

More than just a bowl of noodles, ramen in Japan is an experience and a tourist attraction

By Yuri Kageyama
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Spicy, steaming, slurpy ramen might be everyone’s favorite Japanese food.

In Tokyo, long lines circle around blocks, and waiting an hour for your ramen is normal. What awaits might be just a dive, but a hot bowl of ramen rarely fails to hit the spot.

Often cooked right before your eyes behind dingy counters, the noodle dish starts here at around 1,000 yen (\$6.50), and comes in various flavors and local versions. There’s salty, soy-based “shoyu” or “miso” paste. Perhaps it’s red-hot spicy with a dash of chili. Sometimes there’s no soup at all but a sauce to dip the noodles in.

The curly noodles are lighter than the darker buckwheat “soba,” or “udon,” which are also usually flatter or thicker.

Global success

Ramen has also surged in popularity in the U.S., South Korea, and other countries. Retail sales in the United States have risen 72% since 2000, according to NielsenIQ, a sales tracker. In the 52 weeks ending April 13, Americans bought more than \$1.6 billion worth of ramen.

In restaurants, versions beyond the traditional soup are appearing, said Technomic, a research and consulting company for the restaurant industry. Del Taco, a Mexican chain, recently introduced Shredded Beef Birria Ramen, for example.

Packaged ramen that’s easily cooked in hot water at home is called instant noodles; it’s precooked and then dried. The story of how Momofuku Ando invented instant ramen in a backyard shed in 1958, when food was still scarce, is the stuff of legend in Japan. He went on to found the food giant Nissin Foods.

Although convenient, instant noodles aren’t the same as the ramen served at



restaurants.

The experience

Some Japanese frequent ramen shops twice or three times a week. They emerge, dripping with sweat, smacking their lips.

“I’m probably a talking bowl of ramen,” says Frank Striegl as he leads a dozen American tourists through the back alleys of Tokyo’s funky Shibuya district on what he calls “the ultimate ramen experience.”

The crowd is led behind a shabby doorway, sometimes down narrow stairs, to a dim-lit table where ramen gets served in tiny bowls, practically the size of a latte cup, or about a quarter of a regular ramen bowl. That’s so guests have enough room in their tummies to try out six different kinds of ramen, two at each spot during the tour.

One restaurant, Shinbusakiya, offers “Hokkaido classics” from the northernmost main island, while another, Nagi, offers “Fukuoka fusion,” from the southern main island of Kyushu. It includes a green ramen, similar to pasta al pesto. Syuuichi, which means “once a week,” features curry-flavored ramen.

“It’s not just, of course, about eating delicious ramen, but also learning about it,” said Striegl, a Filipino American who grew up in Tokyo. He calls ramen “people’s food.”

“A lot of countries around the world have their version of ramen in a way,” he said. “So I think because of that, it’s a dish that’s easy to understand. It’s a dish that’s easy to get behind.”

While the tour participants were relishing their noodles, Striegl outlined a brief history of ramen: Its roots date back to the samurai era, when a shogun took a fancy to Chinese noodles, setting off the localizing journey for ramen that continues today.

Katie Sell, a graduate student on Striegl’s tour, called ramen “a kind of comfort food, especially in the winter. Get a group of friends, go have some ramen, and just enjoy it.”

Kavi Patel, an engineer from New Jersey, said he was glad he included the humble ramen on his tour of Japan, along with more established attractions like the ancient capital of Kyoto and the deer park

SENSATIONAL SOUP. Kota Kobayashi prepares a bowl of noodles at his chain called “Ore No Ikiru Michi” in Tokyo. Spicy, steaming, slurpy ramen might be everyone’s favorite Japanese food. In Tokyo, long lines circle around blocks, and waiting an hour for your ramen is normal. What awaits might be just a dive, but a hot bowl of ramen rarely fails to hit the spot. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

in Nara. “I’m having good fun,” he said.

Adjusting to change

While ramen has never been more popular in Japan, ramen places have struggled because of the pandemic, the weakening the Japanese yen, and the higher cost of wheat imports and energy, according to a study by Tokyo Shoko Research.

One beneficiary of the pandemic is a home delivery service for frozen, professionally cooked ramen. Called takumen.com, it boasts some 500,000 subscribers in Japan.

