Japan's Use of Flour Began with Noodles

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Noodles Introduced by Zen Priests

In previous issues of FOOD CULTURE, Hirotaka Matsumoto described the globalization of sushi with stories and photos from his own travels to sushi restaurants and stores in thirty-five cities in twenty-five countries. He provided detailed reports of the tremendous expansion of sushi throughout the world, indicating that there are 14,000 to 18,000 restaurants and stores selling sushi around the world.

In the course of its history, the foods and diet of Japan have assimilated aspects of the food cultures of many countries. More than any other, the use of flour, introduced from China during the Middle Ages (end of the twelfth century to the end of the sixteenth century) took firm root in Japan, making noodles a food with an importance comparable to rice, the staple food of the Japanese diet. In this issue, we begin to trace the historical development of noodles, focusing on the flour processing techniques brought from China by Japanese Zen priests, and the process that made noodles a major Japanese food.

Introduction

Since ancient times, the Japanese have included the grains foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*), millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) and rice in their diet. The Japanese diet underwent three major modifications, brought about by contact with foreign food cultures, especially those that use flour.

First was the introduction of an unleavened bread-like food, known as *bing* in Chinese, during the Nara period (710–784), brought about by contact with China's Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties. Next was the introduction of noodles, brought about by contact with China's Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) over a period beginning around the end of the Heian period (794–ca. 1185) until the early Kamakura period (ca. 1185–1333). Finally was the adoption of bread in the Japanese diet following Japan's defeat in World War II during the Showa era (1926–1989). These three encounters with foreign food cultures utilizing flour not only led to significant transformations of the Japanese diet, but also changes in society itself. Based on information gathered from diaries and other documents written during the Middle Ages, this article presents a history of noodles in Japan and explains the introduction of foreign flour foods, especially noodles, as well as the social changes Japan's second encounter with flour foods triggered.

The establishment of flour foods is dependent on three essential elements. These elements are the availability of appropriate grains, a means to grind grain into flour, and a way to use flour to produce a product that is suitable for eating. If any of these three are in absent, the use of flour in the diet does not take root. The introduction of foods made with flour began during the Nara and Heian periods, when the emperor encouraged the cultivation of wheat and farmers accepted the challenge. Initially the Japanese attempted the *bing* introduced by the Chinese. However, Japanese policy makers had overlooked the necessity of importing the quern-stones used to grind the wheat into flour, causing this first introduction of flour into the Japanese diet to fail.

Introduction of Quern-Stones and Flour Foods

The history of noodles in Japan begins with Zen priests represented by Eisai (1141–1215), founder of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, and Dogen (1200–1253), founder of the Soto school of Zen. Seeking to revitalize Buddhism in Japan at a time when it had become quite stagnant, the priests crossed the sea to Zhejiang province in Jiangnan (region to the south of the Yangtze river) in China. The Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) government, ousted from Kaifeng by the nomadic Jin dynasty (1115–1234) from the northeast of China, moved their capital to Hangzhou in Zhejiang province, to establish the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). This relocation of the capital benefited not only the people of the Jiangnan region, but eventually the Japanese as well. The flour food culture that developed in northern China was transported all at once to the rice cultivating regions of the south.

The quern-stones that made the production of flour possible during the Tang dynasty were also brought to the Jiangnan region. In addition, rice farmers in Jiangnan had invented rice hullers. Changes in regional dialect indicate that noodles suited the palate of the Jiangnan people extremely well and that they had become extremely popular in the region. (It was during this time of considerable change that over a hundred priests, including Eisai and Dogen,visited the region.)

In his second visit to China in 1187, Eisai studied Zen for five years at two monasteries, one on Mt. Tiantai and one on Mt. Tiantong, both in Zhejiang province. During this time, he also learned of the uses of powdered green tea, known in Japan as *matcha*. After returning to Japan, Eisai presented the shogun, Minamoto no Sanetomo (1192–1219), with *Kissa Yojoki*, a work he had authored, and a cup of *matcha* tea that he had made from tea leaves ground using a hand mill.

Dogen arrived in China in 1223, and studied Zen in the

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Jingde-si monastery on Mt. Tiantong in Zhejiang province for five years. His works, *Tenzo Kyokun* and *Fushuku Hanpo*, include accounts of noodles and not only guided his disciples to eat noodles, but also provided instructions as to how noodles should be eaten.

