Kelly Yamanouchi/Atlanta Journal-Constitution-TNS
Almost-instant spicy sesame miso ramen with smoked trout and egg.

Quest for the perfect ramen

By KELLY YAMANOUCHI
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

I have spent a lifetime experimenting with variations on basic instant ramen, with the vague goal of someday reaching noodle soup perfection.

As with a lot of things, there were instances when I believed I had reached the pinnacle of homemade ramen, only to see a new idea bubble up, hinting that there could be more greatness to be achieved, and tempting me to tweak the recipe again.

My life of instant ramen, and the endless variations on it, started decades before ramen was cool, pre-dating this period of young professionals celebrating their birthdays over $12 bowls at trendy ramen restaurants.

I'm Asian American, and ramen was a staple of my childhood — a simple and comforting meal, easy to turn to anytime.

My parents made a more involved saimin, a noodle soup popular in Hawaii, where they grew up. But, we occasionally would turn to ramen, with accouterments similar to saimin: julienned omelet, char siu, green onions from my mother's garden.

As soon as my older brother Roy was tall enough to boil water on the stove, he started making his own ramen, and would make a double batch for both of us.

That's the point in my childhood when I learned preferences for ramen can vary. My brother would take his share of noodles and broth from the pot, before it even reached the golden 3-minute mark, and leave the rest on the stove for me — telling me that it was because I liked my ramen "overcooked."

I told my brother I was writing an article on weird variations on ramen and asked if he still likes his "crunchy." He responded: "Yes. And it's not weird."

Besides, he said, when he was in Boy Scouts, they would eat ramen raw, "but that's because we were hiking and too lazy to cook."

And, my brother revealed his current unauthorized method: He boils water, turns off the heat and then drops the noodles in.

"Sacrilege!" I responded.

"I'd call it al dente," he claimed.

At my friend Shanna's house, after middle school got out, I learned another twist: She drained cooked ramen noodles and added butter and the seasoning packet — a sort of Asian-inflected butter noodles.

College was a chance to expand my ramen horizons. There, I learned my friend Emily added a raw egg to the pot when cooking ramen — quicker than making a separate omelet for garnish, as my parents do. I've been dropping in an egg ever since.

Over time, I've adopted an unusual method of eating ramen, probably because I grew tired of juggling two utensils. Dispensing with chopsticks, I use only an Asian soup spoon to cut through the noodles, and scoop the perfect ratio of broth to noodles for every bite.

I view ramen as comfort food, the way others look at mac-and-cheese. But, when I asked my husband, Ron — who did not grow up eating ramen — what his corollary is, he said: "Nothing. I don't like anything as much as you like ramen. You eat it for breakfast!"

I informed him that plenty of people eat ramen for breakfast, which he questioned. So, of course, I searched Twitter to back me up. I found 13 tweets with the term "ramen for breakfast" in the previous 24 hours, and thousands more in the broader Twitterverse.

I knew this to be true, because my best ramen buddy — my friend Ashley — also loves ramen for breakfast. I know this because, when playing the card game Ramen Fury, the player who goes first is whoever ate ramen most recently. Ashley's answer: This morning.

Ashley and I regularly gift each other instant ramen in different flavors — new ones discovered at the Asian supermarket, favorite flavors to share, unusual varieties found during travels. I think she might love ramen as much as I do.

But, the real point of this story: I believe I may have found what's close to the perfect ramen — at least, until I find something better.

The genesis was an electric smoker I found at an estate sale. Upon hearing of my smoker purchase, my dad told my mom to find their "basic smoked fish" recipe to send to me. It yielded some tasty results.

Then, while visiting my parents, I thumbed through some old family recipe binders and found a "Yamanouchi smoked fish recipe" — something I apparently could not be trusted with, in my father's eyes. As I skimmed the more extensive list of ingredients, I felt simmering rage and jealousy — wondering if my brother had gotten the family smoked fish recipe after he bought his smoker, and how long he had to wait for it. But, I said nothing. Instead, I surreptitiously shot a photo of the recipe with my phone, and flew home.

