

Authentic-Ish: Ramen, Culinary Tourism, and Canadian Foodways

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Abstract: Originating from a food shortage in Japan, ramen—or Japanese noodle soup—has become a sought-after dish across Canada. Canadian ramen restaurants add their own twists, combining the traditionality of Japanese ramen with Canadian culture. Using local ingredients and tastes, they describe their food as “authentic” or “Japanese inspired” rather than “traditional.” Through an autoethnographic examination of two ramen restaurants—one in Atlantic Canada, the other in Ontario—I explore ramen’s transformation from a food of poverty to a desirable form of Canadian ethnic cuisine. Drawing on Lucy M. Long’s concept of “culinary tourism,” I consider how ramen restaurants function as tourism not only for consumers of ramen, but also for the people who cook and serve it. Ramen may be “just noodles and soup,” but as culinary tourism, it conflates and contests socio-economic status, cultural identities, and racial identities in complex ways.

Keywords: culinary tourism, Canadian foodways, ramen, Ontario, Atlantic Canada

“We’ve never had ramen before. What is it?” Over the past two years, I have worked as a server in two different ramen restaurants across Canada, and at both, this question is the one I am most frequently asked. The second most commonly asked question is “is it always this busy?” While the first question requires a more thoughtful response, the answer to the latter is easy: yes. Despite being located in distinctively different regions—one in Ontario, the other in Atlantic Canada—both ramen restaurants are incredibly popular within their geographic communities. It was the success of these two restaurants that first made me question why ramen has become such a favoured culinary experience for Canadians. On one hand, ramen restaurants are “ethnic,” allowing Canadians to engage with Japanese culture and foodways. On the other hand, both businesses I worked at are primarily owned and operated by fellow (white) Canadians, meaning that they are both Japanese *and* Canadian. It is this blending of cultures that initially caught my interest and made me ask the same questions as many of the guests: What *is* ramen and what makes it a desired culinary commodity within Canada?

In order to understand the appeal of ramen to Canadians, first we must understand its history and significance. To phrase it simply, ramen is a type of Japanese noodle soup. Generally, ramen consists of a wheat noodle served in a broth flavoured with oil and salt with an assortment of toppings such as pork and vegetables. Originally referred to as “Shina soba” (Chinese noodles), by the twenty-first century ramen has come to represent Japan, “permeat[ing] virtually all features of contemporary Japanese life” (Kushner 2012: 227). Indeed, ramen has developed a significant cultural presence within Japan. Satomi Fukutomi describes how ramen has become an object of “connoisseurship,” with Internet forums discussing and ranking the best places for ramen across the country (2010: 257). Socially, ramen is a dish of contention, with Japanese people debating and discussing what elements and restaurants make the best ramen. Barak Kushner asserts that ramen is a significant part of Japanese culture and identity with the claim “ramen is Japan” (2012:

227). In the same way that sushi has become a global symbol of Japanese identity (see Sakamoto and Allen 2011), ramen is perceived globally as synonymous with Japan.

Ramen has a short but important history that also makes it a food of hard times. Although Chinese-style noodles, the basis for ramen, were present in Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912) thanks to the presence of impoverished Chinese students in Japan (Ayao 2001: 67), it was not until post-World War II that ramen gained significant popularity. This increase in popularity was not due to adventurous culinary desires, or even acculturation, but rather due to necessity. The focus on rice as patriotic led to an “extreme food shortage” both during and after the war, resulting in mass starvation (Kushner 2012: 175). The lack of rice culminated in the United States of America exporting wheat to Japan, that was then transformed into cheap and filling foods such as noodles and bread (2012: 199). Noodle dishes, namely ramen, were sold in push-cart stalls on the black market since the government was moderating the distribution of food (Solt 2010: 186). Furthermore, these carts were also frequented by Korean and Chinese labourers and were primarily operated by foreigners (2010: 196). Thus, ramen, a dish that has become significant to the way that Japan defines itself, originated as a foreign food eaten out of poverty and starvation.

The “instant” form of ramen holds symbolic meaning for many Canadians outside of its Japanese context. Originally invented by Ando Momofuku in 1958 as a way of alleviating the aforementioned mass starvation in Japan (Kushner 2012: 188-9), instant ramen emerged in North America in the 1970s as an “inexpensive, convenient, and last-resort staple food,” especially among students (Kim and Livengood 1995: 206). Indeed, the “Styrofoam cups of dehydrated noodles have become ubiquitous” to many North Americans as what ramen is (1995: 205-206). Ramen has a cultural history as a food of poverty, and these connotations continue today. In her study of the Internet meme “#WhiteHouseDinners” that emerged after President Donald Trump served fast food in the White House, Sheila Bock states that these memes referenced “foods generally eaten by necessity due to limited budgets, not always by choice—including Top Ramen,” with Top Ramen being a popular instant ramen brand (2021: 32). Within the popular imagination, ramen is mocked as a meme, and reduced to a food eaten when nothing else is economically feasible. In the Canadian context, ramen is symbolic of not only Japanese culture, but also of “hard times” when money is short, and when food that is cheap and fast is valued above food that is tasty or culinarily adventurous.

