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FOOD

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cover story

SUPER BOWL

IN BOSTON-AREA RESTAURANTS,
RAMEN HAS ARRIVED

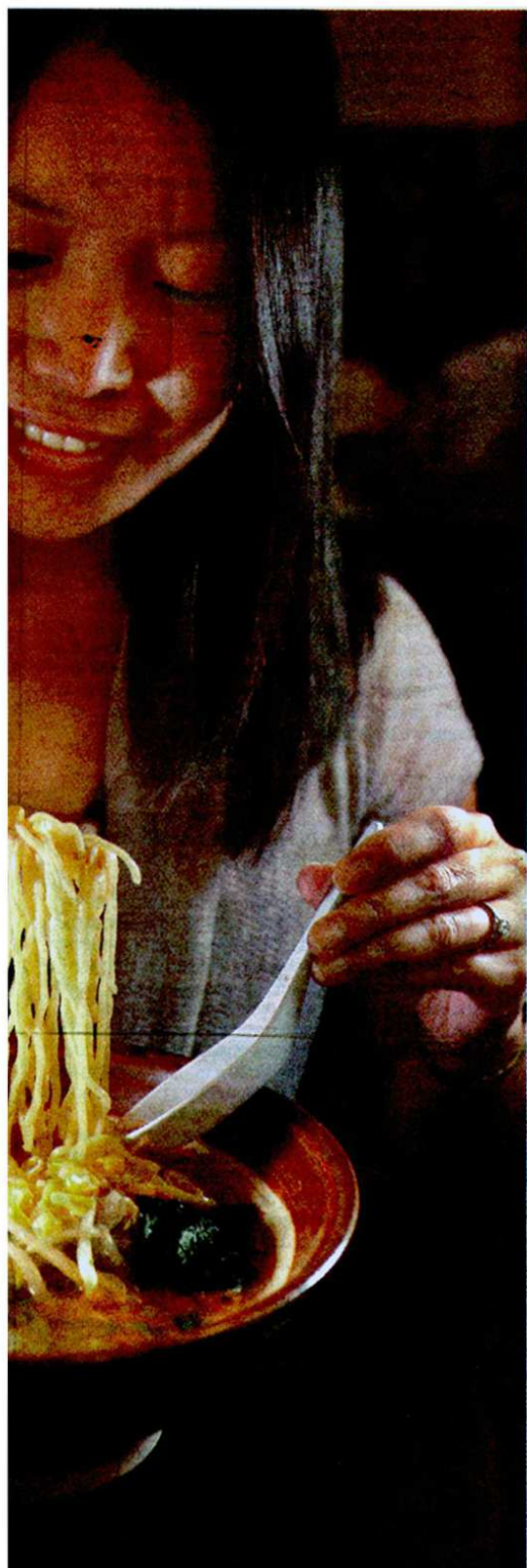
BY DEVRA FIRST | GLOBE STAFF

Ramen seems like a simple dish. Japan's favorite comfort food is nothing more than broth, noodles, and a few toppings — roast pork, seaweed, bamboo shoots, an egg if we're getting fancy. But: Is the broth tonkotsu, made from pork bones; shio (salt) or shoyu (soy); assari (light) or kotteri (rich)? Are the noodles thick or thin, made by hand or in a factory, extremely chewy or relatively soft, wavy or straight? Is the pork fatty or lean, soft or tough? There are more than 30 regional varieties of ramen in Japan, according to the Shinyokohama Raumen Museum. The search for the perfect bowl can become an obsession. Google "ramen blog" and you'll find site after site, with names like Ramenate!, Ramen Adventures, and the Ramen Shaman, all detailing their owners' quest for the best.

Until recently, the dish was hard to come by in this area. The past few years have seen a ramen explosion, with bowls of noodles now available at pop-up restaurants, on late-night menus, as lunchtime specials, in bars, even made to order and brought directly to one's door. (The Boston Ramen Noodle Co., which offers this service, delivers to Back Bay, the South End, and the Fenway.) And there are more restaurants specializing in the dish, which is a good thing. A kitchen that dabbles in ramen is often a kitchen that makes bad ramen. Crafting a proper bowl takes laser focus and true dedication, as anyone who has seen the movie "Tampopo" knows. Although we don't yet have the selection of ramen joints found in larger cities, we now have choices enough to obsess over.

Still, one only needs to be a casual consumer to appreciate a steaming bowl of noodles. With the weather getting colder, ramen season is upon us. Here is where to go.





PHOTOS (TOP AND ABOVE) BY MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE



PHOTOS (LEFT AND ABOVE) BY BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Celene Chang and Jennifer Yan (top) try the pork ramen (middle) at Yume Wo Katare in Cambridge; Jim Chen (above), owner of Inaka in Allston.

