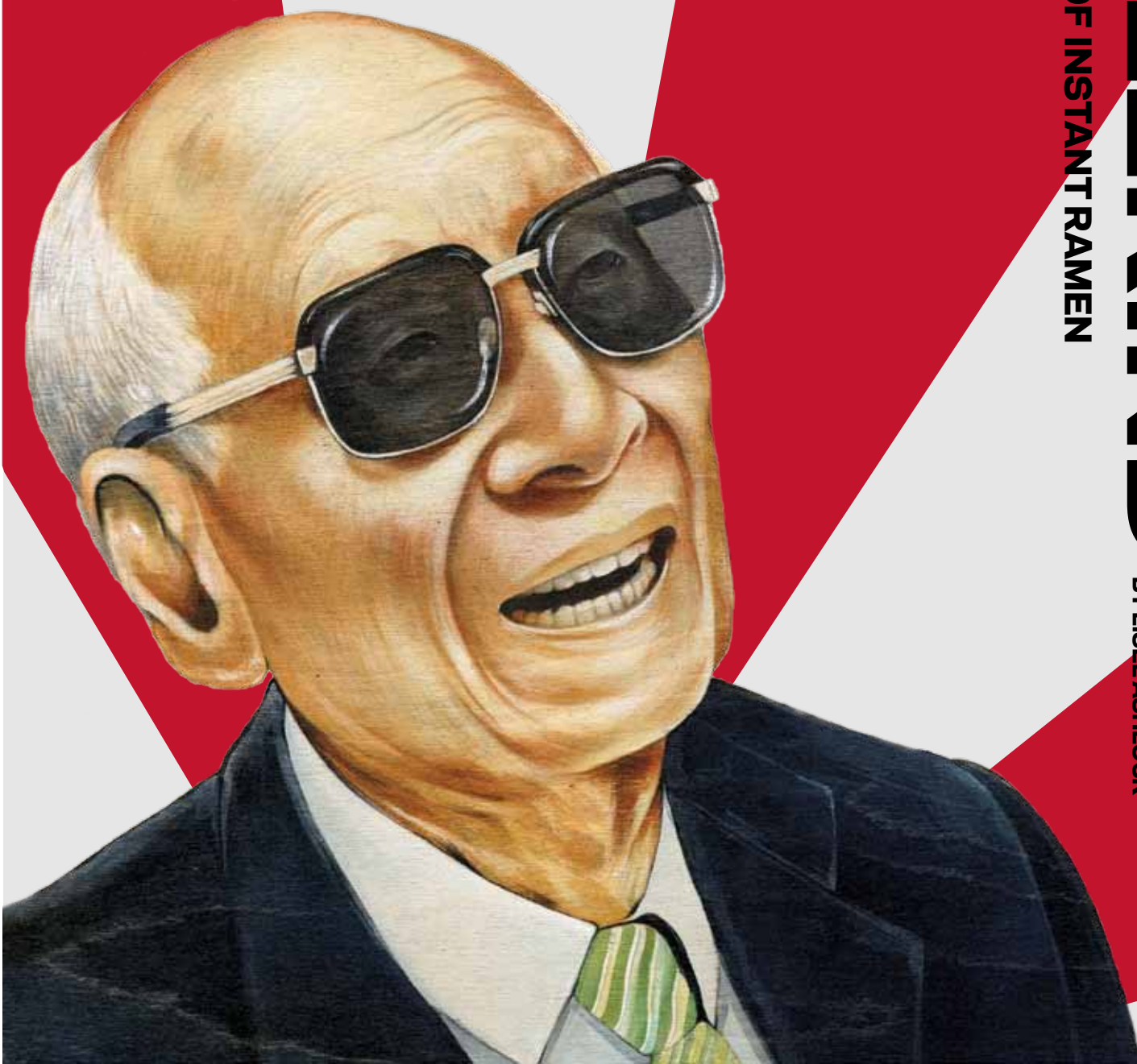


MAN K I N D I S N O O D L E K I N D

MOMOFUKU ANDO AND

THE INVENTION OF INSTANT RAMEN

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MOMOFUKU ANDO PORTRAIT
BY LISEL ASHLOCK



In the last hundred years, Japan has given the world a number of remarkable inventions—the Walkman, the bullet train, the digital camera, the fuel-efficient car, karaoke. But in a poll conducted in December 2000, the Japanese people chose instant ramen as the greatest Japanese innovation of the twentieth century.