Portrait of Zen master Eisai (Property of Kennin-ji Temple of the Rinzai school of Buddhism)

Following Buddhist precepts, apprentice monks ate rice gruel for breakfast and steamed rice for lunch. Nothing was eaten after noon. However, the Zen school, traditionally believed to have been established by the Indian prince turned monk, Bodhidharma (ca. early fifth century), assigned monks hard labor as part of their routine. After hard work, the monks were given a small amount of food as a sort of snack. Since rice, the staple food, was prohibited by Buddhist precepts, flour foods such as noodles and steamed buns provided excellent alternatives. During their five years spent in Chinese monasteries, Eisai and Dogen learned not only the tenets of Zen, but also the culture of Zen monasteries, the Zen diet and table manners, and the preparation of green tea, all of which they took home to Japan.

Portrait of Zen master Dogen (Property of Somu-cho, the general office of the Soto school of Buddhism)

In addition to the information, given above that was shared by Eisai and Dogen, both also mentioned the use of seasonings. In his first volume of *Kissa Yojoki*, Eisai recommended the use of five types of flavors sweet, spicy, sour, salty, and bitter to maintain good health. Dogen recommended six flavors sweet, spicy, sour, salty, bitter, and light be used conservatively to achieve subtle seasoning. Prior to these two Zen priests, no one in Japan had ever taken enough interest in the art of cooking and seasoning to write about them. It could be said that the art of cooking and seasoning, still applicable in the present day, stems from these two priests.

What sort of noodles did Eisai and Dogen bring back to Japan from China? The book *Kyoka Hitsuyo Jirui Zenshu*, believed to have been compiled during the period beginning with the end of the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the beginning of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), is a sort of encyclopedia of domestic life that describes the diet of the common people around the time Eisai and Dogen were in China. It contains a chapter on moist flour foods and gives recipes for a number of types of noodles and steamed buns. The following recipes are taken from this book, several of which coincide with the earliest Japanese noodle recipes. This will give us a clear picture of how noodles were established, and then developed, in Japan.

Women grinding flour (*Hyakunin Joro Shinasadame*, property of the National Diet Library)

Noodles Introduced in *Kyoka Hitsuyo Jirui Zenshu*

Let's look at a few noodle recipes found in *Kyoka Hitsuyo Jirui Zenshu*.

Suikamen

Mix water, oil, and salt with flour and use a rod to knead the mixture until it becomes elastic. Divide into lengths as thick as a finger and soak in water. Stretch the lengths to achieve the desired thickness and boil in hot water.

Somen

Use only high-grade flour. During the spring, summer, and autumn, water should come directly from a well. Mix oil with the water and then add to the flour. Knead the mixture well. Continue kneading, adding oil a little at a time. Divide the dough and stretch each portion to achieve a strand with a diameter roughly equivalent to that of a heavy chopstick. Make a number of these strands with a consistent length and diameter. Lay the strands out straight and cover with oiled paper. After the strands have set for a while, stretch the strands between two sticks about the size of chopsticks to stretch them even further to produce fine noodles, and then dry. An alternative to this method is to knead the dough without adding oil and then divide the dough into portions and roll each portion, sprinkling frequently with rice flour, to produce fine noodles. Be sure that all rolled noodles are of the same diameter, and then dry.

Tettaimen

Add water and salt to flour and knead the mixture. Roll the dough until it is very thin, and then cut into wide noodles.

This noodle was mistakenly referred to as *kishimen* or *himokawa* in Japan.

Koshimen

Crush shrimp and strain to acquire a clear liquid. Add this liquid to flour and knead. Roll the dough until it is very thin, cut into lengths and boil. As the lengths cook, they naturally turn red.

Suiromen

Squeeze new leaves of the pagoda tree (*Styphnolobium japonicum*), add the juice to flour and knead. Roll out the dough and cut into thin slices. The resulting noodles are sweet and yellow-green in color. *Suiromen* is related to Japan's udon noodles, made of wheat flour.

Konton Wrapper

Add saltwater to flour and knead. Divide the dough into small balls and roll the balls into thin, round sheets, slightly thinner around the edge. Place filling in the center of the sheets and use water to seal the edges around the filling.

The noodles described here can be divided into two groups

The chapter covering moist flour foods in *Kyoka Hitsuyo Jirui Zenshu*, which was widely read by the people of China during the period spanning the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (1279-1912). This chapter shows the great variety of noodles eaten in China from ancient times. (Property of the National Diet Library)

based on the method used for making them. The first group, including *suikamen* and *somen*, are made by stretching dough. The second group, including *tettaimen*, *suiromen*, and *koshimen*, are made by cutting dough. Of the three primary methods for making noodles, only the press method is missing. Common noodles made using the press method include Korean cold noodles and Italian spaghetti.

Earliest Records of Noodle Terms

The earliest Japanese records known to contain terms related to noodles are listed below in chronological order.

