THE SOUP ISSUE

THE JAPANESE INVASION P. 14
TOP RAMEN P. 17
POZOLE P. 18
HOT POT P. 19
PHO P. 20
THE SLURPTOWN RECIPE CONTEST

Submit your best. We will make five and have a panel pick the winner.

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Everywhere the guy with the Mohawk went, the cameras followed.

It was grand-opening night, Oct. 18, at the new Portland location of Tokyo-based ramen chain Afuri just off Southeast Morrison Street. Brothers and celebrity ramen chefs Hiroshi and Shigetoshi Nakamura strode through their stately Japanese-inflected pleasure dome trailed by not one but two camera crews. Shigetoshi, who designed the noodles his brother’s ramen chain uses in Portland, was the one with the flattened ‘hawk.

“They’re filming a documentary,” we were told by bartender Ryan Magarian, who made the punctiliously precise cocktails on Afuri’s menu. “It’s like Jiro Dreams of Sushi, but for ramen.”

The other camera guy was for local TV news, and sometimes the crews pointed their cameras at each other. Afuri’s ramen is so popular in Tokyo that would-be diners line up around the block in the morning to buy a “ticket” to their afternoon meal from a little vending machine, like crowds in the aughts trying to get into David Letterman.

That night at Afuri, one thing became very clear: Real-deal Japanese ramen had finally come to Portland.

Ramen is, of course, Japan’s drunky, slurping comfort food, the equal province of late-night hard-drinking salarymen and harried lawyers at lunchtime. But it is also serious business. The
maker of a city’s finest tonkotsu or shio broth is a subject for debate every bit as serious as the brisket champ of Texas hill country or the finest bistro burger in Portland.

A truly great bowl of ramen, marrying the subtle flavors of tare seasoning with soup base, pinged by salty nori and the alkaline tang of lightly al dente noodles, deepened by molten egg and fatty pork chashu, is not just comfort but revelation. Ramen can make you cry.

But Portland ramen used to be crap. Until 10 years ago in this town, it was still mostly a dry good scarfed by college kids after 2 am, fancied up maybe with a drunken egg drop and about 6 ounces of Sriracha. Even as recently as a few years ago, if you wanted a good Hakata-style tonkotsu pork broth, you had to drive to a Beaverton strip mall to seek out an almost unmarked door with blacked-out windows next to the cellphone store.

Now in the past two years alone, three different ramen chains from Japan have parked themselves here, while seemingly every strip-mall neighborhood in town gets its own local ramen-ya next to the artisan wood-fired pizzeria.

But the best bowls in town right now are mostly from just those three chains from Tokyo: Kizuki, Marukin and Afuri. I know, because I ate them all—almost 40 bowls at over a dozen spots that specialize in ramen (see opposite page).

So why are the Japanese slinging noodles in a midsized provincial city like Portland? Well, it’s a little bit of luck, and a little bit of fear.

The sudden onslaught of Japanese restaurants expanding to the U.S. isn’t just a Portland phenomenon. Even with our three Shigezo izakayas beginning in 2011, we’re actually late to the game. According to national food blog Tasting Table, the glut of Japanese expansion to Los Angeles and New York is partly inspired by Japan’s low birth rate: Turns out if there are fewer people in the country, your restaurant doesn’t do as well. New York PR firms are now staging seminars for Japanese restaurateurs eager to follow ramen dons Ippudo and Ichiran to Manhattan and Bushwick.

That’s the story with Kizuki, whose palatially high-ceilinged strip-mall spot in Beaverton has wait times of over 30 minutes even at 1 pm on a Tuesday for bracingly garlicky tonkotsu and the lovely tsukemen, a variety of ramen dipped in broth as you eat. The chain came first to Seattle and is now churning out locations and franchises all over the country: Carmel, Ind., Chicago and God knows where else. (Kizuki swapped out its international name from Kukai after noting its unhealthy resemblance to both a French perfume brand and the Hawaiian word for birdshit.)

But for the time being, only Portland gets Marukin and Afuri. Both are well-loved Tokyo boutique chains, and both are probably making some of the best ramen in the country.

