My first encounter with ramen, as mentioned in the Introduction, was partly shaped by linguistic barriers. In my first year in Japan, I neither spoke nor read much Japanese. For weeks, each day after working as an assistant English teacher in a small fishing village in the northeastern prefecture of Iwate, I would walk through the tiny one-road town, exploring shops and sights, not really understanding any of the signs on the stores. To make things worse, the thick brogue of the local dialect rendered the relatively few words I called my “Japanese vocabulary” unintelligible to the town's residents. Among other obvious problems, I had a tough time finding places where I was sure I could eat. I explained my frustration to an English-speaking colleague who readily offered a solution: “Look for doors with noren, blue curtains, hanging over the entranceway. This curtain signifies that a restaurant is open for business.”

Armed with that simple advice I began discovering restaurants where I previously thought none had existed. All went deliciously well until I discovered that not all blue noren meant “restaurant.” One evening, as I was searching for an interesting-looking eatery, I noticed a blue noren hanging over the doorway of a traditional old house. I slid open the door, stepped in, took off my shoes in the sunken “genkan” entranceway and started down the hallway. I ignored the laundry hanging in the passage, a common sight in restaurants in small villages, which often dry towels, aprons and napkins wherever space permits. The tantalizing aromas led me down the hallway into a room where I stopped suddenly in my tracks. I had interrupted a family of five seated on the floor around a low table, happily eating their dinner. As this fact sank in, I backed up slowly, the family’s faces undoubtedly as dumbfounded as mine. That evening's lesson was that, while I was beginning to appreciate Japanese food, finding a place to eat it was proving far more difficult than I imagined, even with my new understanding of the secret of the blue noren.

How to Eat Ramen – Slurp!

As every ramen expert will tell you, ramen must be eaten hot. Piping hot. As any good ramen shop-owner also knows, it requires perfect timing,
setting the bowl down in front of the customer just after the noodles have boiled and the soup has been ladled out. Good ramen cannot under any circumstances be tepid and it must be served fresh. In short, good ramen is labor-intensive and time-consuming to make. Just how strenuous an activity it is can be seen from the grueling curriculum at the new center for studying how to make the freshest noodles and tastiest soup, located in the heartland island of Shikoku.

Fujii Kaoru’s “institute for higher learning about ramen” college runs a week-long 8am to 6pm program, sometimes including night courses, to teach the uninitiated the basic techniques of making perfect ramen. The school reveals how to cook noodles and how to make the essential broth base, where to buy quality ingredients and – equally important – how to financially manage your capital and attract more investment. Fujii’s goal in teaching the solid production values behind quality ramen and how to operate a good eatery is to raise the general level of noodle cuisine around Japan. He is relentless in this pursuit. He briefly explained his philosophy to me, early one morning before an onslaught of business meetings: “There are no limits to how tasty ramen can get and our duty is to pursue a better and tastier product. Ramen is slowly taking over the world and one can see that in our growing student body. We are taking in over 300 students a year from all over the world, including America, Thailand, Australia, Korea and other countries.”

But how do you eat ramen? Historically, diners sucked the noodles in as quickly as possible and then tipped up the bowl and drank the soup. Eating quickly in this fashion seems to have been a mainstay of Japanese culture even in early times. Sei Shōnagon, a female writer of the late-ninth and early-tenth centuries and author of the *Pillow Book*, a record of personal observations at court, described how the masses ate:

> The moment the food was brought out, they fell on the soup bowl and gulped down the contents. Then they pushed the bowl aside and polished off the vegetables. I was wondering whether they were going to leave their rice; a second later there wasn’t a grain left in their bowls.

While the “guzzling” approach is still in evidence in most ramen stores and fast-food eateries – both traditional and contemporary – the volume of slurping may have toned down a bit. Each group has an arsenal of tools at its disposal, including websites, books and a growing mountain of

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