Men (noodle), Tenzo Kyokun (Dogen, 1237)

"Tomorrow I'll prepare *menjiru* (noodle soup) as it is a day for holding public memorial services. I came to the Japanese ship to buy shiitake mushrooms to use in the broth."

Dogen arrived in China in 1223 and remained on his ship until receiving permission to come ashore. The account mentioned above is the words of an old Chinese monk in charge of preparing meals, recorded by the Zen priest Dogen. However, this is considered the first appearance of the word *men* in a Japanese document.

Men-rui (general reference to all types of noodles), *Fushuku Hanpo* (Dogen, 1246)

"To take rice from a bowl, grasp about seven grains of rice between the thumb and forefinger of the right hand, and place them on a spatula. *Hei* and *men-rui* should be about half the size of a coin for eating."

Fushuku Hanpo describes the rules and etiquette observed by apprentice monks in Zen monasteries. During Dogen's stay, noodles became a part of the everyday diet at Eihei-ji monastery. The *hei* Dogen refers to is the Chinese flour food, *bing*, not the *mochi* rice cake typically served as a New Year's dish in Japan. During the Nara (710–784) and Heian (794–ca. 1185) periods, the Chinese character for *men* originally meant flour. Dogen changed the meaning of this character to noodle, the meaning it still holds today.

Somen (extremely fine noodles, similar to vermicelli), *Moromori-ki* (the diary of Nakahara Moromori, from the January 4, 1340 entry)

"As with every year, we had our first baths today. It was so nice. A monk brought some *somen* and other things."

Moromori wrote that a monk visited him at his home in Kyoto and gave him what the monk called noodles made of wheat flour. Moromori had never seen these noodles before and, being unsure of the name, referred to them as *somen*, literally wheat noodles, in his diary. In the later passage of February 10, 1340, Moromori wrote that a monk from Daigo-ji Temple also brought him noodles that even the monk could not name. Moromori indicated these noodles using different Chinese characters than he had in the previous passage. Initially historians thought this must have been a mistake, but later records indicate that both sets of Chinese characters, though different from those used today, were used to refer to *somen*. Therefore, Moromori's diary is considered the first appearance of the word *somen*.

Uton (today's *udon* noodles), *Kagen-ki* (from the July 7, 1347 entry)

"The presentation of Kaiken's reward for service in last year's battle was held at Sangyo-in. Three hot dishes were served with sake. The dishes were bamboo shoots, *uton*, and wheat gluten dumplings."

Kagen-ki is a record from Horyu-ji Temple that spans the sixty years from 1305 to 1364. The entry noted above records a ceremony held for a soldier monk, named Kaiken, at which he was rewarded for distinguished service in the battle between the northern and southern imperial courts.

It was long an established belief that the Chinese characters used to note *uton* changed over time, first with characters that described a variety of Chinese flour foods introduced to Japan during the Nara period, and then to characters indicating that *uton* were noodles that were boiled and served hot, and then finally to the Japanese hiragana characters, *udon*, used today. However, passages in other documents clarify the fact that the differences in early Chinese characters used in fact indicate different flour foods that already existed in Japan during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). To date, *Kagen-ki* is considered the first Japanese record in which the term *uton*, or *udon*, was used.

Hiyamugi (finer noodles usually served cold), *Noritoki-kyo-ki* (diary of Yamashina Noritoki, from the June 19, 1405 entry)

"Honored by the presence of Minamoto no Saido. Offered *hiyamugi*. Takahashi also present."

As a side note, another set of Chinese characters used to indicate *hiyamugi* first appeared in *Zenrin Kouta*, compiled by Ryoyo Shogei (1394–1420), a priest of the Jodo-shu, or Pure Land school of Buddhism. These characters were included, along with many other terms describing various types of noodles and flour foods, in a passage jesting about the prosperity of the Zen school at the time by describing Zen priests slandering one another for their poor skill in making these dishes. The year in which that entry was actually made is unknown, however, we may assume that 1420, the year in which Ryoyo Shogei died, is the latest date the characters used by Shogei were used in a Japanese document.

Soba (buckwheat noodles), *Onryo-ken Nichiroku* (from the October 12, 1438 entry)

"Received a box of *matsutake* mushrooms and a box of *soba* from Shokoku-ji Temple's Rokuon-in Temple."

Onryo-ken Nichiroku is the official record of Shokoku-ji Temple's Rokuon-in Temple. The record was kept by Kikei Shinzui from 1435 to 1466, and by Kisen Shusho from 1484 to 1493. The passage quoted above is considered the first men-

tion of the word *soba* in Japanese documents.