Afuri has the higher profile, and not just because of the considerable money it obviously suffered in the translation to Portland. In a healthy resemblance to Port- land, but Hijikata says the diversity of interests and backgrounds of Portland-trained chefs is something she has to work through when making something so dedicated to consistency.

“[Marukin’s] founders love talking to the cooks here,” says Rademacher. “They ask about the tattoos. They’re not used to cooks being in bands.”

Lake Oswego would be the next-door neighbor and friend of Masa Hayashi, now a co-owner of Marukin. “We were both hockey players,” says Rademacher, “which is rare in Japan.”

During one of Hayashi’s visits three years ago to his son, who was going to school in British Columbia, he liked the region so much he turned to Rademacher and said, in a line familiar to impulsive Portland transplants from everywhere, “What about here?”

Marukin keeps it simple—counter-service ramen with a few sides—and unlike almost every other shop in town, it makes its constantly improving, firm-textured noodles by hand at its own shop. Chef Mayumi Hijikata, who traveled here from Japan after cooking with Marukin for more than a decade, cooks down its trademark, impossibly rich and balanced tonkotsu for eight hours from pork bone stock, creating a broth neither oversweet nor overly fatty but nonetheless big as hell, like a Pollock painstakingly made with fine brushwork. (Her favorite, for the record, is the chicken-stock paitan shio.)

The ramen doesn’t seem to have suffered in the translation to Portland, but Hijikata says the diversity of interests and backgrounds of Portland-trained chefs is something she has to work through when making something so dedicated to consistency.

“I love the idea that the chefs think about the ingredients individually,” says Rademacher. “But we’re not used to cooks being in bands.”
Ramen ain’t nothin’ but a noodle. Generally, it’s a pretty thin one with some alkaline salts added, which keep the noodles firm in hot broth and also tasting a wee bit like a soda cracker.

But beyond that, the world is your huckleberry. Sure, there are the traditional four “classes” of ramen covering the three main flavorings, called “tare”—shoyu (soy), shio (salt) and miso (fermented soy)—and also a fourth class called tonkotsu, which describes the super-rich pork broth that came out of Kyushu in the south of Japan.

In a country obsessed with tradition but addicted to novelty, there are seemingly no limits. Depending where you are in Japan, you can pick up abura (oily ramen), mazemen (no-broth ramen) and tsukemen (dipping ramen). There’s spiciness, ramen and ramen that comes with cheese, tan tan ramen with Chinese-style spicy sauce, citrus-laden ramen, and apparently even ramen that tastes like spaghetti Bolognese.

We slurped our way through more than a dozen ramen houses in Portland and Beaverton, eating 39 bowls to find our favorites of each type. Here’s where to get the best of the best in Portland.

**BEST BOWLS**
The best ramen in Portland, by style.

**BY MATTHEW KORFHAGE mkorfhage@wweek.com**

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**Tonkotsu**

**Tonkotsu shoyu at Marukin ($10)**

Thanks in part to the success of Hakata-style ramen giant Ippudo in this country, tonkotsu is what Americans talk about when we talk about ramen. The broth is big, loud, fatty, sometimes sweet and always full of pork—everything we are as a people. Not only that, but tonkotsu is so dense with umami it covers flaws: It doesn’t even have to be good to be good, the same way a puppy doesn’t have to be cute to be cute. But Marukin’s tonkotsu is nonetheless in a class by itself in Portland—slightly light for the form, avoiding both indelicate porky sweetness and the gut bomb afflicting lesser tonkotsu, without sacrificing any depth of flavor. The effect is like an elephant riding a unicycle, terrifying and amazing in the bigness of its balance. If you like spicy, get the red version: Marukin has lately dialed in its chili levels to perfection.

**Honorable mention:** Beaverton’s Yuzu serves a broth devoted to the excessive pork-sweetness that Marukin dodges—and it is wonderful, a butterball of pure comfort for which no other broth in town substitutes. If you like garlic so intense you’ll wake up in the middle of the night with the smell of it in your sweat, the garlic tonkotsu shoyu at Beaverton’s Kizuki is yours to love.