And as unlikely as it seems, instant ramen's creator, Momofuku Ando, had exactly such ambitions in mind. Instant ramen may seem like a trivial consumer product, but it has helped millions of people survive economic and natural disasters, which is no small accomplishment. And in the aftermath of Japan's recent tsunami and nuclear crisis, with instant ramen feeding thousands of displaced citizens, Ando's legacy has proven its importance once more.

On August 15, 1945, the day after Japan surrendered to the Allies, Ando was walking through his hometown of Osaka, surveying the damage wrought by years of war. The city had been spared the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it was devastated nevertheless. Aerial bombings had destroyed the factory and two office buildings that Ando had built, leaving him in search of a new occupation. During his walk, he stumbled across a group of people gathered in the wreckage behind the train station, lined up outside a makeshift ramen stall and waiting for something to eat. Ando thought: People are willing to go through this much suffering for a bowl of ramen? As it turns out, noodle soup is a near-universal comfort food, and Japanese people turned to ramen for comfort.

Food shortages continued to plague Japan for years after World War II, and Ando concluded that hunger was the most pressing issue of his time. He believed that “peace will come to the world when all its people have enough to eat.” Ando wanted to help Japan feed its entire population.

He was not obviously suited to the task; he had become a bank president after the war. But in 1957, when the bank failed and Ando lost his job, he undertook the monumental project of filling the national pantry.

To start, he drew up a set of criteria for the perfect postwar food. It had to be:

- Tasty
- Nonperishable
- Ready in less than three minutes
- Economical
- Safe and healthy

Ando remembered the demand for ramen he'd witnessed more than a decade earlier. Then he got to work making a mass-produced noodle soup that would satisfy the harried workers of an increasingly industrial country.

Ando spent a year trying to preserve ramen noodles without success; the texture of the rehydrated noodles

was never right. But one day, the story goes, he threw some noodles into the tempura oil his wife had heated to make dinner, only to discover that frying not only dehydrated the noodles, but also created tiny perforations that made them cook more quickly. Instant noodles were born.

And so, at the age of forty-eight, Ando embarked on his third and final career: Mr. Noodle. “I came to understand that all of my failure—all of my shame—was like muscle added to my body,” he said later. He’d felt terribly guilty when his bank failed, and instant ramen promised a kind of redemption. Ando promoted his product with a nearly religious zeal, as though he were on a crusade to feed the world—to end hunger with ramen.

When Chikin Ramen, Ando’s first product, hit the shelves in 1958, the Japanese public initially

saw it as a luxury product—it cost slightly more than fresh soup at the local ramen shop. But consumers quickly embraced the convenience of making ramen at home, and sales took off. Instant ramen became a staple food in Japan, and other companies entered the market.

Ando, in turn, looked for international customers. Undaunted by the American consumer’s ignorance of ramen and even chopsticks, Ando declared “Let them eat it with forks!”

On a business trip to the United States in 1966, Ando had his next great idea. According to legend, Ando was demonstrating his product to supermarket executives in Los Angeles when he observed them repurposing their Styrofoam coffee cups as ramen bowls. Intrigued, Ando replicated these makeshift containers for a

new product, which took five more years to develop. When Cup Noodles debuted in 1971, they were an immediate sensation: Nissin, Ando’s company, has now sold more than 20 billion units. Instant ramen packaged in its very own heat-resistant container—what could be more convenient?