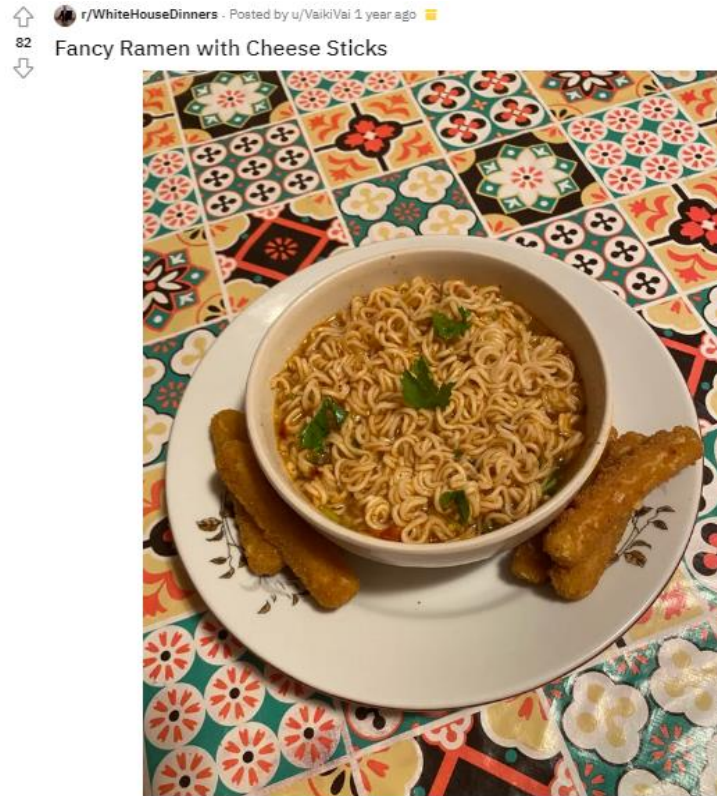


Figure 1: An example of a “#WhiteHouseDinners” post on popular forum website, Reddit.

Despite these cultural and historical connotations of ramen as poverty food, ramen restaurants in Canada highlight that ramen is a food of exotic taste, rather than simply a cheap, calorie-dense meal. These Canadian restaurants draw on notions of nationality and class to engage in what Lucy M. Long refers to as “culinary tourism.” Culinary tourism is how food is used as a means of exploring cultural Others (Long 2004: 20). With ramen, both racial and socioeconomic identities can be reflected and explored through this dish. Food is a means of communicating “identity, relationships, ideologies, and emotions” meaning that consuming the food of the Other through culinary tourism can work as a means of reflecting one’s own identity or attempting to understand the identity of the Other (2004: 45). With the complicated history and cultural presence of ramen, how do Canadian ramen restaurants function as culinary tourism? How is a food of poverty transformed into a sought-after culinary experience within Canada? Through several interviews conducted with my present and past coworkers—cooks and servers in two ramen restaurants—as well as a ramen “connoisseur” (to borrow from Fukutomi), and through my own autoethnographic observations as an employee, I reflect on how Canadian ramen restaurants function as culinary tourism not only for their guests, but also for their staff. Through this tourism, ramen has developed multiple symbolic meanings, transforming from ethnic Japanese cuisine rooted in poverty into a distinctively Canadian, highly sought-after dish.

It is important to note that both ramen restaurants I am discussing, Oni Ramen in Ontario and Noodle King in Atlantic Canada,¹ are primarily owned and operated by white

Canadians. Debates on cultural appropriation, colonialism and foodways are complicated, and while it is important to keep these in mind while discussing culinary tourism, they are beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I seek to understand notions of hybridity regarding the identities and meanings of foods such as ramen. The whiteness of the workers at these restaurants reflects the demographics of the communities where they are located.² Additionally, it is not unprecedented for ramen to be made by non-Japanese people. In 2007, Ivan Orkin opened a very successful ramen shop in Japan and part of its initial popularity was due to the fact that he was a white American foreigner running a ramen shop in Tokyo (Orkin 2013: 65). Indeed, the Japanese seem very receptive to foreigners creating and consuming their cuisine; in terms of sushi, the government has “authenticated” various sushi restaurants globally and also acknowledges that the consumption of ethnic food is a form of “soft power” (Sakamoto and Allen 2011: 108, 115). The fact that ramen at both Oni Ramen and Noodle King is primarily made and consumed by white people allots space for questions of authenticity and the role of culinary tourism, while also highlighting the importance of hybridity and fusion in our globalized world.

