

Instant Noodles—30 Years and Counting

By Hiroyuki Yamamuro

This year marks the 30th anniversary of one of Japan's most important cultural artifacts: the instant noodle.

Instant *ramen*, dehydrated Chinese-style noodles that spring to rubbery life when immersed in boiling water, have become one of the staples of Japanese life. As many as 4.5 billion helpings of the noodles, packed in styrofoam cups or gaudy cellophane packets, are slurped down annually in Japan alone. Add in instant *ramen* produced in other countries, and total production soars to an astonishing 13 billion helpings every year.

Instant *ramen* wasn't always so well accepted. At the time of its origins back in 1958, Japan was still a poor country, and Tokyo was a magnet for ambitious youngsters from the countryside in search of a university education. Living in shabby 4.5-tatami mat rooms (roughly 3 meters square) with a single naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling, they would work odd jobs to pay their way through school. Today those students are the elite of corporate Japan, living in apartments and houses brimming over with gas ranges, microwave ovens and automated bread makers. But back then they had nothing to their name but a tiny electric cooker and a pot for boiling water. And then, overnight, they had their trusty packs of instant *ramen*.

Mothers' moans

In their first six months in the 1958 marketplace, instant *ramen* makers sold 13 million helpings. How could it have been otherwise? Those first packs of *ramen* cost only ¥35 at a time when a weekly magazine was also ¥35 and a bowl of Chinese noodles in a cheap restaurant cost ¥60. Instant *ramen* instantly became associated with the image of naked light-bulbs, stifling 4.5-mat rooms and students working their way through school. It's a rare survivor of those days who doesn't remember returning to his hometown for holidays and hearing the inevitable lecture from his mother: "Stop eating those instant noodles all the time and get something more nutritious!"

But the students grew up, and so has



Instant *ramen* noodles have become an indispensable part of the Japanese diet.

instant *ramen*. In 1971 a food maker perfected one of the most important innovations in Japanese food processing history: it took instant *ramen* out of little cellophane packs and plopped them into disposable plastic cups. "Cup of Noodles" was born! No longer did students have to stop in the midst of their mah-jong games to open a bag and fill a pot with water. Now all they had to do was peel back the cup cover, pour in hot water from a tea kettle, and wait three minutes. Cup of Noodles took *ramen* out of the boarding house into the street. It became the vogue to stroll about the student centers of Shinjuku and Shibuya, not to mention university campuses, with a Cup of Noodles in hand. The image of instant *ramen* changed from a badge of poverty to a mark of freedom and independence.

After that, it was up to the marketplace. A burst of lively TV advertising completed the image change, while manufacturers rushed to devise new flavors and gimmicks. Soon consumers could choose among salty *ramen*, soy sauce *ramen*, miso *ramen* and even curry *ramen*. Today as many as 10 instant *ramen* commercials run on every commercial television channel in Japan every day, together with ads for such spin-off products as instant soba (Japanese noodles) and instant rice pilaff. It would seem that manufacturers are trying to sell their wares as much by mass hypnosis as by taste.

Yet an advertising blitz alone seems inadequate to explain the continued popularity of instant noodles in an age of often excessive affluence. Rather, a peek at present social conditions reveals that the *ramen*-junkie students of the past have not gone away; they have only straight-



A man on a *tanshin funin* assignment enjoys a quick dinner of instant *ramen*.

ened their ties. Take, for instance, the plight of the *tanshin funin* employee.

Tanshin funin refers to office workers who are transferred by their companies to posts in other cities, and choose to leave their families behind to avoid the trauma and expense of a full-fledged move.

Bachelors' boon

Traditionally, *tanshin funin*, or "business bachelors," have been sent forth from Tokyo to outlying cities, but with the soaring cost of land in Tokyo and growing educational problems, there has recently been an increase in "reverse *tanshin funin*," with fathers living alone in Tokyo during the working week while their families live in more congenial surroundings in outlying communities. In any case, the business bachelor population is soaring.

In a recent survey by a life insurance company on how much time office workers spend on lunch, 40.4% said they gulped down their meals in only 10-19 minutes. The average for all workers was only 21 minutes. That is how pressed for time Japanese office workers are today. Why not nibble noodles?

Taken together, all these developments signal a chain reaction of change in industrial structure, a shift in social consciousness, and great news for instant *ramen* makers. All things considered, instant *ramen* may be, for better or worse, a meal exceptionally suited to the modern Japanese way of life.

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