

Nagasaki *champon* as served at Shikairo

CHAMPION NOODLES

Nagasaki's iconic *champon* noodles are loved around Japan but nowhere more so than in the Kyushu island port town of their origin.

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STEAM billows up from the wok as Seiichi Yorozuya tosses the contents – a mixture of seafood, meat and vegetables – with a deft flick of the wrist.

He adds a cream-colored broth and noodles and in the blink of an eye, the chef has ladled out the contents into a porcelain bowl and another serving of Nagasaki's best-known cuisine is being whisked away to an expectant customer at Shikairo, an historic restaurant in the port city's Matsugae Wharf area.

With its characteristic milky-white soup and thick noodles, Nagasaki *champon* is one of Japan's most instantly recognizable dishes. And while other parts of Japan are known for variations on the theme, it's also possibly the only dish that's so inextricably linked to one place.

Nagasaki *champon* was created in the late nineteenth century by a Chinese immigrant named Chen Ping Shun (1873-1939) as a cheap, filling and nutritious meal for the growing population of impoverished Chinese students to the city, which lies in the far west of Japan.

Like Chen, many were from Fujian Province, where a popular way to ask if someone had eaten was to simply inquire “chapon,” according to Chen's great



Customers enjoy a lunch of champon noodles (top), a restaurant in the China Town district (bottom) of Nagasaki



grandson, Masatsugu Chen.

“At first, my great grandfather simply named the dish ‘Shina-udon’ (Chinese noodles), but with the growing presence of Fujianese in the city, it soon became known as ‘chapon,’ which eventually evolved to ‘champon,’” explains Masatsugu, who is the fourth-generation president of Shikairo, which his great grandfather opened almost 120 years ago on the edge of Nagasaki’s Chinese settlement.

Fujian is well known for its plethora of noodle dishes, one of which, *tang rou si mian* (a dish featuring plain soup, noodles and strips of pork), the elder Chen had been desperate to replicate in his adopted home town.

However, a lack of appropriate foodstuffs led him to concoct a completely new variety. With Nagasaki being a port city, seafood was combined with other locally grown produce, such as cabbage, beansprouts and *hanpen* (a pink and green cake made from minced and steamed fish) as the base ingredients. To these were added the noodles and a chicken and pork bone broth.

“The result was a dish that utilized only ingredients he could easily source here, and while the roots of the dish can be found in Fujian, it was a dish unlike any other,” explains Masatsugu. “That’s why we often describe champon as a Chinese dish made in Nagasaki.”

A unique feature of Nagasaki champon is that, unlike its distant cousin, ramen, where each component is prepared individually before being combined in the bowl, the entire dish is created within the wok before being served.

First the vegetables, seafood and meat are flash-grilled in oil at high temperature, before the stock and noodles are added and, finally, a dash of two types of soy sauce are added to taste.

According to Masatsugu, it is this in-wok fusion that gives the soup its uniquely silky, creamy texture.

“Sometimes people with allergies ask rather anxiously if there are any dairy products used, but there are none - no cream, no milk, just the stock, the vegetables and the noodles,” says Masatsugu.

Another unique aspect is the color and texture of the noodles. While Chinese noodles most commonly



have a yellowish tinge and a slightly springy texture, champon noodles are white, featuring a softer, silkier consistency.

The former is a result of an ingredient customarily used in Chinese cuisine called *kansui* (lye water). Champon, meanwhile, uses a Nagasaki-produced variant known as *touaku*, which not only prevents any color change but also gives the noodles their distinctive, slightly eggy flavor.

Nagasaki champon is also unique in its enduring popularity, which Masatsugu puts down to its humble, benevolent beginnings and refusal to adopt sauces and other condiments that have found their way into kitchens over the intervening years.

“I think a reason it has lasted so long is that it was never developed as an idea food or a fad, but as a filling, nutritious repast that equated to a good home cooked meal,” says Masatsugu. “Also I think another reason is that there is now a custom in Nagasaki for local people to make the dish at home. It has become a deep-rooted part of the local food culture and a much loved dish throughout Japan.”