Slippery Definitions

At its core, ramen is noodle soup, but there is a widespread lack of consensus on what constitutes this dish. Okumura Ayao, a ramen scholar, remarks that there is no industrial standard for the “thickness or ingredients of ramen noodles” other than that they are “yellowish” in colour (2001: 66). Likewise, Barak Kushner states that “fundamentally, ramen is a dish where the noodles are usually made from wheat and swim in a flavorful soup” (2012: 6). The word “usually” is key here, implying that ramen does not *have* to be wheat noodles. With these two scholars, neither has a definitive definition of ramen, nor do these descriptions seem to coincide beyond the fact that ramen must contain “noodles.” Matt³, one of the chefs I interviewed from Oni Ramen in Ontario, describes ramen as being “about the noodles” which he states are a “wheat flour noodle” that is “alkaline” in nature. Paul, another chef from Ontario, similarly describes ramen as “just an alkaline wheat noodle,” while also acknowledging that “what you do with [ramen] is really up to you.” For both chefs and scholars, then, the noodle is considered the essential part of ramen. Indeed, when the broth is mentioned, it is mentioned in passing, with Paul noting that ramen “normally consists of broth” but that the broth can be “on the side or in it.” The focus on the noodle is understandable, as it is the wheat noodle that was introduced to Japan post-war and thus developed into ramen as we know it today. Seemingly, then, ramen is defined by its noodle.

Interestingly, customers and servers describe ramen slightly differently, focusing less on the noodle and more on the broth. Jill, a frequent visitor to Oni Ramen, describes ramen as a “noodle soup” that can be either “hot or cold.” Erica, a server at Noodle King in Atlantic Canada, told me that ramen is a “soup” that is also “distinctive from soup” as it contains both “broth” and “noodles.” When I describe ramen to guests, I often ease them in by describing ramen as “just noodles and soup.” Matt remarks that when customers are apprehensive about trying ramen, he tells them that ramen is “just fancy chicken noodle soup and everybody loves chicken noodle soup.” Indeed, I have observed that often customers will order and then confirm “that comes with noodles, doesn’t it?” While noodles may be integral to those who make ramen, to those who consume it, ramen appears to be

perceived primarily as a soup rather than noodle dish. Perhaps the focus on “soup” is an appeal to familiarity. Soup is a common dish in North America, familiar to nearly everyone. Indeed, Matt’s definition of ramen as “chicken noodle soup” takes this foreign dish and likens it to one North Americans commonly turn to when they are sick, or outdoor temperatures are frigid. Matt acknowledges that nearly every culture has soup in its cultural repertoire, and that chicken noodle soup is “a universal part of human experience.” Focusing on ramen as a soup, and a noodle soup at that, then, fits it within larger cultural culinary repertoires and turns ramen into something familiar and comforting rather than exotic and othering for customers.

Referring to ramen as “chicken noodle soup” highlights another important aspect of ramen: its status as a comfort food. Comfort foods are foods that are “associated with a generic or stereotypical but mythic national past grounded in the home and family” (Long 2017: 126). Another way we can think about comfort foods is as nostalgic cuisine. For many non-Japanese people, their first experience with ramen is instant ramen (Kushner 2012: 4), and my participants suggest that this often occurs in childhood. Everyone reported first encountering ramen in the instant form as a child. Erica, for example, remembers that she thought instant ramen was “the best thing [she] ever ate” when she was “like six [years old].” Erica laughed as she told me this, implying that although she liked instant noodles back *then*, she does not enjoy them to the same degree *now*. Similarly, Jill remembers frequently eating instant ramen in their childhood. Jill’s mother taught young Jill a recipe for instant ramen that they could make for themselves that required boiling the instant noodles in chicken broth and adding green onions, a recipe that Jill laughingly said was “terrible.” Paul recollects that in “elementary school” his fellow classmates would “eat the noodles raw and uncooked,” something that today he finds disgusting. Finally, although Matt does not have a memorable experience with instant ramen, he states that his first time having ramen was “certainly instant ramen” when he was a teenager.

Although this instant ramen might have been enjoyable when they were children, no one I interviewed finds it tasty now. This may be due to the fact that instant ramen is rather cheap, denoting it—as we have seen above—as a food of poverty. As a food eaten out of necessity, instant ramen may remind individuals of more difficult times in their lives, rendering the food unappealing. Yet, this poverty food is still comforting as it brings back fond memories of childhood. The relationship between poverty and comfort food is not new. For example, in her analysis on boloney in Newfoundland, Diane Tye remarks that while boloney is symbolic of childhood poverty, it continues to be “eaten selectively as purposeful and positive reminders of past time and places” for many adult Newfoundlanders (2017: 159). Although Tye describes adults preparing boloney according to their childhood memories, ramen is *elevated* from one-dollar instant ramen to casual dining restaurant fare. Through this elevation, ramen becomes more gastronomically pleasing while still being able to maintain feelings of comfort through the “ramen” name. Ramen for Canadians is a comfort food that is eaten “selectively”—not as one remembers it, but still with connotations and memories of childhood.