Another Tokyo operation, Gourmet Innovation, has signed on 250 of the country’s top ramen joints to sell packaged versions of their soup, noodles, and toppings, to be heated up in boiling water and served at home.

Co-founder and executive Kenichi Nomaguchi, who hopes to expand his business overseas, says ramen and animation are Japan’s most successful exports.

Why ramen? Unlike pasta or curry, ramen is difficult to replicate at home, he said. Making it from scratch involves hours of cooking stock, with pork, beef, or chicken, various fish or bonito flakes, and “kombu” kelp. Some stock uses oysters.

Lots of variety

Besides the different soup stocks and flavors, onions, grated garlic, ginger, or sesame oil can be added for extra punch. Toppings can include bean sprouts, barbecued pork, boiled or raw eggs, seaweed, fermented bamboo shoots called “menma,” chopped green onions, cooked cabbage, snow peas, or corn.

Continued on page 7

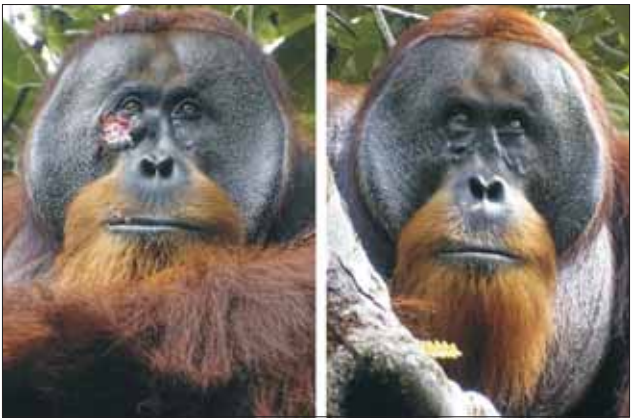
A wild orangutan used a medicinal plant to treat a wound, scientists say

By Christina Larson
The Associated Press

An orangutan appeared to treat a wound with medicine from a tropical plant — the latest example of how some animals attempt to soothe their own ills with remedies found in the wild, scientists reported.

Scientists observed Rakus pluck and chew up leaves of a medicinal plant used by people throughout Southeast Asia to treat pain and inflammation. The adult male orangutan then used his fingers to apply the plant juices to an injury on the right cheek. Afterward, he pressed the chewed plant to cover the open wound like a makeshift bandage, according to a new study in *Scientific Reports*.

Previous research has documented several species of great apes foraging for medicines in forests to heal themselves, but scientists hadn’t yet seen an animal treat



itself in this way.

“This is the first time that we have observed a wild animal applying a quite potent medicinal plant directly to a wound,” said co-author Isabelle Laumer, a biologist at

AMAZING APE. This combination of photos provided by the Suaq foundation shows a facial wound on Rakus (left image), a wild male Sumatran orangutan in Gunung Leuser National Park, Indonesia, on June 23, 2022, two days before he applied chewed leaves from a medicinal plant on his face, and on August 25, 2022 (right image), after the wound was barely visible. (Armas, Safruddin/Suaq foundation via AP)

the Max Planck Institute of Animal Behavior in Konstanz, Germany.

The orangutan’s intriguing behavior was recorded in 2022 by Ulil Azhari, a co-author and field researcher at the Suaq Project in Medan, Indonesia. Photographs show the animal’s wound closed within a month without any problems.

Scientists have been observing orangutans in Indonesia’s Gunung Leuser National Park since 1994, but they hadn’t previously seen this behavior.

“It’s a single observation,” said Emory University

Continued on page 18

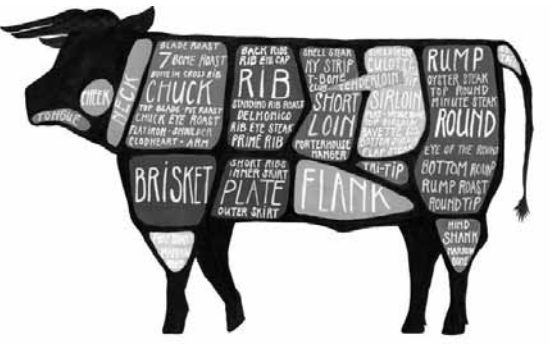
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