**Shio**

**Yuzu shio at Afuri ($15)**

Afuri’s American CEO, Taichi Ichizawa, worries that its shio broth ramens done sprang—in many ways the baseline and middle ground for what ramen can be, neither light and pure as shio nor palate-filling as miso or tonkotsu. But sometimes this also makes it a poor cousin, light but unsubtle. Not so the shoyu at Afuri: The shop’s chicken-bone broth has the floor dropped on its flavor by shimeji mushroom and lightly sweet endive, offset with salty nori and a delicately seasoned egg. Avoiding the woodiness of many local pork shoyus, Afuri’s broth is like a depth charge for soy, a palate-changing monster from the center of the earth.

**Honorable mention:** Marukin’s pork-chicken miso shoyu ($15) is beautifully simple, its flavor easing in like an old recliner; it’s as if the basic soy-sauce broth were always the best thing Shigezo makes, a lovely soft-egg-sopped, truffl e, shiitake and lightly smoky hoji tea, amid that riot of ferment and the gentle herbal notes of Chinese chive.

**Miso**

**Spicy yuzu miso at Mirakutei ($11.50)**

Miso is the youngest of the Big Four, coming out of Hokkaido in the ‘60s alongside a mess of curried ramens, throwing a wash of sweet fermented soybean into the tare for a never-miss formula. Mirakutei uses the citrusy sweet-heat formula perfected by the Caribbean to make an equally perfect flavor bomb deepened with miso ferment like the pith to a fruit, with a wonderfully satisfying circular slab of pork chashu.

**Honorable mention:** Marukin’s pork-chicken miso shoyu ($10) is beautifully simple, its flavor easing in like an old recliner; it’s as if the basic soy-sauce broth were always anticipating the ferment. Also Afuri’s vegan miso (see below) shames most in town.

**Vegan**

**Black truffle miso at Afuri ($18)**

Japan doesn’t do vegan much. And yet, this wholly vegan broth is the finest no-meat broth in town—with a black bean miso aged 8 months until the ferment grows into its character, with still more earthy depths in the form of truffle, shitake and lightly smoky hoji tea, amid that riot of ferment and the gentle herbal notes of Chinese chive.

**Honorable mention:** Until last month, I would have sent you straight to Biwa spinoff Noraneko in the Water District, whose shiitake broth was up to then the richest and most satisfying vegan broth I’ve had—though I prefer to unveg it with Noraneko’s baconesque chashu and delightfully salty seasoned egg.
It seems like every culture has some soup or stew at the center of its comfort cuisine, from Texas chili to Chinese congee. In Mexico, it’s pozole, a hearty stew built on a base of nixtamalized corn kernels.

In my St. Johns neighborhood, pozole has become the standard centerpiece of many a small gathering and potluck. On a wet, chilly night, nothing is cozier. But I have yet to convince anyone at these gatherings to serve me cocktails, and I usually end up loading the dishwasher.

Since I can’t invite everyone over—and since I hate doing dishes—I dropped by Tazon, the monthly pozole night at Tournant, a tiny boutique event space in Northeast Portland.

Tazon started the right way, as an excuse to share something special and delicious. Last spring, Tournant co-chef and co-owner Jaret Foster discovered the local organic nixtamalization company, Three Sisters Nixtamal. Nixtamalization is the process of exposing hulled corn kernels to an alkaline solution, typically limewater, to make it more nutritious and easier to digest. That process forms the basis of much Mexican cuisine.

“Tournant’s pozole night is a soul-warming event built on locally made hominy.”

BY ADRIENNE SO @adso_sheehan

That’s especially true if that group has ordered a round of mescal Manhattans or margaritas.

After being seated, you choose between three kinds of pozole, which are quickly delivered to your table. Pork rojo, pollo verde, and verduras (red pork, green chicken, and vegetables) all start at $12 and come with a plate heaped high with garnishes like shredded cabbage, onion, cilantro, radish, lime and tortilla chips. You can also select other toppings for $2 or $3 apiece. I recommend spending $3 to get a queso fresco tamalito on the side—a tiny tamale with Ancient Heritage Dairy queso fresco tucked inside.

Tournant’s pork rojo comes with generous helpings of tender, slow-braised shoulder meat and big, rich kernels of hominy, served in a dark, opaque, spiced and aromatic broth. Both the pork rojo and pollo verde, served with salsa-braised chicken thigh, were a little thin, more like soup than the thick and flavorful stews I’ve had before. But topped with plenty of tortilla chips, radishes and cabbage, both were filling and savory.

