even movies.

But what's it like to be part of this ramen-obsessed world, to be driven by something as prosaic as a bowl of noodles? To find out, KS takes its field fork on a pilgrimage across Kansai, eating ramen at the best shops (as rated by Tabelog website users) in Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe to experience a day in the life of a ramen addict.

Preparation

I prepare for my three-ramen day by hitting the blogosphere to find members of the brotherhood. My first chat is with Brian MacDuckston of Ramen Adventures, who explains the obsession simply: “It's everyman food. Everyone likes it, and the Prime Minister eats at the same shop as students.”

Patrick Mackey, author of *Osaka Insider*, thinks foreigners who only know instant ramen get hooked in Japan after realising how delicious and cheap it is.

I also watch *Ramen Girl*, a decidedly B-kyu movie about a girl who becomes a ramen chef after being dumped by her boyfriend in Tokyo. I learn that ramen is a complex art where it can take apprentices over 10 years just to learn the soup recipe. But Brian says that tradition is fast changing. “The scene is getting a lot of young, experimental stars who are getting

creative with ingredients, making foams, even putting out ramen in ratatouille or American chilli bean style,” he says.

Brian has reviewed over 500 shops, so he's the perfect person to ask for guidelines. “Ask for the recommendation, or *osusume*, eat all the noodles, and don't get anything “omori” or large size – that's silly even by my standards,” he says. And with that, I'm ready to go.





Breakfast – Kasho in Kyoto

- **General vibe:** Excited but unsure I'll reach every shop today.
- **Hunger for ramen:** Medium-low, so I've brought a friend

11:30am After a one-hour train ride to Demachiyanaagi and a 15-minute walk, we reach a two-story shop at a busy intersection. It's sleek inside, with an open kitchen and a wooden bar where we sit and watch the action. The menu is resolutely Chinese, with mouth-watering offerings of steamed dumplings and stir-fries. Determined to stay focused, we order the top two ramens, which we are told are tantan men and chicken ramen, and they both arrive in well under five minutes. The tantan men is a nest of curly noodles in a thick broth enriched by sesame, with dark-red mince and mushrooms on top. It's absolutely delicious, but the portion is too small for the man friend, who wished he'd ordered a set. Mine is an entirely different experience. Curly noodles in a clean soy broth crowned by shredded poached chicken and spring onions, it's a perfect lady's portion and a restorative start to the day.

Lunch - Jikon in Osaka

- **General vibe:** Good, but there's a long way to go
- **Hunger for ramen:** Medium, but I've lost the friend

1:30pm Under a block of units on an uninspiring residential street resides the shop voted Best Ramen Restaurant for 2011 on Tabelog. Three tables and a four-seater bar fill the compact space, and the only sound is the background hum of music and the rhythmic slurping of noodles. I chose the venue's featured dish. It's a light soy broth that comes with thin, straight noodles - a first for me. Toppings include a small medallion of duck, a thin slice of pork, two small chicken balls (which have strange crunchy bits that I don't like) and a nest of fresh, green leaves that provide the perfect foil to the deep flavours. As I am photographing the dish, my waiter, wearing a worried expression, tells me I shouldn't wait any longer before eating the ramen.



When the place empties, my friendly waiter sits down to the most enormous portion of ramen (undoubtedly the "omori" Brian warned against), which he kindly lets me photograph. The chef, Mr Shimata, is clearly amused by my photography and shows me a line of instant ramen made by his friend, a famous ramen chef from Tokyo's Ito restaurant. Too interested to be embarrassed, I photograph the instant ramen before asking Shimata to pose for me. It's not weird if it's a legitimate craze, right?





Afternoon snack – museum visit

2:30pm With some time to kill, I visit the Instant Ramen Museum in Ikeda, which pays tribute to Momofuku Ando, the inventor of the instant noodle. It's lots of fun, with highlights being the world's first instant noodle launched into space (to stop the noodles and liquid flying everywhere in zero gravity, the noodles are rolled into bite-sized balls and the soup is a thick gravy) and fantastic hands-on activities. For only ¥300, you can design your own bespoke cup noodles, and if you book ahead, you can learn to make chicken ramen in the kitchen on the second floor. Sadly, I don't have time for the second activity; but I watch the participants, decked out in pink aprons and chicken headscarves, hand making and flavouring noodles. Definitely worth a return visit.

www.instantramen-museum.jp



Dinner - Nagomi near Kobe

- **General vibe:** Strangely elated
- **Hunger for ramen:** V High

6:05pm My final destination is Amagasaki, a cute riverside town between Kobe and Osaka. After a short walk down a delightful commercial street, I find my ramen shop glowing warmly in the night. It's only five minutes past opening time but the place is packed and I'm asked to wait outside – something I welcome as an integral part of the ramen enthusiast's experience. After only 13 minutes, I'm shocked that the first patron is getting up to leave, which reminds me of something Brian said about the financial potential of a busy ramen shop. "Customers need 10 minutes at most to finish a bowl of ramen, and I know shops that are only open for three hours but serve 150 to 200 bowls".

