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Why Japan?

Why Ramen?

Why Ivan Orkin?

*Words: Chris Cosentino
Images: Daniel Krieger*



IVAN ORKIN and I met on a street in Manhattan eight years ago. We knew of each other but had never met. I was on my way to eat and invited him along. We went for an incredible impromptu offal meal at Takashi and talked about Japan for hours. Then, two years later, we bumped into each other in Shibuya, Tokyo, and he spent the day touring us around. Ivan's love of Japan is infectious. What follows is just a taste of our conversation.

Do you ride your bike in Manhattan? I used to ride in New York back in the day, but now the Citi Bikes are crazy and the traffic is a bit much. I feel like people put a star on their car whenever they hit someone on a Citi Bike. When I was in Japan I rode my bike to commute to work every day. Everyone rides bikes to work, to the subway. There are whole parking lots just for bikes. It's a very civilized way of getting around Tokyo.

When did you decide to move to Japan? As a kid on Long Island in 1978, I got a job at a sushi spot washing dishes. That sparked my love of cooking and I became enamored with Japanese culture. In college, I majored in Japanese culture and I learned the language. Then I decided to immerse myself by moving there. I came back to New York and enrolled in culinary school. Graduating from the Culinary Institute of America was part two of my education. I was 30 years old. When I became a cook, there were not many Japanese restaurants in the U.S. and they wouldn't hire non-Japanese workers. It was a very insular community at that time. So I went and worked at Mesa Grill and Lutèce, both with very classic cooking styles. In 2000, I moved back to Japan, but I never even fantasized about opening a ramen shop.



It takes a set of brass ones for an American to open a ramen shop in Japan, right? I fit in. I was part of the community. I hung out with neighbors, paid my taxes, followed the rules, so why wouldn't I open a business? It was my home. Isn't it amazing that Japanese people can come to New York and be accepted? Why shouldn't I be accepted in Japan? There is no difference between opening or staging in Europe and opening in Japan. It's just like any expats anywhere—follow the rules and anything is possible. I felt like I belonged in Japan. It takes brass balls to open a business, period, whether I am in Japan or in New York. People tell us we are crazy. But read about successful people; they stumble horribly. The only way to grow is to make the mistakes and learn from them. Great mistakes make amazing people. There are two kinds of people; when they stumble, either they retract or resolve. I chose to resolve.

How did you adapt from your classic training to cooking ramen in Japan? I hate cool food! Food that doesn't make sense—"foofy" food. Most people can't take 15 flavors and make a symphony. I told my wife I just want to make the best ramen in Tokyo. My job as a chef is to make things taste good. Making people happy, honoring the feeling and spirit of ramen, I needed to learn what are the boundaries for my Japanese customers. Thinking about umami [a savory taste], I created my ramen when I was in my 40s. I didn't need to go crazy, just be delicious. My customers would tell me I have western flavors, but they kept coming back. I insisted on having an oven in my 175-square-foot kitchen when I opened





Ivan Ramen. An oven makes me feel good. I had been cooking for 20 years, I didn't want to stage. I am aware of prep lists, storage space, all about organization from classical training. I felt I had this.

You moved back to the U.S. in December 2011. Do you still have the Ramen shops in Japan? No. In Tokyo, it was two tiny shops and it was too hard to manage from the U.S. My wife said it was nostalgia and it's time to let it go. I sold one of the locations to my No. 2 chef and closed the other shop.

Is there a ramen shop in Japan you think people should try? Ramenadventures.com is the best place to find the best spots. There's a miso place called ticombo in Kanda, which has super-fun ramen that is really ramine, it's so rich, intense and spicy.

For a first-timer in Japan, what are the five must-see or must-eat things? Make sure you eat at a good French or Italian place. Why would you do that? It's important. Some of the best French and Italian restaurants are in Japan. The best French pastries in the world, amazing pizza, go to Pierre Hermé salon and sip tea and eat sick deserts. It's incredible. People don't realize how amazing it is; be surprised by trying. Tokyo's Tsujiki market is great to see the hawkers, eat an egg omelet, buy a knife, get some sushi; go after 8 p.m. and see the tail end of the market. Train food is amazing—ride the bullet train, eat a bento box, have a great beer and see the beautiful scenery go by.

GOOD READ
 Ivan Orkin has two books: "Ivan Ramen" and the soon-to-be-released "Gajin Cookbook"—recipes from him cooking with his wife at home that he has been making for 15 years for his family. It's a fun book with all the "cheffiness" taken out. His restaurant, Ivan Ramen, is located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at 25 Clinton Street. Instagram @ramenjunkie

What was the most surprising thing when you first moved to Japan? Things just make sense in Japan. Of course, you line up for things, and it's super clean. I miss the respect and courtesy. People are responsible, very conscious of their space. They pick up garbage. It's super polite. The quality of product is over the top. When you talk about the love and passion and the history of passing down the techniques from family member to family member, it's very specialized.

Do you miss working and living in Japan? I like to go back three times a year. It's good for the family. I go cook some events and visit with friends, eat some amazing food. Japan will always be my second home. *Pm*