“Authentic” Tourism

The appeal of ramen, then, is that it is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Ramen appeals to one's memories of having "instant ramen" during youth, or perhaps of having "chicken noodle soup" on a cold winter day. At the same time, ramen is also "Japanese," making it foreign and unique. The lack of consensus on ramen allows for it to be interpreted regionally in Japan, as each area has its own variation (Fukutomi 2010: 260), but it also allows ramen to be adapted into a culinary tourism framework. With culinary tourism, customers use food to "perform a sense of adventure, curiosity, adaptability, and openness" to cultures outside of their own, allowing them to "taste" the Other (Molz 2007: 78-79). At the same time, tourism seeks to offer a "negotiation of novelty and familiarity" (Long 2017: 130). In this sense, culinary tourists desire adventure alongside familiarity; they want foods that are different enough to pique their curiosity while maintaining enough familiarity to not appear inedible according to their cultural norms. With ramen, culinary tourism is two-fold: it crosses national borders as well as economic borders, as it is desired ethnic food that is *also* a symbol of poverty. The familiarity and cultural meanings of instant ramen to Canadians provides restaurants the opportunity to thrive as culinary tourism destinations, where fresh noodles and Japanese techniques and ingredients are used to create what would be identifiable as, yet adventurously different from, Canadian chicken noodle soup.

Both Oni Ramen and Noodle King are able to use the familiarity of ramen to ease customers into their cuisine, but they also attract those with more adventurous palates through constructions of "authenticity." Upon entering the website for Noodle King, bold letters greet you, stating that the restaurant is "authentic, not traditional." As folklorists know, authenticity is a slippery word. Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine remark that "authenticity is a locally constructed folk idea" (1995: 538), highlighting how definitions of authenticity vary depending upon one's own culture and expectations. Food culture is dynamic, meaning that authenticity is constantly in flux, changing alongside variations in taste, ingredients, and techniques (Clair et al. 2016: 2). In this sense, "authentic food" has no objective meaning and all notions of authenticity are subjective. Notions of "authentic" ethnic cuisine are created within one's own culture, not in the foodways of the "ethnic" culture in question. For most ethnic restaurants to be successful, they must perform the "illusion of authenticity," and "accommodate local needs while retaining characteristics of ethnic tradition" (Lu and Fine 1995: 541, 543). Authentic cuisine, then, depends on cultural expectations of ethnicity and respect for the norms of one's own cultural foodways. To be authentic rather than traditional means not to recreate Japanese ramen, but rather to negotiate the familiar with one's assumptions of what Japanese ramen should be.

With the lack of consensus on what constitutes ramen, authenticity becomes even trickier to create. Can there be an authentic ramen when the rules are unstable and in flux? In order to create this "illusion of authenticity" that culinary tourism depends upon, ramen restaurants focus heavily on atmosphere rather than strictly upon food. Atmosphere and environment play a large role in culinary tourism as they help to create the illusion of travel. Restaurants often evoke the country of origin of their cuisine through use of decorations to give way to "imaginative travel" (Molz 2007: 81). Even the architecture of the restaurant can be used to demonstrate ethnic identities and cultural difference (Li 2020: 279). In his analysis of Chinese restaurants in Newfoundland, Mu Li remarks that Chinese restaurants have

become a “tradition” in that customers anticipate the same sort of décor and menu at every Chinese restaurant (2020: 280). Taking this point further, we can argue that culinary tourism requires not only “authentic” food but also an “authentic” atmosphere that evokes difference while still fulfilling the expectations of the customer. What ramen culinary tourists desire is not necessarily décor from Japan, but décor that evokes cultural beliefs of what Japan *is*. Restaurants, then, must provide not only authentic food, but an authentic experience, and this experience is achieved through the creation of an environment that is different enough from “Canadian” restaurants to evoke a sense of exoticism.

When you walk into Oni Ramen in Ontario, it immediately feels different from most North American restaurants. The restaurant is small and holds limited seating. A long L-shaped bar runs along the kitchen, which is entirely visible, while two small tables are attached to the wall in the back and a large “kommunal” [sic] table sits in the front window. The restaurant accepts no reservations, and all seating is first come, first served. As soon as you walk in, you are greeted by a cashier/server standing behind the bar. You give your order and pay upfront as the only menu is on a large board to the left. After ordering, you are free to select your own seat, and without individual tables, it is very likely on a busy night that you will be seated next to a complete stranger. If you are seated at the bar, then you have a full view of the kitchen, and are encouraged to watch the cooks make your food. If it is not too busy, the chefs may engage in conversation with the customers as their food is being prepared. This serving experience is unlike many North American restaurants, where the kitchen is often hidden from the view of the customers, and they are served tableside. The unfamiliarity of this serving style evokes *difference* and the design of the restaurant immediately informs customers that within the space of the restaurant, they are “elsewhere.”