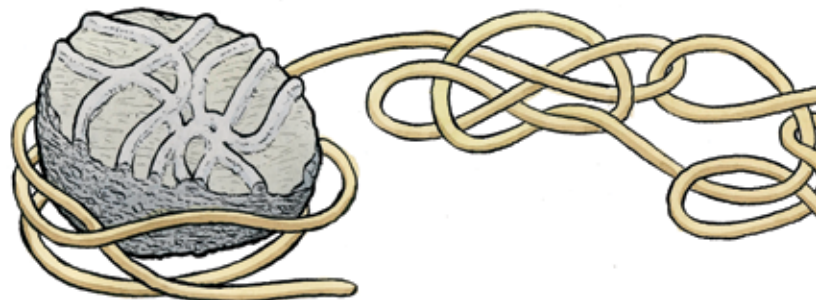
Space ramen, that’s what. Ando developed “Space Ram,” a vacuum-packed instant ramen made especially for Japanese astronaut Soichi Noguchi’s trip on the *Discovery* space shuttle, in 2005. Space Ram is edible even at zero gravity, with a broth thick enough to prevent dispersal and smaller noodles that can be cooked without boiling water. When Ando died in 2007, Noguchi delivered a eulogy to a baseball stadium full of mourners, including two former prime ministers of Japan. One of the former premiers

A TIMELINE OF RAMEN DEVELOPMENT

TEXT BY KAREN LEIBOWITZ

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT TEPLIN

-2000 BC—Invention of noodles. Fossils discovered near China’s Yellow River suggest that the first noodles were made during the Late Neolithic period. Scientists speculate that the noodles were made from a combination of foxtail and broomcorn millet.



praised Ando as “the creator of a culinary culture that postwar Japan can be proud of.” Momofuku Ando turned instant ramen into a national symbol, and instant ramen turned Momofuku Ando into a national hero.

Like modern Japan, Ando rose from the tragedy of World War II to become an economic powerhouse. As the head of Nissin Foods, Ando developed the company from a personal hobby into a multinational corporation, one that now earns more than \$3 billion in annual net sales.

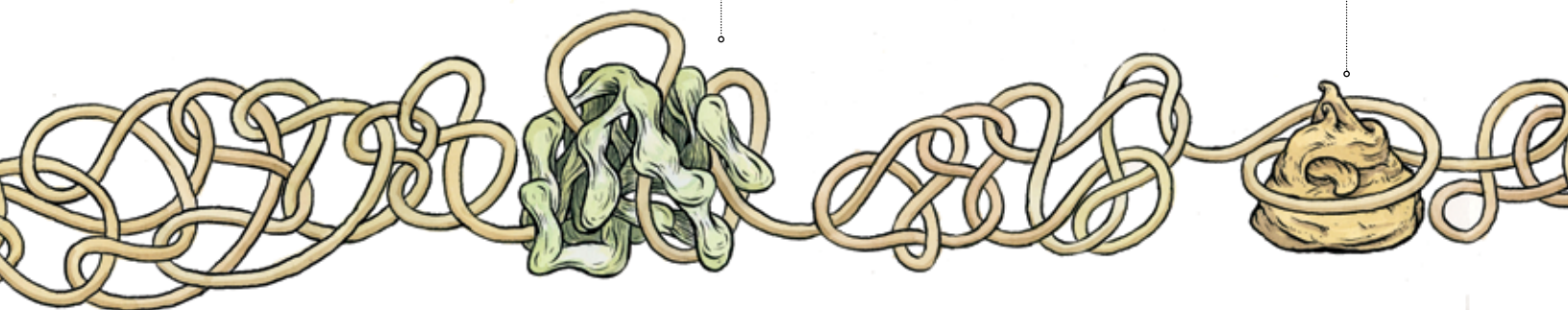
The day before his death, Ando visited the Nissin factory in Osaka to give his annual New Year’s message, though he had officially retired in 2005, at the age of ninety-five. Over the years, Ando had used these speeches to articulate his thoughts on ramen, which had gradually developed into an ex-

