



# MUCH ADO ABOUT UDON

Sanuki udon, that is.

To make Sanuki udon, wheat flour dough is kneaded, rolled, cut into long ribbons, dropped into boiling water and removed as soon as the noodles rise to the surface, ready to eat.

## KUMIKO SATO

**N**OODLES play a major role in Japanese food culture. One popular variety of noodles is udon, in which flour is kneaded into dough and then stretched out and cut into long, thin strands. Since long ago, udon has been a familiar and popular food for the common people of all regions of Japan, and the way udon is made and eaten varies characteristically between each region. The most well-known and popular of them all is “Sanuki udon,” which bears the old provincial name for Kagawa Prefecture.

Kagawa Prefecture covers the north-eastern corner of the island of Shikoku, facing onto the Seto Inland Sea. It has a warm climate but receives little rainfall, and its rice-growing efforts have often met with crop damage due to droughts. For that reason, the people of Kagawa grew wheat crops as an alternative to rice. Since dry climatic conditions are actually more suitable for growing wheat, the people of Kagawa were able to obtain good-quality wheat. The ingredients for udon are very simple, consisting only of wheat flour, salt and water, so the quality of the raw ingredients is key. Blessed by the calm inland sea and sunny weather, Kagawa has also been a salt-producing region since ancient times, with extensive salt fields.

Sanuki udon is made using a bizarre method in which the dough, which is kneaded from wheat flour with the addition of salt and water, is then kneaded further using the feet. Masaaki Kagawa, third-generation president of Sanuki Mengyo Co. – originally an udon shop founded by his grandfather, who was one of the master udon makers in his village – revealed the secret of udon production. “Putting your body weight into it and treading rhythmically is what gives the dough that powerful elasticity that is so unique to Sanuki udon,” he says.

The finished dough is then stretched out to an even thickness using a rolling pin and cut out using a knife, producing noodles with angular corners on their cut edges. The noodles are then thrown into a large cooking pot called a *kama*, which is filled with boiling hot water. Once the noodles begin to float, as if dancing around in the hot water, then the beautiful, semi-transparent Sanuki udon is ready to eat.

The essential accompaniment when eating these boiled noodles is *dashi*, the special broth that udon is served with. “The dashi served with Sanuki udon also has unique characteristics. While many types of dashi used in Japanese cooking are made using dried fish shavings like *katsuobushi* (dried, fermented skipjack tuna shavings), the basic ingredient in the dashi used for Sanuki udon is *iriko*,” says President Kagawa. *Iriko* is a word used to refer to dried Japanese anchovies,

which are another local specialty of Kagawa and other coastal regions along the Seto Inland Sea.

Sanuki udon has a long history. It is said that it originated in the year 806, when the Sanuki-born Buddhist high priest Kukai brought the method for making it back with him from his studies in China. A folding screen painting created around 300 years ago, which portrays the scene of a religious festival at Kotohira Shrine, depicts udon shops along the road leading to the shrine, and it can be seen from the picture that the noodles were being made using methods that remain completely unchanged to this day.

Teruo Suwa, chairman of the Sanuki Udon Research Association, explains:

“In the past, udon was a special food that people would eat at annual events such as agricultural events, festivals, new year, *hange* or *hangesho* (the eleventh day after the summer solstice) and *bon* (an annual Buddhist event where Japanese people honor the spirits of their ancestors); as well as at temple ceremonies and celebrations, and at places where people gathered to dine together after collaborative work efforts. There would always have been a master udon maker in every village. Even today, in Kagawa, discussions become heated whenever the subject of udon is brought up. The udon masters of the past must surely have worked to refine the delicious taste and texture of their udon by exchanging information with each other on how to make it.”

There are various different ways of eating Sanuki udon. It can be eaten hot or cold, dipped in *tsuyu* (a soy-sauce-based dipping sauce) or with dashi poured over it. In recent times, udon shops leave the choice of preferred style of eating up to the customer, and so around half of all udon shops in Kagawa Prefecture are now self-service. Customers receive only the boiled noodles, and then proceed to finish the dish off in their own preferred style; freely adding various toppings that are provided in the shop such as tempura, green onions, ginger and egg, and finally choosing sauces, such as soy sauce or *dashi*.

“These days, many Kagawa residents have come to eat udon at shops. Our group holds udon-making workshops aimed at children, so that we may



Sanuki udon can be eaten hot or cold, and either dipped in *tsuyu* (a soy-sauce-based dipping sauce) as in this picture or with dashi poured over it in a bowl.

continue passing on the traditions of udon to future generations. Our workshops are always very well received,” says Suwa.

“We say that the distinguishing characteristics of Sanuki udon are its *hada* (smooth skin-like texture), *tsuya* (shine) and *koshi* (chewy elasticity),” says Michihiro Arai, chief of the Kagawa Prefectural Government’s Local Products Promotion Division. “It feels smooth on the tongue and as it goes down the throat, and has a strong, chewy texture when bitten. The people of Kagawa love their udon so much that Kagawa has given itself the name ‘Udon-ken,’ meaning ‘Udon Prefecture.’ There are approximately 600 udon shops in the prefecture, and in recent times the number of people visiting Kagawa – not only from other parts of Japan, but also from overseas – to eat Sanuki udon is increasing.”

Meanwhile Kagawa Prefectural Agricultural Experiment Station, in cooperation with Kagawa’s udon industry, has been working to improve wheat varieties that are suited for use in the manufacture of Sanuki udon, and has succeeded in creating its own wheat brand named “*Sanuki no Yume*,” or “Sanuki Dream.” And in 2016, a course entitled Udon Studies was opened at Kagawa University’s Faculty of Agriculture, enabling students to study and acquire a wide range of udon-related knowledge.

The history of Sanuki udon is said to date back over 1,000 years. Today, with traditional know-how and the added help of scientific corroboration, Sanuki udon continues to evolve, in the search for even greater deliciousness. 🍜