Both customers and staff are receptive to the feeling of difference within the Ontario restaurant. Jill, a frequent customer and close friend, claims that they “love” the restaurant not because of the food but because “of the authentic-ish atmosphere.” In particular, they enjoy the “little bar area for slurping your noodles,” describing it as both “cute and cozy” before stating that the restaurant has “nice food” as well. What is particularly interesting is that Jill perceives the restaurant as “authentic-ish.” Clarifying this term, Jill states that the restaurant is “as authentic as you can get it in [City], Ontario.” This comment draws attention to the fact that even when customers are aware of the impossibility of authenticity, it does not necessarily hinder their experience. Limitations, such as availability of Asian ingredients and produce (Clair et al. 2016: 15) as well as cultural norms regarding restaurants, prohibit them from experiencing ramen the same way one would in Japan, rendering the experience authentic-*ish*. Indeed, customers often seemed confused by the serving style at Oni Ramen. Whereas in Japan the expectation is that diners vacate the restaurant as soon as they are finished, rendering ramen a form of “fast food” (Fukutomi 2010: 265), many Oni Ramen customers stay and chat for long periods after finishing eating, making turnover quite slow. In addition, signs around the restaurant remind customers to order before taking their seat, a concept that first-time visitors find difficult to follow. Although ramen is fast to make, many do not perceive it as “fast food” and they anticipate a sit-down restaurant experience. “Authentic-ish” describes how ramen style is different enough to feel unfamiliar, foreign, and exciting, while still acknowledging

that the restaurant makes way for cultural serving norms of other local eating establishments. At Oni Ramen, one cannot engage in the same ramen experience as one would in Japan, but through the bar seating, the *idea* of Japan ramen shops is emulated—it is “authentic-ish.”

Among staff, Oni Ramen is not described as authentic, but as providing an experience outside of everyday norms. Matt, a sous-chef, states that there is a “real special energy to the shop as a physical location” and that there is a “certain magic to it.” While he remarks that the space is “small,” he also calls it “intimate,” implying a sort of community formation within the space. In the winter in particular, Matt notes that the narrow space of the restaurant lets customers feel others as they walk by, making it a “community space.” The magic of the restaurant, then, is partly due to the fact that the Japanese-style seating fosters a sense of community within the restaurant. This space differentiates inside from outside; inside a community can flourish due to the difference of this space from other Canadian restaurants. Paul, a former head chef, notes that the Japanese-inspired serving style can create confusion for customers, however. For example, unlike most Canada restaurants, tipping is discouraged at Oni Ramen. According to Paul, the mindset of the restaurant is “don’t worry about tipping because we’re not going to serve you. The cooks are going to hand you your food.” In this sense, the restaurant is competing within the wider fast-food market but, as Paul indicates, the difference is “you [can] watch the cooks cook your food.” Although neither cook points out the attempts to evoke authenticity, they do remark that the restaurant is significantly and positively different from other local restaurants. For these ramen cooks, to eat at the ramen shop is to enter a place that is unique from other places they have worked. This difference evokes Japan, through narrow bar-side seating, serving style, and the lack of expectation regarding tipping. These ramen shops allow not only customers but also staff to experience a form of culinary tourism through the *style* of the restaurant.

Unlike Oni Ramen, Noodle King in Atlantic Canada has North American style serving, where patrons are served tableside and the kitchen is not visible from the dining room. At a previous location, Noodle King attempted bar seating similar to Oni Ramen, but they found the location was too small, and most customers were not responsive to this serving style. However, other decorative elements are used to fulfill expectations of Japan. Like Oni Ramen, menus are not given to guests. Instead, a large blackboard covers the wall and displays the daily menu which changes based upon ingredient availability. No reservations are accepted and the customer turnover rate is high. With few tables and un-cushioned seating, the restaurant emphasizes that ramen is a “fast food” in the sense that you are expected to eat and then leave (Fukutomi 2010: 265). Erica, a long-time server, states that the idea behind the restaurant is that it is a place for people who want to “eat and go” without the “whole sit-down thing.” According to her, the restaurant was designed to be an alternative to “fries” and other fast food for “people who worked in kitchens.” Serving hearty noodles quickly for workers is precisely why ramen thrives in Japan: originally, ramen stalls were frequented by blue collar labourers and students (Kushner 2012: 161, Ayao 2001: 67). In Japan today, ramen restaurants see businesspeople, primarily men, as their most frequent customers (Fukutomi 2010: 264). Thus, Oni Ramen and Noodle King

both evoke an unfamiliar dining experience for many Canadians that represents forms of culinary tourism for guests as well as staff.