Indeed, this tiny space is doing a roaring trade, with the three chefs warming bowls, boiling noodles and ladling salts and oils at great speed. When my steaming bowl arrives, I'm immediately taken with the noodles, which are fat, curly and perfectly chewy. The owner, Takeshi, who runs the shop with his wife, hovers in front of me to make sure the broth is to my taste and that I'm correctly dealing with the toppings. He then proudly shows me a photo of his two young children, 2 and 4 years old, who are running amok in their apartment above the shop. Definitely feeling the love here.

I leave the shop glowing from my day as a ramen addict. I'm touched by the enormous pride the staff have for their product and the seriousness with which they take my ramen experience. Ramen has introduced me to places in Kansai that I would never have visited, and much to my surprise, each bowl I've eaten today has tasted better than the last.



Osaka ramen hunting – tips from Patrick Mackey

- Try out the reliable chain shops such as Kinryu, Kio, Shi-ten-noh and Ippudo to get a feel for what a solid bowl of ramen tastes like.
- Start exploring the smaller shops in Minami, Tenjinbashisuji 6-chome and other areas known for good food to find some more original approaches to the dish.
- There are various types of ramen around Japan, and because Osaka is such a cosmopolitan city you can find examples of all of them if you look hard enough.

Patrick's top three

- **Sodaisho (総大醬):** The best shoyu ramen I have found in Osaka. Their rich soup is out of this world.
- **Men'ya Kurobune (麵屋 黒船):** It's a rare thing to find great miso ramen anywhere in Japan, and theirs is amazing.
- **Men'ya Eguchi (麵屋 えぐち):** Probably the best tsuke-men (tsuke-soba) you'll find in Osaka. It's also super-affordable despite its high-class taste.

Ramen Contacts

- Patrick Mackey from Osaka Insider (www.osakainsider.wordpress.com) now blogs at Finding Fukuoka (www.findingfukuoka.com) and has written a guidebook, Osaka Insider: A Travel Guide for Osaka Prefecture, which includes a ramen guide.
- Brian MacDuckston, blogger at Ramen Adventures (www.ramenadventures.com), writes a weekly ramen corner for a Japanese magazine, and has been named a ramen ambassador for Yahoo Japan. He is working on an Osaka ramen school, where English speakers can learn to run a ramen business from scratch.

Restaurant Details

Breakfast – Kasho (華祥)

- **Address:** Kyoto-shi, Sakyo-ku, Tanaka Satonouchicho 41-1
- **Access:** Mototanaka Station on the Eizan railway (from Demachiyanaagi Keihan)
- **Open:** 11am–2pm / 5:30–10pm
- **Closed:** Weds

Lunch – Jikon (麵や而今)

- **Address:** Osaka-fu, Daito-shi, Haizuka 6-7-9
- **Access:** 14min walk from JR Konoike Shinden station
- **Open:** 11:30–2:30 lunch only
- **Closed:** Tues

Dinner – Nagomi (和海)

- **Address:** Amagasaki-shi, Mukogawa-cho 2-19-3
- **Access:** Hanshin Mukogawa station
- **Open:** 12–1:30pm / 6–9pm
- **Closed:** Mon, 2nd & 4th Tues

Kansai Scene t-shirt design competition

Sponsored by
Sweatshop Union t-shirt print shop, Osaka
www.sweatshopunion.jp

Love Kansai? Want to share the love on a shirt? Get out your pencils and enter the **Kansai Scene t-shirt design competition.**

Theme

Kansai. That's it. Anything goes. Ultimately we are looking for designs that people would actually want to wear. Typography, illustration — it's entirely up to you.

What you win

One lucky winner receives 10 printed t-shirts of their design, an iTunes gift card and will get their work featured in Kansai Scene magazine.

Rules

- Design must include the Kansai Scene logo
- You must use our special template (see below)
- The design must be digital artwork (preferably vector)
- Use no more than 3, flat colors
- Base t-shirt color can be any color
- Max 3 entries per person

Download our entry form, KS logo and layout template here:

www.kansaiscene.com/t-shirt-competition

Submit your entries by email to: competition@kansaiscene.com no later than **Nov 30th 2012**.

- All entries will be posted to our Facebook page and readers invited to vote for their favorite.
- The winner will be chosen by KS on December 10th and announced in the January edition of Kansai Scene.