Ultimately, ramen has become a unifying symbol of sustenance around the world. Ando wanted to design a food that would sustain human life through the most difficult times, and instant ramen does so with spectacular efficiency.

pansive and inspiring philosophy. (A book of his collected wisdom was distributed to all 6,500 attendees at his funeral.) For Ando, “the fundamental misunderstanding of humanity [is] believing that we can achieve all of our desires, without limitation.” Ando was acutely conscious that resources are limited relative to human demands. In culinary terms, that means prioritizing nutrition over nuance. Instant ramen may not taste exactly like fresh ramen, but it just might feed the world, and shouldn’t that count for something?

Ultimately, ramen has become a unifying symbol of sustenance around the world. Ando wanted to design a food that would sustain human life through the most difficult times, and instant ramen does so with spectacular efficiency. As of 2008, global consumption of instant ramen reached 94 billion packages per year—that’s an average of fourteen bowls per person. In the modern world, instant ramen has truly become the food of the people. As Momofuku Ando put it, “Mankind is Noodlekind.” ♦

300–400 ac—Invention of *hishio* in China. Derived from fermented soybeans, *hishio* is an antecedent of both *miso* and *shōyu*. Early *hishio* was salty and pungent in flavor, porridge-like in texture, and dark brown in color.



701 AD—Japan begins to regulate sale and consumption of hishio and miso.

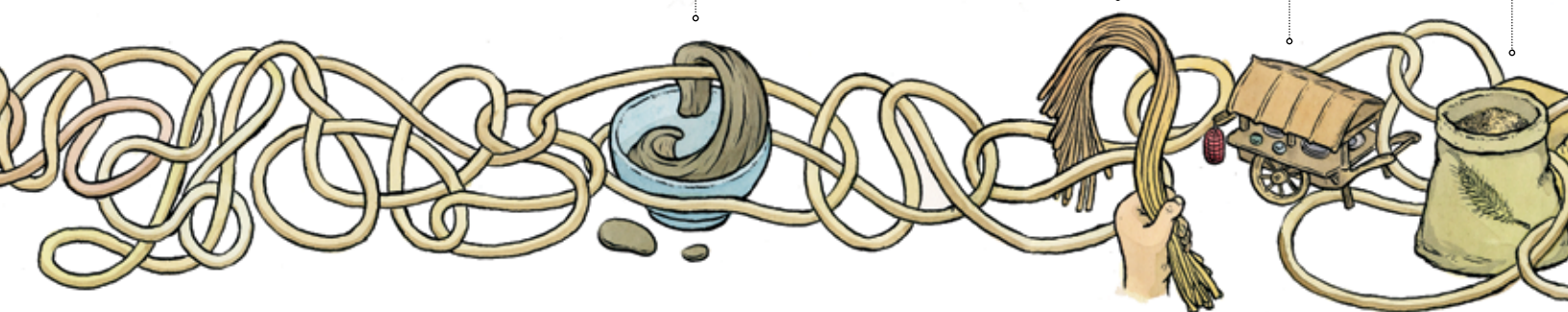
1500–1700—Development of shōyu. The first written record of *tamari-shōyu* appears in 1559. Manufacturers outside Tokyo add roasted wheat—which darkened the sauce considerably—and rename their product *koi-kuchi* (“dark mouth”) shōyu. *Usukuchi* (“pale mouth”) shōyu is invented outside Kyoto in 1666. Shōyu broth is recommended in a cookbook published two years later.

1868–1912—The introduction of *shina soba* (“Chinese style” soup). Shina soba later comes to be known as ramen. Some linguists speculate that “ramen” is a Japanese adaptation of the Chinese term for hand-pulled noodles, *la mien*, though there are competing theories as to the origin of the name.

1923—First ramen carts and street stalls appear in Tokyo and Yokohama after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. A Chinese-food craze in 1920s Japan helps popularize Chinese-style soup.