“In my mind’s eye, I saw a big, simple bowl of food that you could put ingredients in across the board, like the slow egg or the tamal, to make it really soul-satisfying,” Foster says.

At first, the chocolate flan seemed like the perfect ending—pudding made with Woodblock chocolate drizzled with mescal caramel and chile salt. But then came the best possible ending: I finished eating and no one started pestering me to help clean up.

**GO:** Tournant, 920 NE Glisan St., 503-206-4463, tournantpdx.com. Pozole night is the third Thursday of each month.
POGO FARM’S SHABU SHABU TAKES PORTLAND HOT POT TO A NEW LEVEL.

BY MARTIN CIZMAR mcizmar@wweek.com

In Japan, they like food to be as fresh as possible. That preference defines the teppanyaki steakhouses, DIY okonomiyaki pancake spots and izikukiri, seafood served and eaten while the heart beats on.

So it’s not surprising the Japanese have their own versions of the hot pot self-serve soups you find across East Asia.

In Japan, soup that bubbles at the center of a family table is called nabemono, and there are many variations. The one you’re most likely to spot in Portland is called shabu shabu. It’s a lot like familiar Chinese hot pots, except the boiling broth is made with kombu, or kelp, and is very simple to start with, picking up flavors from the cooking leeks, chrysanthemum leaf, tofu and napa cabbage.

Until recently, the only shabu shabu in town was low-grade stuff served at spots that also make California rolls. But, in November, Pono Farm Soul Kitchen upped the ante with a reservation-only shabu shabu service that uses exceptional meat from its family farm in central Oregon. For $35, you get a platter of meat ranched by Pono Farm and fresh produce acquired by trading its beef at the farmers market on Saturdays.

Pono's regular menu is inconsistent, but the thin-sliced rib-eye in its shabu shabu is the best beef I’ve eaten this year.

“The idea of the parties that come in, you can tell just by the head nod as soon as they eat the meat,” says co-owner Ellen Chien. “They just eat it and, ‘Wow.’”

This is the first time Pono, which also has a restaurant in Bend, has offered shabu shabu. But Chien and co-owner Ted Nakato have a lot of experience with it.

“That’s actually our Thanksgiving meal,” says Chien, who is from Taiwan. “We don’t do turkey, we gather around the hot pot. With the winter season coming, we figured it’d be something new to try and a great way to present our meat.”

In Japanese cuisine, they want to end the meal with a starch, either rice or noodles,” says Nakato. “So with a lot of these hot pot dishes, they add either rice or noodle at the very end to finish the meal.”

For those accustomed to Chinese hot pot, there are a few other twists, like the emphasis on the final broth. Pono finishes its shabu shabu by adding rice to make a soup. It even offers an optional $10 upgrade to spike that final broth with mushrooms—black trumpet, yellowfoot, hedgehog, maitake and the like—and make it extra, extra savory.

“To me, this seemed unnecessary. So we passed on the upgrade. But given the surprise of that steak, maybe that was a mistake.”

GO: Pono Farm Soul Kitchen, 4118 NE Sandy Blvd., 503-889-0885, soulkitchenpdx.com. $35 for beef and pork, $45 for all beef. To make a reservation, contact Ellen Chien at ellen@ponofarm.com.
MAKING OF A SOUP LEGEND

THE EPIC JOURNEY OF THE FAMILY BEHIND HA VL, PORTLAND’S MOST FAMOUS BROTH MASTERS.

BY ZACH MIDDLETON zmiddleton@wweek.com

Ha VL is probably the worst-kept secret in Portland. Sure, the tiny banh mi shack is tucked almost invisibly into the back end of a Southeast 82nd Avenue strip mall, and its exterior looks a bit like an inner-city smoke house. But its rotating menu of meticulously crafted Vietnamese soups has become legend.

After eating there four days in a row on a 2010 tour stop, Pavement bassist Mark Ibold became so obsessed with the place that he wrote a love letter to Ha VL in Lucky Peach. Bon Appétit’s Alex Grossman declared Ha VL one of his favorite five restaurants in the world, alongside Manfreds in Copenhagen and Contramar in Mexico City.