Other elements in both restaurants create a sense of exotic dining through customer expectations of Japan. If ethnic restaurants have “traditions” that customers expect in terms of décor and ambiance (Li 2020: 280), then Oni Ramen and Noodle King fulfill them. Both restaurants have “lucky cat” and other Asian trinkets on display by the cash register and serve their food with chopsticks instead of forks. Both sell Sapporo beer, a popular Japanese-style beer, and Noodle King serves warmed *sake* as well. Rather than translating ingredients, the restaurants use their Japanese names: Noodle King serves either *shoyu* (soy) or *miso* (red bean paste) ramens, whereas at Oni Ramen, bowls can be served with *negi* (green onion) or *nori* (seaweed). Additionally, both establishments serve *wakame* (seaweed) salad and *gyoza* (Japanese-style dumplings) as sides. Most customers do not speak Japanese yet these restaurants use Japanese terms to describe their food. As Erica notes of the staff, “We’re not Japanese. None of us are Japanese; none of us speak Japanese.” The target audience is not Japanese customers because, as Matt states, they are not an “ethnic restaurant aimed at feeding nostalgia of the culture from which that dish originates.” Thus, the Japanese terms are not used to benefit cooks and servers, or to attract Japanese immigrants, but rather entirely for the experience of the culinary tourist. If the majority of customers do not speak Japanese, then an important reason behind the use of Japanese terms is their evocation, of opening a door in Canada and entering a space that is foreign, adventurous, and exciting. Thus, these ramen restaurants present themselves as culinary tourism destinations through not only serving foreign foods, but also through the creation of an atmosphere that *feels* Japanese without being entirely unfamiliar. As Jill characterizes it, these restaurants serve an “authentic-ish” experience within the confines of their own cultural norms.

Ramen as Canadian

What is of particular interest is that while culinary tourists such as Jill highlight the authenticity of the food and atmosphere and how it fulfills their idea of Japan, workers in these restaurants do not address nor debate authenticity. Initially, when I set out to conduct my interviews, I anticipated that the staff who are, as previously mentioned, predominantly white Canadians, would be excited by the concept of “authentic” Japanese food and ingredients. This enthusiasm, I predicted, would provide a sort of culinary tourism experience for the staff through working with these ethnic ingredients and cooking techniques. Instead, what I found was that the workers were not overly concerned with authenticity. Significantly, Erica, Matt, and Paul all described the ramen served in their restaurant as “Japanese inspired,” not as “authentic.” The use of the term “inspired” rather than “authentic” allows for more interpretation and more play with what constitutes ramen. Important to culinary tourism is the creation of the idea of authenticity, but ethnic restaurants are always “in-between space[s]” as they are both reflective of the culture of origin of the food as well as their own local culture and place (Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002: 251). In their research on ethnic restaurants in Quebec, Laurier Turgeon and Madeleine Pastinelli note that the majority of restaurant owners “offer a cuisine adapted to Quebecers’ tastes” that combines the exotic with the local (2002: 257). Furthermore, Lu and Fine state that “ideally” ethnic restaurants provide food that is “authentic” but

“practically” this food must be “Americanized” in order to suit the tastes and foodways of North American customers (1995: 539). By using the term “Japanese-inspired,” ramen restaurants are perceived by the staff as hybrids of Japanese and North American culture, where Canadian tastes are *inspired* by Japanese ingredients and techniques, rather than simply a reproduction of Japanese cuisine.

As noted earlier, ramen is a dish of hybrid origins, originating as Chinese *soba* and then adopted by Japan. Both Matt and Paul highlight this hybridity. When asked to describe ramen, Paul emphasises that ramen comes from “lo mein” which is “a Chinese type of alkaline wheat noodle” (“mein” translates to “noodle” and “lo” refers to the tossing method of preparation). Throughout our interview, Paul stressed that the only essential ingredient of ramen is “wheat noodles” to the point where he argued that gluten-free ramen is impossible due to the necessity of wheat. Wheat is not native to Japan, nor is ramen, according to Paul, yet ramen is still thoroughly a Japanese dish as it “comes from Japan.” It appears that built into ramen, by definition, are notions of hybridity and cultural adaptation. Likewise, Matt similarly expresses notions of cultural adaptation surrounding ramen. When asked about the ramen served at Oni Ramen, Matt states that “ramen is a Japanese version of originally a Chinese dish so we’re very much influenced by that Japanese inflection of that dish.” This adoption process can then be applied to Canadian ramen, which is an “inflection” of Japanese ramen. Through this process, Matt seems to imply that the ramen he makes is not a re-creation of Japanese ramen, but a Canadian version that has been adopted from Japanese traditions. Matt even compares ramen to pizza, stating that both dishes have been “heavily adopted” from their country of origin, so much so that they become forms of “global cuisine.” With ramen in particular, Matt settles on the fact that ramen is both “Japanese cuisine” and “Canadian cuisine as well.” For both chefs, then, ramen is not Japanese cuisine, but Japanese-inspired cooking; they center ramen as a thoroughly hybrid and adaptable dish. Even Erica remarks that the cuisine she serves is “Japanese fusion” with “other Asian-cuisine influences” making Noodle King ramen “Asian-inspired” cuisine. Indeed, both restaurants serve Chinese-inspired ramen called *tantanmen*, as well as a Noodle King’s *Rad Thai*, which is a play on the popular Thai dish “pad thai,” or the Korean-inspired *Seoul Food* at Oni Ramen. The Canadian ramen cooks and servers I interviewed placed less emphasis on ramen’s evocation of Japan and concentrated on its combination of inter-cultural culinary techniques, ingredients, and traditions.