Kirimugi (cut noodles), *Daijoro Onna no Koto* (1450)

Soba (buckwheat noodles)	– *Aoi*
Soba no kayu (buckwheat porridge)	– *Usuzumi*
Somen (very fine noodles like vermicelli)	– *Zoro*
Hiyamugi (fine noodles usually served cold)	– *Tsumetai zoro*
Kirimugi (cut noodles)	– *Kirizoro*

Daijoro Onna no Koto notes the special terms used by ladies serving at the imperial court, including those for noodles cited above. *Kirimugi* noodles presumably emerged around the mid-15th century, and were made using generally the same method as today's cut noodles. That is, the dough was kneaded by hand and then cut into noodles. This method was used during the Nara period, and later revived in Zen monasteries.

A kitchen in which *somen* is served. This illustration provides a hint at the color of the dipping sauce used during the Middle Ages. (*Boki Ekotoba* 13, property of the National Diet Library)

In referencing various ancient documents, the author believes that both *hiyamugi* and *udon* were originally made by stretching dough into noodles, and that the cutting method was introduced around the mid-15th century. Presumably, that is why such terms as *kirimugi* began appearing in ancient records of this time.

Suikamen, *Yamashina-ke Raiki* (Osawa Hisamori, Osawa Shigetane, et al., from the February 24, 1468 entry)

The Osawa family was in charge of managing an estate owned by the noble Yamashina family. *Yamashina-ke Raiki* is a fifty-year record spanning the years 1412 to 1492 (records for fifty of those years have been lost), made by the Osawas. The record-keeper in 1468 was Shigetane. The February 24, 1468 entry by Shigetane is the first appearance of the term *suikamen* in Japanese documents.

Sobakayumochii, *Yamashina-ke Raiki* (Osawa Hisamori, Osawa Shigetane, et al., from the March 8, 1468 entry)

"Shukubei and I were ordered to prepare *sobakayumochii* by an officer from the court guard office."

The *sobakayumochii* to which Shigetane refers is known today as *sobakaki* (soba dumpling). The *soba no kayu* (buckwheat noodle porridge) in *Daijoro Onna* no Koto, cited above, is made by boiling buckwheat flour in water. Contrary to popular belief, *soba no kayu* is not the same dish as the *sobakayumochii* to which Shigetane refers. *Sobakayumochii*, or *sobakaki*, was made using a higher concentration of buckwheat flour to produce a dough-like substance that was shaped into dumplings. At the time, *soba no kayu* and *sobakayumochii* were the only dishes that used buckwheat flour.

Sobamochi, *Onryo-ken Nichiroku* (from the December 2, 1489 entry)

"Lunch, consisting of two soups, six dishes, and *sake*, was served to the visitors. I had *sobamochi*, two sweets, some tea, and then I left."

As the practice of serving simple meals to visitors to Zen monasteries spread, noodles became more common in Japanese society. *Sobamochi* was made by kneading buckwheat flour dough and rolling it into balls. Vegetables may have been mixed into the dough, and it was presumably eaten like today's *mochi* rice cakes.

Sobakiri (cut buckwheat noodles), Josho-ji Monjo (from the February 10, 1574 entry)

"Repairs at Josho-ji Temple in Kiso began with an offering of *sobakiri*."

The term *sobakiri* was originally thought to have made its appearance in a 1614 passage from the diary of a priest at Taga Shrine in present-day Shiga prefecture. However, the book *Tsurutsuru Monogatari*, published in late May 1989, states that *soba* (buckwheat noodles) had already become a common dish, known as *sobakiri* to even the general public, by the Tensho era (1573–1593). This premise was based on extensive research over many years. Five years after the publication of this book, the premise was proven in a newspaper article.

The December 13, 1992 issue of the Shinano Mainichi Shimbun reported the discovery of historical records, those containing the quote at the beginning of this section, under the headline, "Japan's Oldest Historical Accounts Found in the Kiso Region–*Sobakiri* in the Shinshu Region Dates Back to warring States" (the Kiso region is the southern part of present-day Nagano prefecture, the Shinshu region is present-day Nagano prefecture, and the Warring States period was ca. 1493–ca. 1573).

A review of the first appearances of noodle-related terms in ancient Japanese documents shows that a great many noodle terms had already been introduced during the Middle Ages, before the Edo period (1603–1867). In comparing Japanese noodles with the noodles introduced in *Kyoka Hitsuyo Jirui Zenshu*, it is clear that Japanese noodles were originally introduced from China's Southern Song dynasty. Noodle types mentioned in ancient Japanese documents, and which originated in Japan during the Middle Ages, include udon, *hiyamugi, kirimugi*, and *soba*.

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