But while the meaty, herbal, elegant compositions of turmeric noodles, snail meatball soup and shrimp-caked vermicelli will indeed shock your taste buds like licking a 9-volt battery, few of Ha VL’s customers know the family’s world-spanning, decades-long journey to starting the restaurant.

It all began with the CIA and the fall of Saigon.

Before and during the Vietnam War, William Vuong, patriarch of the family behind Ha VL and sister restaurant Rose VL Deli, served as a Provincial Reconnaissance Forces Commander cooperating with the United States. “I was working with the CIA,” the 76-year-old says with a wink, sipping tea while manning his usual station at one of Rose VL’s tables.

But after the withdrawal of American troops in 1975, Vuong became distinctly unpopular with the Communist government, which he says “confiscated” his country after the war. His American connections landed him in a Vietnamese prison for 10 years.

With her husband gone, Christina Ha Luu (who loaned her name, somewhat shortened, to Ha VL) was left alone to raise their six young boys until William was eventually released as a prisoner of war in 1985. But even after his release, it quickly became apparent that the family’s future lay outside the heavily destabilized country.

“There was murder and rape, it was horrible,” says son Peter Vuong, now chef at Ha VL.

So in 1986, Peter and three of his brothers fled Vietnam, striking out on their own to find a place for their family. They washed ashore at a Malaysian refugee camp on Bidong Island in the South China Sea, where the government housed countless “boat people” abandoning Vietnam. Peter doesn’t like to talk about it, but the conditions were unimaginably harsh. Some reports claim 40,000 people were housed in a space approximately the size of a football field.

Luckily, he didn’t have to stay long. After stopping at a way station in the Philippines, Peter was sponsored to gain immigrant status by one of his father’s former students, and was able to travel to the U.S. in 1986. He survived by washing dishes and cooking, often working multiple full-time jobs, but always bouncing back to a kitchen.

But even with four of their sons already in the United States, William Vuong and Luu were unable to attain refugee status, and were stuck in limbo in Saigon. It would take seven years before they were able to rejoin their family, and 13 more before they were able to realize their dream of starting a restaurant.

Luu, 68, who seems never to stop moving and speaks in staccato bursts, was the entrepreneurial energy responsible for opening Ha VL in 2006. She’d completed a trade program in baking back in Vietnam, and had been taught how to cook by her mother and mother-in-law. Both, she says, were excellent cooks. In those early days, Ha VL was just a cafe. “We wanted a small restaurant, just sandwiches and coffee,” says William.

But after a few months of miserable business, Luu decided to add a soup—bun bo Hue—to the menu. It soon began to sell out, so they added another soup, then another. Now Luu and her family serve a rotating menu of two soups each day, six days a week. Each morning, Vietnamese men, including chefs from nearby restaurants, sit in front of Ha VL eating, smoking, and drinking the restaurant’s phenomenal iced coffee made with William’s secret blend of beans.

They sell out of their soups each day. After noon, you’re usually out of luck.

Ha VL has passed on to Peter, 49, who’s maintained his parents’ high standard of excellence. He shops at several markets to buy ingredients for his soups, and wakes up early to start making the broth. “I don’t serve people leftovers,” he says, peering over his eye glasses. He’s sporting a backward paperboy cap and a sweater unzipped to reveal a small, gold chain around his neck. “It has to be made fresh every day.”

You can find many of William Vuong and Luu’s grandchildren working at Ha VL and Rose VL, the restaurant the couple opened when they got bored of starting a restaurant.

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Three at VL

SOUPS YOU MUST TRY.

Bun cha oc
(snail noodle soup, available Thursdays at Ha VL)

One of Peter Vuong’s unique innovations is his take on bun cha oc, Ha VL’s snail noodle soup. Traditionally, this soup contains whole snails, but Peter developed a lemongrass-scented snail meatball “to make the snails more flavorful.” Floating in a broth made from pork bones, the hearty soup is bolstered by fried tofu and slices of pork loin, while tomato provides a fresh and acidic contrast.