For ramen shop workers, notions of hybridity and fusion are not focused on Asian cultures, but rather on how ramen reflects *local* culture. The slogan for Oni Ramen, Matt recites, is “Japanese-inspired, locally influenced, and house-made.” Although “Japanese” implies foreign and exotic, “locally” and “house-made” bring the dishes closer not simply to Canadian cuisine, but to the cuisine of one’s own community. Although there is some debate as to whether or not Canada has its own cuisine (Jacobs 2010), these ramen restaurants contribute to the creation of a regional cuisine within their own communities.

One way that these restaurants help create local cuisine is through the ingredients used in their cooking. Matt notes that “in Japan, a lot of ramen involves seafood,” but since seafood is not a native ingredient to their location in Ontario, they do not use seafood as it “doesn’t

reflect the time and place we are in.” Seafood may be traditional to Japanese ramen, but to use seafood would render the food at Oni Ramen *inauthentic* within their local region. Authenticity, then, is not so much about replicating Japanese cuisine, but about creating a dish that is reflective of its place of origin, which is not Japan but rather Ontario. Paul expressed a similar perspective, stating that Japanese ingredients “don’t lend themselves to winters in Ontario” so the dishes served revolve around ingredients that are locally abundant in Ontario such as tomatoes, corn, and mushrooms. According to Paul, who used to do the ordering of provisions, “everything we could, we bought locally, and if we couldn’t, we bought the best we could get.” Paul likens the quality and locality of the ingredients to that of a “fine dining restaurant” despite the fact that ramen is the “furthest thing” from fine dining. This comment is particularly revealing, because Paul *also* likens ramen to McDonalds and Subway when discussing how ramen is an economically good deal, because with limited funds, you can have a filling meal that is within the same economic range as fast food chains: “I don’t even think you can get a Subway combo for under twenty dollars.” For Paul, ramen may be a form of fast, cheap food—bringing it back to its origins as a food of hard times and its cultural perception as a food of poverty—but by using local ingredients, the restaurant is elevated to being akin to fine dining. Ramen is perceived as *both* fast food and fine dining, meaning that individuals who cannot afford to eat at expensive restaurants are offered the opportunity to experience their local community through food, in the same way diners at upper end restaurants do. It is local ingredients, then, for both Paul and Matt, that transform ramen from a Japanese dish or a dish of poverty into a culinary destination reflective of local Canadian culture.

Economically, this stance towards purchasing local ingredients of high quality makes sense, as ingredients sourced locally would most likely be cheaper than ingredients that have to be imported or specially ordered. There are limitations to what foods are accessible as well, based on geographic location. The proximity to global hubs such as Toronto and Ottawa makes most ingredients easier to source in Ontario than in Atlantic Canada. To use local ingredients may be more fiscally feasible, but with communities such as Toronto’s Chinatown so close by, using local ingredients is also a carefully selected choice. For Noodle King, sourcing ingredients is made more difficult due to limitations regarding what is farmed locally. Erica notes that Noodle King cannot produce traditional Japanese-style ramen due to the fact that “you have to be able to get the groceries” and their location makes it difficult to obtain the “groceries you normally get consistently” at other ramen restaurants. Like Japan, Noodle King is coastal, meaning that seafood products are frequently used in their ramen. In this sense, Noodle King ramen is similar to many variations of Japanese ramen; however, produce that is readily available in Japan, such as shiitake mushrooms, is difficult to source in Atlantic Canada. For Noodle King, the use of local ingredients is less a choice and more a necessity due to product availability. The limitations regarding ingredients, however, are not treated as a hinderance, but rather as an opportunity. Because Noodle King has no set menu, food and cocktail offerings change daily, depending on ingredient availability. The rotating selections reflect the local community: one cocktail is named after a nearby street, another after a well-known musician-turned-farmer. Both restaurants turn local ingredients into “ethnic” food, bringing ramen a bit closer to a local, rather than foreign, cuisine.

Ramen as Community

To be locally-influenced is not limited to produce and ingredients: it also means to be engaged with and influenced by one's own community. Although the atmosphere of these ramen restaurants evokes Japan, for the workers, they function not as tourist destinations but as community hubs *through* a culinary tourism lens. Both Matt and Paul acknowledge that the community has a great influence on the menu at Oni Ramen. Matt says that the restaurant "make[s] a strong effort to cater to" the needs of the "large local vegetarian population," and Paul agrees that it caters specifically to the local vegans and vegetarians. On the current menu, out of thirteen variations of ramen, six are exclusively vegan or can be made so. Ramen is not normally a vegan dish, as the broth typically contains meat bones and is "based on meat flavours" (Kushner 2012: 6). To make and promote vegan ramen means that the restaurant is responding to the needs and desires of their local customers. Importantly, both Matt and Paul perceive the vegan ramens as specifically "catering" to the local vegan community. For these cooks, the adaptability of ramen allows them to craft dishes specifically for their own community. In this sense, ramen becomes as reflection of the local more than an evocation of Japan.