Carolyn Hann, of Washington, D.C., with a bowl of spicy miso ramen at Sapporo Ramen inside the Porter Exchange in Cambridge.

THE BIG PIG

Yume Wo Katare

1923 Massachusetts Ave. (Porter Square), Cambridge. 617-714-4008.

www.yumewokatara.com. \$12-\$14.

Yume Wo Katare, which just saw its one-year anniversary, is a tiny shop with bright blue walls lined with calligraphy and hand-drawn cartoons. It has a counter with a view of the kitchen and two additional rows of seating. From the time it opens, every chair and stool is full; people wait in line for hours to try chef-owner Tsuyoshi Nishioka's food. Piled high, these bowls are like nothing else in Boston. Nishioka serves a style known as "jiro ramen" — the porkiest, heartiest ramen around. The bowls at Yume Wo Katare (the name means "tell your dreams" in Japanese) are filled with fatty, meaty broth, essential, all pig and salt; brawny handmade noodles; thick slabs of tender meat accented by just enough wobbly fat. There's nothing delicate about it, but nothing crude either. It is carefully, lovingly prepared. This is the only kind of ramen served here, and you have two choices to make. Do you want it with garlic, yes or no? (I say yes, so there is some uplift with all that swinery.) And do you want a bowl with two slices or five slices? I can barely contemplate eating the entire two-slice bowl, but those stauncher than me swear by the five-slice. Know thyself and order accordingly. This is good pork: Will you be sad you could have had more? There is plenty of support here for pigging out. Eat well and the staff responds with a hearty round of "Good job!" But finish every last drop and the cry is even more rewarding: "Perfect!"

THE NEW RELIABLE

Inaka

72 Brighton Ave., Allston. 617-562-1668. \$8.95-\$12.95.

Opened in May, Inaka is a newcomer to the local ramen scene. The restaurant is in Allston, but the J-pop soundtrack, curtains printed with waving cats and sumo wrestlers, and festoons of faux cherry blossoms make you feel you could be in Japan. ("Inaka" is the Japanese word for a rural area.) So does the ramen. There are several versions — a standard shoyu ramen with soy sauce-flavored broth; a yakibuta ramen, an amped-up version of the shoyu with six slices of pork instead of three, corn, and a soft-cooked egg; miso ramen; and spicy miso ramen. (Also on the succinct menu: a cold noodle dish called hiyashi chuka, along with the likes of donburi and katsu curry.) You'll be offered your choice of thick or thin noodles — the thick ones are intensely chewy, while the thin are paler and more delicate, commonly served in Hakata-style ramen from Fukuoka. "For you, I think the thin are better," a server says, but I like my noodles with bite; in the hot soup,

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the thin version quickly gets too tender for my taste. The shoyu broth is on the lighter side here, but accompaniments of chopped garlic, the chili-based spice blend shichimi, and sesame oil give it more depth. The spicy miso, however, needs no assist — it has a rich and savory broth with just enough attitude. If you want to eat ramen on your own terms, without obsessively refreshing your screen for pop-up tickets, burning the midnight oil, or standing in a long line, this is now one of the best bets in town.

THE CRAFT PROJECT

backbar

7 Sanborn Court (Union Square), Somerville.
617-718-0249. www.backbarunion.com. \$12.

This annex to sister restaurant Journeyman is known for its cocktails, but every day from 4-6 p.m. in chilly weather backbar serves ramen. (Summer means burgers instead.) Last week the season started up again, and chefs Diana Kudayarova and Tse Wei Lim began dishing bowls of toripaitan ramen, made with a deep, rich chicken broth seasoned with soy; they rotate ramen styles and toppings regularly. Fresh, handmade noodles with just the right amount of resistance swim in the bowl with bamboo shoots, nori, scallions, and more. There are also optional toppings such as pickled ginger, bacon, and black garlic oil. One highlight of the dish is a poached egg, the white creamy and delicate, the yolk bright gold with the texture of rich pudding. Another highlight: slices of pork belly, tender and flavorful, edged with a rich ripple of fat. Each element of backbar's ramen feels carefully thought out and prepared. It's a chef's bowl, with clear, distinct flavors. Bonus points for being able to get a well-made drink at the same time, while listening to jazz and relaxing in a cozy, pillowed corner beneath artistically illustrated chalkboards.