Back at home, I fired up the electric smoker for four beautiful fillets of smoked trout, made with the smuggled Yamanouchi recipe.

The next morning, as a pot of water boiled on the stove for my breakfast ramen, I started to sense a synergistic opportunity.

I had been experimenting with ways to enhance ramen made with Lotus Foods' brown rice noodles, which don't come with a soup base and, thus, offer a blank slate for innovation.

While some of my dependable flourishes include homemade stock and kimchi, this time I tried miso paste and hot sesame oil with egg and ... flaked smoked trout.

See, Ramen/Page B3

Pandemic linked to rise in foot pain

By SARAH GANTZ
The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — Stuck at home and out of work because of the pandemic, Timothy Hudson decided to tackle a new project: lose weight and get in shape.

Between September 2020 and May 2021, the 32-year-old dropped 100 pounds by changing his eating habits, working out more, playing basketball with friends, and running up to five miles a day.

Hudson, who lives in Chester, Pennsylvania, said he'd never felt better — except for his feet.

"It was like a burning, pulling feeling," Hudson said. "Any type of strenuous activity, I'd be out for at least three days."

Foot pain has been on the rise during the pandemic, as people working from home kicked off their supportive shoes in favor of flimsy slippers and flip-flops, while others, including Hudson, used the time to become more active, which put new strain on their feet.

"In March 2020 I said … 'Oh, my goodness, everyone is going to have plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis,'" recalled Laura Virtue-Delayo, the president of the Pennsylvania Podiatric Medical Association.

Her prediction panned out: Podiatrists, orthopedic surgeons and physical therapists say they're seeing more cases of plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis — two common foot-pain conditions — than ever before.

Virtue-Delayo, a Scranton-based podiatrist, said her caseload of foot pain patients peaked over the summer, when she was treating about 35% more people for foot pain than usual. The number of new patients with foot pain has gone down but remains above prepandemic levels, she said.

What causes plantar fasciitis?

Plantar fasciitis is inflammation of the thick band of tissue that connects the heel bone to the toes, which causes a stabbing heel pain.

See, Foot/Page B3

Dislike the word 'moist'? Cookbook author says to embrace it

Gretchen McKay/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS
This hearty pasta salad is full of Moroccan flavors, and is a perfect side for scallops or Caribbean jerk chicken.

By GRETCHEN McKAY
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Want to make people uncomfortable? Just say something is "moist."

Studies show that many people don't like the word, in large part because of its association with sweat and other types of moisture we'd rather not talk about.

Yet when it comes to cooking, moist is a good thing, both when it comes to texture (who likes dry cake?) and basic techniques such as simmering, braising, steaming or stewing.

Moisture — the presence of a liquid — is what makes breads spongy, vegetables tender, watermelon juicy and pastries so wonderfully silky. Moist-heat cooking methods like poaching and frying, meanwhile, keep foods from drying out, resulting in tender, flavorful meat and seafood dishes.

New Castle, Pennsylvania, native and cookbook author Kathy Hunt can't understand why so many people bristle at "moist." But she sees it, especially among younger adults and kids who either giggle or gag (and sometimes both) at its mere mention.

Even her publisher found the word too titillating a name for her latest cookbook, which aims to explain and demonstrate, with more than 70 recipes, why moist is so important in the culinary world. While they loved the idea of a technique book, the marketing department nixed using the word in the title.

They found a happy compromise with "Luscious, Tender, Juicy: Recipes for Perfect Texture in Dinner, Desserts and More" (Countryman Press, $30), all of which are important elements of delectable (and moist) foods. The book published in December.

Hunt's authority on the subject is years in the making. Even though she grew up with a mother who viewed cooking as drudgery, she couldn't help but embrace it once she arrived at Grove City College to study history and secondary education. It was one way to guarantee she could find something good to eat in a tiny college town.

"It was an act of rebellion and survival," she says with a laugh, noting that "The Joy of Cooking" was her bible.

She only grew more passionate after moving to New York City in 2000 to pursue a graduate degree in journalism at Columbia University. The many restaurants she explored there inspired her to enroll at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

See, Moist/Page B3