Furthermore, the physical restaurant space is perceived by the workers not as a foreign culinary destination, but as a local communal space. Erica describes Noodle King as a "comforting" restaurant, saying that going to Noodle King is "very similar to going to your mom's house and having her make something for you." Part of the reason for this level of comfort and familiarity is due to the fact that Noodle King functions as a "hangout" where both the staff and the customers "have fun." When I asked why she liked working at Noodle King, Erica responded that she "really like[s] our customers and they're fun to talk to." She then told me that most of the staff have been caught dancing in the restaurant, and that one time she walked in and there was a "dance party" happening in the dining room among several customers. For Erica, the joy of ramen is not necessarily the food, but the communal and convivial aspect of the restaurant, and how her job allows her to interact with the customers in a fun and fulfilling way. As a server, Erica highlights how the ramen restaurant is a community-based space where the focus is on the enjoyment, comfort, and familiarity between both customers and staff.

In Ontario, a similar, community-based attitude is expressed, as Paul told me the target audience of the restaurant is "almost anyone." He explained that the restaurant is a "kid-friendly" space at lunch and on Sundays, and he named the wide variety of people who frequent the restaurant, such as high school students, young adults, older couples, families, and prominent city council members. Matt, perhaps, summarized it best, stating that "the target audience is very clearly everybody who lives in [City]." Indeed, the restaurant even participates in a program called "Tasty Tours," where small groups experience a culinary tour of the area, stopping at local restaurants to get a taste of the local cuisine. The restaurant, then, features prominently within the community, and works to facilitate a community space. When I worked at Oni Ramen, I would encounter the familiar faces of frequent regulars daily; some customers I came to know by name and memorize their orders. When I talk to the staff I worked with, we often discuss customers such as the local baker, Dave, or Matthew-the-Barber, or the "garlic guy." Although none of us wore name tags, customers came to know our names in the same way we learned theirs: once, I was at

a local bar, and a woman I did not recognize came over to me excitedly and asked if I worked “at the ramen restaurant.” Another time, a woman approached me for directions because she “remembered me” from the ramen restaurant. Even Jill, a frequent ramen eater, said that “half the fun of [ramen] is who you’re talking to when you eat it,” which includes other customers seated along the bar as well as the kitchen staff. Through the focus on the local community, accomplished through using local produce and suppliers, addressing dietary needs and desires, and facilitating “fun” restaurant atmospheres that encourage discussion, ramen restaurants work as *community spaces*. For the staff in particular, the appeal of working at these ramen restaurants is not found in the ethnic ingredients or the foreign food techniques they employ, but rather in the ability to engage with and explore one’s own community. In this sense, then, ramen may be perceived as a form of ethnic culinary tourism, but it is also a culinary tourism of one’s own geographical place—of one’s own place in the community and world.

Conclusion

Ramen, then, functions as a fusion of local community life within an increasingly globalized world. On one hand, ramen is ethnic cuisine, but on the other, ramen demonstrates how foods can be adopted by other communities and cultures and transformed into distinctive foodways with their own meanings and local significance. The lack of strict definition and rules regarding ramen allows for cultural adoption, where communities both within Japan and within Canada are able to come up with their own regional variations that reflect their geographical place and community. Many Canadians know of ramen as a food of hard economic times, whether as students, as was the case with Matt, or as children growing up in less affluent families, as is the case for myself and for Paul. Despite these seemingly negative connotations, ramen has been transformed into an affordable yet gourmet form of cuisine within Canada, where it is valued not as a cheap calorie-dense meal, but as a food that facilitates community. Perhaps the reason why Noodle King and Oni Ramen elect to reflect their community through ramen is due to the fact that this food emerges from hard times; it is about coming together and sharing a meal *despite* hard times.

Although I continue to tell customers and friends that ramen is “just noodles and soup,” it clearly has complex meanings and is deeply significant. Perhaps it would be best to tell my guests, when they ask what ramen is, that it is as much Canadian as Japanese, as much local as global, as much dependent upon here and now as its long cultural history and personal meanings. This hybridity opens up space for continued discussions regarding Canadian cuisine, as well as how food and culinary tourism offer significant avenues for exploring one’s own identity, community, and place in the world.

Notes:

¹ To protect the privacy of these restaurants, as well as the staff and owners, I have used pseudonyms for both restaurants and have generalized locations.

² According to the 2016 Canadian census, approximately 7% of Noodle King’s local community is composed of visible minorities. Of these, 0.04% identified as Japanese. Compared to Oni Ramen’s community where 18.8% are visible minorities, and 0.14% identified as Japanese. Source: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

³ All informants have been given pseudonyms.

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