

FOOD

# OODLES OF NOODLES

Whether you choose to enjoy them hot or cold, dry or in soup, there's an Asian noodle dish to suit every palate. By **Pat Tanumihardja**



Photo courtesy of Lao Beijing, Tung Lok Group

Handmade noodles with spicy beef

hen it comes to Asian staples, rice may be the ubiquitous offering, but it doesn't stake its claim on the Asian menu. Noodles are an equally popular staple on the Asian table. In fact, in some places like Shanghai, China, noodles are preferred over the white grain for its delicious versatility and variety.

No one knows for sure who first thought of combining wheat flour and water to make the long strands we call noodles, but we do know that noodles have a long history in China. The first written account dates back to the East Han Dynasty (sometime between 25 and 220 A.D.). More recently, archaeologists discovered a small, well-preserved pile of 4,000-year-old noodles beneath an upturned bowl along the Yellow River in Northwestern China. Unlike modern-day versions made from wheat, these ancient noodles consisted of millet, a grain indigenous to China. Experts also believe that Marco Polo brought Chinese noodles home with him during the 13th Century.

These days, noodles are mainstays in menus everywhere. Noodle types and dishes are as varied as the cultures that create them. In Japan, you can slurp cold noodles dunked in a dipping sauce, while in Thailand, the popular *pad Thai* is a scrumptious rice noodle dish stir-fried with an assortment of seafood. In Asia alone, there is a dizzying variety of noodle dishes to savour.



Photo courtesy of  
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Wonton noodles

## CHINA/HONG KONG

### Lamian (hand-pulled) noodles

Lamian (*la* translates to “pull” in Mandarin), originated in the city of Lanzhou, a narrow corridor that runs about 20 kilometres along the southern bank of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia. Created by the Hui people (a Chinese Muslim sect), hand-pulled noodles were sold in the streets as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Making hand-pulled noodles is an art form – it involves stretching and folding the dough over repeatedly until a single very long noodle strand is formed. The noodle is twisted into a yarn-like bundle and tossed into a cauldron of boiling water. The cooked noodles are then smothered with a thick sauce and traditionally garnished with chunks of beef and vegetables.

### Wonton mee

The epitome of Hong Kong street food, wonton mee is eaten as a satisfying breakfast, light lunch or simple dinner. *Wantan* mee or *wonton* mee is a popular Hong Kong egg noodle dish (Singapore and Malaysia also have their own versions) usually served braised with soy sauce or in a hot soup. This dish is named for the accompanying dumplings, usually stuffed with prawns, pork, and spring onions, and sometimes mushroom or black fungus. In Cantonese, the homonym for *wonton* poetically means “swallowing clouds.”

## SINGAPORE/MALAYSIA

### Char kway teow

A hawker favourite in Singapore and Malaysia, *char kway teow*, literally means “fried flat noodles.” Indeed, flat rice noodles (*kway teow*) are fried over very high heat with soy sauce, chilli paste, seafood (any combination of prawns, cockles and squid), bean sprouts, Chinese sausage and/or fish cake. Not a dish for the faint hearted, *char kway teow* is fried in pork fat and served with crispy bits of pork lard, both of which lend the noodle dish its distinctive fragrance and mouthwatering flavour. In the early days, *char kway teow* was a filling and cheap meal popular among labourers fuelled by its high carbohydrate and high fat content. And the first *char kway teow* sellers were fishermen, farmers and cockle-gatherers who hawked the dish in the evenings to supplement their income.

### Nonya laksa or Laksa lemak

Nonyas are the female descendents of the Peranakans, Straits-born Chinese who developed a culture straddling Chinese and Malay traditions. The name “laksa” may have originated from the Sanskrit word *laksha*, meaning “one hundred thousand”, a reference to the dish’s myriad of ingredients. Nonya laksa is based on *lemak* (hence its other name), or coconut milk. There are two important elements in this dish: the laksa paste – lemongrass, onion and chilli pounded into a paste – and the stock consisting of chicken stock, coconut milk, evaporated milk

Nonya laksa



PHOTOLIBRARY

Zaru soba

and dried shrimp. After both are left to simmer in a pot, the result is a deliciously rich, milky, red-tinged, orange-hued gravy. Traditionally, Nonya laksa is served with thick vermicelli noodles and garnished with hard-boiled egg slices, prawns, bean sprouts and most importantly, laksa leaves.