1939–1945 (World War II)—Japan enters the war in 1941, with a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and is the last Axis power to surrender, in August 1945. In response to Japan’s postwar food shortages, the United States supplies Japan with a large quantity of wheat, leading the Japanese government to encourage the production of wheat noodles.

~1955—Miso ramen invented in Sapporo. Miso ramen originally emerges as a light and flavorful noodle soup; an optional garnish of butter and a meatier soup base come into fashion in the 1960s, reducing any claims to healthfulness and increasing its popularity.



1950s—“Ramen” displaces “shina soba” as the preferred term for noodle soup.

1954—Kazuo Yamagishi introduces *tsukemen*. Yamagishi trained as a *soba* chef before getting into the ramen business. According to legend, when he prepared noodles for himself, he did so in the style of *mori soba*: chilled noodles in one bowl, a heavily seasoned dipping broth in another. Eventually the dish made its way onto the menu, and *tsukemen* was born. Yamagishi opened his shop, Higashi-Ikebukuro Taishōken, in 1961, establishing an enduring Tokyo ramen dynasty.

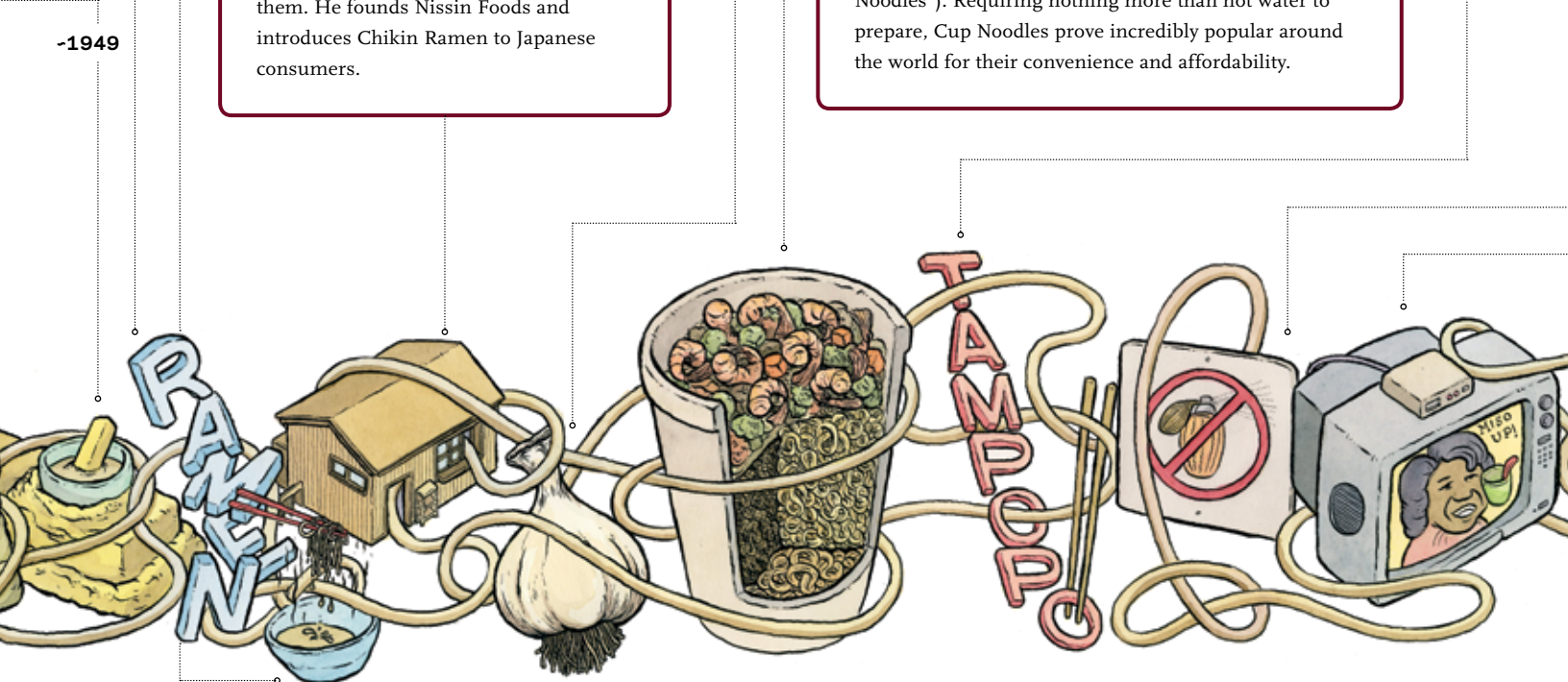
1958—Momofuku Ando invents instant ramen in his shed. Ando discovers that frying noodles parcooks and dehydrates them. He founds Nissin Foods and introduces Chikin Ramen to Japanese consumers.

