

# Culture Notes

## *Magic Ramen:*

*The Story of Momofuku Ando*

by Andrea Wang

Illustrated by Kana Urbanowicz

Little Bee Books, 2019

Non-fiction, set in Japan

2019 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

### Overview

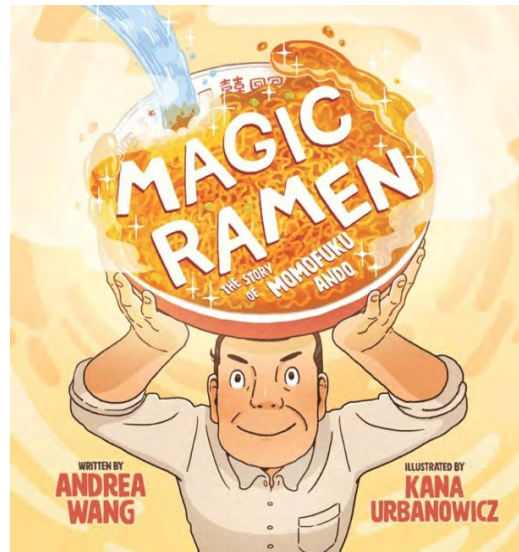
How did instant ramen (pronounced: RAH-men) become one of the most popular fast foods on the planet? *Magic Ramen* by Andrea Wang illustrates the humble beginnings of instant ramen in the story of Momofuku Ando (1910–2007) (pronounced: mow-MOW-fu-ku AHN-dough) and his quest to feed the people of Osaka (pronounced: OO-sah-kah) after World War II.

Only a year after the war ended, Osaka was still in ruins. On his way home from work one day, Momofuku Ando came across a long line of people, cold and starving. They were waiting at a black market ramen stall. It took hours for them to get a single bowl of the noodle soup. Food was already scarce, and the few who were lucky enough to have some money had to pay a steep price for ramen. This moment stuck with Ando, so much so that he spent the next twelve years experimenting in his kitchen, trying to make a new kind of ramen. It would be fast to make and full of the nutrients Osaka's people so desperately needed. Ando's noodles would be "anywhere, anytime" noodles.

In 1958, Ando finally succeeded in inventing *Chikin Ramen* (pronounced: CHEE-keen RAH-men), the first instant ramen. As instant ramen caught on and Ando was able to lower production costs, instant ramen became affordable and widely available. People loved how quick it was to make, and eventually became a huge hit. Ando founded a company, Nissin (pronounced: KNEE-sheen) Foods, and today it distributes his ramen (and many other products) around the world.

### Historical Context

Before Ando introduced instant ramen to the world, traditional ramen had already become popular across the nation. Originating in China, Japanese ramen was first developed in Chinatown in Yokohama. The word "ramen" was borrowed from the name for Chinese pulled noodles, or *lāmiàn* (pronounced: LAH-MEEyehn). However, ramen





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noodles are not actually pulled; they are cut, as they are in southern Chinese cities. This reflects the demographics of Chinese people living in Yokohama.

Southern Chinese noodle soups were topped with ingredients to suit Japanese tastes, which resulted in the ramen we know today. Broths such as soy, *miso* (pronounced: MEE-so; soybean paste), and *tonkotsu* (pronounced: tone-COAT-SUE); pork bone broth) are filled with noodles and topped with vegetables and pork or some other protein for a delightful meal. Yet the rise of ramen includes a rather dark chapter.

Since Osaka was a center of heavy industry in Japan, it was a strategic target for U.S. air raids. Over the course of World War II, with separate bombing raids decimated the city. Estimates put civilian deaths at over 10,000. As a result of the extensive firebombing, much of the city was reduced to rubble by the end of the war.

On top of the widespread destruction, Japan's 1945 rice crop failed, resulting in food shortages nationwide. The United States, now occupying Japan, pumped the market full of cheap wheat flour—the primary ingredient in ramen noodles—in an effort to prevent mass starvation. Although much of the flour was used for bread, some was diverted from commercial mills by *yakuza* (pronounced: YAH-koo-zah; gangsters) and into the black market. Yakuza would provide flour to illegal ramen stalls and extort the vendors for protection money, since the Occupation authorities did not allow outdoor food stalls. Under these restrictions, ramen vendors were arrested by the thousands during the Occupation.

When the U.S. loosened vendor restrictions and wheat flour exchange was no longer controlled, ramen stalls grew in popularity. Today, ramen is a cultural icon and one of Japan's most popular foods, synonymous with urban life.

### **Pronunciation Guide:**

Akemi: AH-keh-mee

Koki: KOH-kee

Mahō no ramen: mah-HOE no RAH-men

Masako: MAH-sah-koh

Osaka: OO-sah-kah

Suma: SUE-mah

Tempura: TEM-poo-rah



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Yatta: yah-TAH

### Additional Resource

The Story of Nissin Cup Noodles: <https://www.japan.travel/en/my/travelers-blog/the-story-nissin-cup-noodles/>

**Author:** Evelyn Seitz, researcher and translator.  
2024