THE PICK-ME-UP

Pikaichi

1 Brighton Ave., Allston. 617-789-4818.
\$7.99-\$8.99.

Pikaichi opened in 2011, picking up the ramen mantle from the esteemed Ken's Noodle House, which occupied the space before it. It serves a solid bowl of soup, along with a dose of Japanese culture: Japanese pop songs play, and there's a Japanese word of the week posted on the wall alongside calligraphy and traditional masks. On one red wall, there's a dragon painted in black. If he is breathing fire, perhaps it is because he consumed a bowl of Pikaichi's jigoku ramen. The brick-red, soy-based broth packs real heat. ("Jigoku" means "hell.") Also on the menu: shoyu, shio, yuzu shio, miso, and spicy miso ramen. Pikaichi's shoyu version hews to tradition; it's what you would be most likely to find at a Tokyo food stall. The lightly fatty, caramel-colored broth has good pork flavor, in the middle of the intensity scale. Noodles are portioned generously (6 ounces as opposed to the industry standard of 5, according to the menu) and offer a pleasurable, ruminative chew. Slices of pork are tender, if a little on the dry side. This is a fine place for ramen in a rush; made-to-order bowls arrive quickly. Another major plus: Pikaichi packs up ramen to go. Many ramen places don't do takeout, as the noodles suffer. But this restaurant has it down to a science, offering the noodles cooked or uncooked, with printed instructions for how to prepare and assemble the soup at home.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Top: Hokkai shio ramen with boiled half egg at Pikaichi in Allston. Above: Kazu Aotani, owner of Snappy Ramen in Somerville.

THE NIGHT OWL

Uni Sashimi Bar

370 Commonwealth Ave. (Back Bay), Boston.
617-536-7200. www.unisashimibar.com. \$10.

In this subterranean nook of a sashimi bar, chefs create elegant compositions with raw fish — think local scallops with candied bacon, ikura, and Asian pear-celery jus, or tuna with oyster crema, Serrano ham, and fig. But every Friday and Saturday starting at 11 p.m., ramen is served. The late-night crowd cozies up to bowls of traditional, vegetable, or squid ramen; offerings change depending on the availability and cost of

ingredients. The squid ramen is warmly spicy, the squid tender white ribbons that mimic noodles; the vegetable version has been known to win over hard-core meat eaters. Noodles are al dente; eggs are cooked soft and wobbly. At high-end Uni, the late-night menu is written in marker on a piece of cardboard. And each (smallish) bowl of ramen is \$10, less than most of the cocktails. Which means you can have one of those, too. Or try Kikusui Funaguchi — "sake in a can!," proclaims the menu.

THE CLASSIC

Sapporo Ramen

1815 Massachusetts Ave. (Porter Square),
Cambridge. 617-876-4805. \$8.90-\$9.30.

Perhaps no one has benefited more from the ramen craze than Sapporo Ramen, a no-frills space located in the food court of the Porter Exchange in Porter Square. It has been operating since 1990, the granddaddy of the local scene. (A second branch is planned for the food court of H Mart, coming soon to Central Square.) There was a time you could roll up to Sapporo, grab a seat, and order a bowl without waiting. These days, there is almost always a line. The ramen has a thick, rich stock made from chicken and vegetables; cooked for more than 10 hours. It is "full of NATURAL COLLAGEN," per the menu. House ramen comes with tender pork, corn, and an egg (on a recent occasion, somewhat overcooked yet still cold at the center). There's good variety here, with flavors from spicy miso to kimchi to curry to tan tan men, the ramenized cousin of China's dan dan noodles. Vegetarian ramen is available, too. Long live the long-lived Sapporo Ramen!

THE ABOUT-FACE

Snappy Ramen

420 Highland Ave. (Davis Square), Somerville.
617-625-0400. \$9-\$14.

This restaurant was Snappy Sushi until suddenly one day it wasn't. As of Oct. 1, it is officially out of the sushi business. Now it is Snappy Ramen. People sit at the bar drinking beer and sake beneath chalkboard menus illustrated with pig cartoons, or at a big, wooden communal table. Jazz plays softly in the background. The place is still sorting things out in some regards: The phone often goes unanswered. Hours are hard to come by (Sunday 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m., Monday-Thursday 5-10 p.m., Friday-Saturday 11:30 a.m.-midnight). But the happy surprise, despite the rapid change in specialty, is that the ramen is really good. The menu is divided between assari and kotteri ramen. On the assari side, you'll find the likes of veggie ramen, featuring a light shiitake broth, thick noodles, cabbage, mustard greens, and plenty of fried garlic. You can get it with chicken prepared in the same style as pork usually is for ramen; it seems as though this might be a bad idea, but it works. On the other side of the menu, dashi kotteri ramen features a dynamite tonkotsu broth — creamy, thick, and voluptuous, almost silky. It contains thin noodles, shiitake mushrooms, scallions, and thick bonito flakes that lend a baconlike smokiness to the bowl. Add-ons range from pork belly and soytinged eggs (ice cold in my bowl) to jalapeno and baby arugula. Just one sushi bar convention remains: a paper order sheet on which you check the items you want. It's an impressive reinvention.

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