### Penang laksa or assam laksa

Penang or *assam* laksa is a tangy fish-based soup, *assam* being the Malay word for tamarind, a main ingredient in this dish. Unlike the Nonya version, Penang laksa is made without coconut milk and is sour, a result of Penang (a city in northwest Malaysia) locals’ penchant for spicy, sour food. Connoisseurs claim the best bowls to be had are at the Ayer Itam market next to the famous Kek Lok Si Temple in Penang. It’s not uncommon for visitors to slurp up a bowl of Penang laksa and take an extended walk around the temple grounds before returning for seconds. The soup base is a concoction of *ikan kembung* (mackerel) stock, tamarind and pineapple juice. Other ingredients that give Penang laksa its distinctive flavour include lemongrass, galangal (part of the ginger family), laksa leaves, red chillies, and *bunga kantan* (ginger flower). Traditionally, Penang laksa is served with thick or thin vermicelli, without meat or prawns but typically garnished with mint leaves, onion and pineapple slices, and a thick, sweet shrimp-chilli paste.

## JAPAN

In Japan, slurping your noodles loudly is not taboo, especially with hot noodles, when drawing up the noodles quickly into the mouth is believed to cool them down.

### Zaru soba

*Zaru soba* gets its name from the slatted bamboo basket it is served in. Soba noodles were originally made entirely from buckwheat flour, making them very delicate. They were then steamed and served in the *zaru*. Modern-day soba noodles are made with a combination of buckwheat and wheat flour and can be boiled. Nevertheless, they are still served in a traditional *zaru*. *Zaru soba* is served cold sprinkled with toasted *nori* (seaweed) and accompanied by a dipping sauce (*tsuyu*) made with *dashi* (soup stock), soy sauce, mirin (Japanese cooking wine) and sugar. To eat, pick up a small clump of noodles with chopsticks and dip them into the *tsuyu*, adding wasabi and negi (Japanese leeks) to taste. Popular during the hot summer months, *zaru soba* is also a New Year’s Eve traditional dish, symbolic of a long life.

### Ramen

Ramen originated from China, its name thought to be the Japanese pronunciation of *lamian*. Also called *shina* soba (literally “Chinesesoba”) but the more politically correct *chūka* soba (also meaning “Chinese soba”) is used today. Ramen noodle dishes generally come in four flavours (*miso*, *shio*, *shoyu* and *tonkatsu*) and with all manner of toppings including *chashu* (sliced pork), seaweed, *kamaboko* (fish cake), shiitake and even corn. Almost every prefecture has its own variation, from Kyushu’s *tonkatsu* ramen made with crushed pork bones boiled for hours, to Hokkaido’s *miso* ramen, featuring a broth of fermented soybean paste and chicken stock. Ramen has historically been a popular eat-out meal, and today it is still sold by street vendors at night and by specialty noodle houses all over Japan.

### Nabeyaki udon

It's said that a Buddhist priest Kobo Daishi brought back the delicious dish of udon soup to his farmer neighbours, after his studies in Buddhism in China in the early ninth century. Toppings are selected to reflect the seasons and to balance with other ingredients. Like a mini hot pot, *nabeyaki udon* is served either in a *nabe* (metal pot) or *donabe* (earthen pot). It is popular in winter when the piping hot, heartwarming broth takes the chill off the bones. The broth comprises a *dashi* (soup stock) usually made from *konbu* (dried kelp) or dried bonito fish flakes, mirin and soya sauce. Nabeyaki udon can be topped with any number of ingredients: prawn tempura, *kamaboko* (fishcake), *wakame* (seaweed), green vegetables, shiitake mushrooms to chicken chunks. A raw egg is cracked into the pot just before serving.

### Yakisoba

*Yaki* literally means "fried" and yakisoba is a Japanese version of Chinese fried noodles made with parboiled ramen or *chuka* (egg) soba. In addition to being served on a plate, yakisoba is also served hotdog style as yakisoba-*pan* (*pan* meaning bread) at festivals or at convenience stores. The noodles are piled onto a bun and garnished

with mayonnaise and pickled ginger. Yakisoba is commonly sautéed with carrots, onions, cabbage and chicken, pork or beef and seasoned with a sweet-tangy sauce.