1968—Takumi Yamada opens the first Ramen Jiro near Keio University in Tokyo. Jiro is renowned for its massive portions, oily broth, heavy hand with garlic, and long lines. Ramen Jiro eventually expands into a chain with more than thirty locations, which promote six guiding principles:

1. Live purely, truthfully, and beautifully. Go for walks,

1. Live purely, truthfully, and beautifully. Go for walks, read books, and smile when saving money. On the weekends, fish and practice copying sutras.
2. For the world, for people, for society.
3. Love & peace & togetherness.
4. Sorry, but you've got to have the courage to speak your mind.
5. Disorder of flavor is disorder of the heart, disorder of the heart is disorder of the family, disorder of the family is disorder of society, disorder of society is disorder of the country, and disorder of the country is disorder of the universe.
6. You want garlic with that?

1971—Cup Noodles introduced. After five years of development, Nissin unveils the new product with the English-inspired name of Kappu Nudoru (“Cup Noodles”). Requiring nothing more than hot water to prepare, Cup Noodles prove incredibly popular around the world for their convenience and affordability.



1985—Director Juzo Itami releases *Tampopo*. Ostensibly a comedy, *Tampopo* parodies Western-movie clichés in its depiction of a young widow’s quest to learn the art of ramen-making, but its vignettes about dedicated eaters across the social spectrum reveal a true appreciation of the finer points of ramen.

1986—Sano Minoru opens Shinasobaya in Yokohama. Over time, he earns the nickname “Ramen Nazi” by establishing strict rules: no conversation, no cell phones, no smoking, and no perfume in his restaurant. Sano is also now known as the “Ramen Demon” for his temper and aggressive behavior toward young aspiring cooks on reality-television shows. He is not to be confused with the retired championship figure skater of the same name.

1992—James Brown appears in advertisements for Cup Noodles on Japanese television, singing alternate lyrics to “Sex Machine.” Brown sings “Misoppa!” or “Miso up!” in place of the iconic “Get up!”

Mid-late-2000s

- Tsukemen boom. An annual Tsukemen Fair in Tokyo brings dozens of shops together to serve their takes on this ramen variation.
- Ramen Jiro’s popularity explodes in the 2000s, leading fans to dub themselves “Jirolians.” In 2010, a book on how to open a Ramen Jiro is published in Japanese.
- The *kodawari* movement takes root. Ivan Orkin of Ivan Ramen attributes this to the influence of Sano Minoru. Ivan says, “In the *kodawari* ramen world, of which I like to think I am a part, shop owners differentiate themselves by seeking out unique and high-quality ingredients—specially sourced chickens and pork, salt produced on a tiny island off Okinawa, small-producer soy sauce, water filtered through complex charcoal systems. For years (and even now, in many places), ramen was an extension of the fast-food business—huge corporate chains, product made in factories and shipped in plastic to retail outlets. Sano and a few other pioneers were the ones who allowed ramen to earn its stripes as a cuisine.”

Early 2000s—“Double-soup” ramen, which blends meat and fish broths, gains a foothold. Adding fish-and-seaweed broth to shio or tonkotsu soup produces an additional layer of flavor.