## VIETNAM

### Pho

Over the last century, this famous noodle soup dish has diversified. Originally consisting of just boiled beef, noodles and broth, newer versions include beef ball *pho* (*pho bo vien*) and chicken *pho* (*pho ga*). Most experts agree that *pho* has its roots in northern Vietnam. Some propose that a clever cook in Nam Dinh province southwest of Hanoi came up with the idea to jazz up local ingredients (rice noodles) with foreign extravagance (beef). Others believe that *pho* is a local take on the classic French boiled beef and vegetable dinner, *pot-au-feu*. In fact, the charred onion and ginger used as the base for *pho* broth is also similar to the roasted onion added to *pot-au-feu*. Adding bean sprouts, *ngo gai* (thorny cilantro), *hung que* (Thai basil), lime and *tuong* (bean sauce/hoisin sauce) at the table is a southern Vietnamese practice that northern *pho* purists eschew.


## THAILAND

### Pad Thai

*Pad Thai* is a quintessential Thai dish, subtly combining the tastes of sweet, sour, salty and bitter to perfection. Rice noodles are stir-fried with tofu, egg, meat, shrimp and pickled radish, and flavoured with palm sugar, tamarind and fish sauce. Texture is just as important – ground peanuts and crunchy bean sprouts are served alongside with a wedge of lime. *Pad Thai* was introduced as a national dish during World War II, partly to promote nationalism and partly to reduce rice consumption in Thailand during a major budget crisis. Although the dish is popular throughout Thailand, Bangkok boasts some of the best variations, with food vendors preparing nothing but the same *Pad Thai* dish for decades.

## KOREA

### Naengmyon

This summer buckwheat noodle dish is served two different ways. *Mul (water) naengmyon* is served with a chilled beef broth, raw julienned vegetables and Asian pear, and often topped with a boiled egg and cold cooked beef. *Bibim naengmyon* is a spicy cold dish reserved for palates of steel. Instead of beef broth, the noodles are mixed with *gochujang*, a hot paste of soybeans, red chillies and salt mixed with glutinous rice powder and fermented in the sun. In Seoul, several *naengmyon* restaurant chains serve nothing but the noodle dish, sometimes specialising in just one variety. 

*Pad Thai*

## WHAT'S IN A NOODLE?

### WHEAT NOODLES

Made with wheat flour and water, this grandfather of all noodles originates in northern China. They vary in thickness and may be round or flat. Fat, white and slippery Japanese udon hails from Shikoku in Kagawa prefecture, where official Udon Day is celebrated on July 2. In Japan, much thinner *somen* is served as “flowing noodles” or *Nagashi Somen* in the summer. The noodles flow in a long bamboo flume filled with ice-cold water around the restaurant. As the *somen* passes by, pluck them out with your chopsticks and dip them in *tsuyu*.

### EGG NOODLES

Made from eggs, wheat flour and water, its yellow shade is a sure tell-tale sign. Asian egg noodles come in varying widths and shapes, from thick Hokkien noodles to the thinner *E-fu* noodle strands. Sold fresh, vacuum packed, or dried, egg noodles have a satisfying meaty bite. Japanese ramen also falls in this category.

### CELLOPHANE NOODLES

#### (bean thread/glass noodles/*tang hoon*)

Chinese cellophane noodles are thin, opaque white threads made from an extrusion of mung bean and tapioca starches mixed with water. The Korean version, *dangmyon*, made from sweet potato starch is a bigger, tougher cousin. Since they have little or no taste, they will absorb the flavours of the ingredients they are cooked with.

### RICE NOODLES

Rice noodles are basically made from rice flour and water. Fresh rice sheet noodles have to be cut to size, giving you *hor fun* (Cantonese) or *kway teow* (Hokkien). These white noodles have a silken, slippery quality unmatched by any dried noodles.

Rice sticks are flat, dried noodles usually available in three sizes: the thinnest noodles are used in soups. The medium-sized noodles for *pho* and *Pad Thai*, and the broad noodles are used in stir fried dishes with meat, seafood or vegetable combinations.

### BUCKWHEAT NOODLES

*Soba* is generally made from a combination of buckwheat and wheat flour but some pure buckwheat flour *soba* is available. It has a nutty flavour and is rich in protein and fibre. Although *soba* originated in the colder climates of northern Japan, they are equally popular in Tokyo. They also come flavoured with green tea (*cha soba*), lemon zest or black sesame seeds.