Bun bo Hue
(available Saturdays at Ha VL and Wednesdays at Rose VL)

The first soup offered at Ha VL was bun bo Hue, a spicy, lemongrass-scented beef noodle soup named after the central Vietnamese city where it was invented. Round, vermicelli noodles are supple and slurpable, while three cuts of meat provide textural dynamics: pork meatloaf has a smooth and even texture, thinly sliced beef round steak is somewhat tougher, and pork loin has a luxurious texture. Ha VL’s bun bo Hue—a family recipe, according to patriarch William Vuong—omits the red-brown cubes of congealed pig’s blood that are used in many renditions of the soup. Topping the accompanying plate of salad and herbs are tiny shavings of banana flower that have a sweet, clean taste.

Mi Quang
(Vietnamese turmeric noodle soup, available Sundays at Ha VL and Saturdays at Rose VL)

This may be the Vuongs’ most complex soup, made with condensed pork broth and turmeric-dyed noodles. When asked about it, William Vuong—as he sometimes does—leaned in to whisper in grave secrecy, a trait that’s fun to imagine is a holdover from his time colluding with the CIA: “The secret is a concentrated broth. Twelve ingredients cooked over low fire for three hours. No one else can make it right.”

The porcine party continues with pork ribs, pork meatloaf, ground pork and pork loin. There’s also shrimp, shrimp cake, and dried, ground shrimp for seasoning, with a handful of ground peanuts and a sesame rice cracker giving a final crunch. ZACH MIDDLETON.

Willamette Week DECEMBER 14, 2016 wweek.com
Alongside the bastard stepchildren of Los Angeles—the Korean taco and the California roll—cioppino is the West Coast's only homegrown food tradition that matters, the only one we made for ourselves.

The first time Jacqueline chef Derek Hanson tried it, he couldn't believe what he was tasting.

Hanson grew up in Denver, but accompanying his father on a business trip to San Francisco, he got his first taste of the Italian-style, fiery-hot tomato-and-wine broth brimming with fish and shells and crab legs fresh from the Pacific.

“I come from a landlocked state,” he says. “I'd never had anything like it.”

Neither has most of the country. Although some easterly fish houses serve a version, often one much closer to that found in Italy, cioppino remains tied to the specific bounty of the Pacific: our King and Dungeness crabs, our bountiful mussels and delicate oysters.

Like all of us here on the edge of the country, cioppino began as a somewhat shy stew of leftovers, steeped in alcohol.

The way the story goes, the Italian fishermen of old San Francisco used to make a communal pot at the end of the day, each fisherman adding a bit of leftover seafood to an herbed brine of wine, garlic, onion and tomato: a mussel or clam here, a crab leg there, a hulking hunk of whitefish to boot.

It was called “ciuppin”—the word for “chop” and “little soup.”

By the '20s, it was San Francisco's signature restaurant dish, and it spread up and down the coast.

Though I grew up hundreds of miles north of its birthplace, the spicy Genoese-style peasant soup remains the only food I think of as my birthright. My father discovered it through an old Sunset magazine article, and when I was young our family ate cioppino just once a year, in September or October. It was the brief moment in Oregon when the seasons for tomatoes and shellfish converged. We invited everybody we knew—especially people with boats who would now owe us favors—to come eat a mammoth pot of the stuff.

Salty's, Cabezon, Gino's, Mama Mia and RingSide Fish House each have their own versions, as do 20 other seafood and Italian spots all over town.

“But none of the new, young, hip spots are making it,” Hanson says. “It's all the old-school places.” On a West Coast not used to maintaining its traditions—or even having them to begin with—the existing fan base for cioppino looks a bit like a convention for General Motors car salesmen, enthusiastic and devoted to better days.

Southeast Clinton Street's Jacqueline is the first Portland restaurant in years to make cioppino a trademark, even if the stylish hall of spicy-smoky cocktails, delicate butterfish and shiitake-botarga salads may seem an unlikely home for an updated take on a dish often eaten with the help of pliers. But Jacqueline's cioppino is the best I've had in a restaurant.

And it happened almost by accident. Hanson had planned to serve a bouillabaisse, but the classic French fish stew was too complicated and time-consuming to make sense for his restaurant. He went with cioppino in part because it was simpler.

But it quickly got complicated. Early versions of the soup came out too thin, Hanson says. And the seasons were a problem. Shells
and especially local Dungeness crab are best in the winter, tomatoes in late summer.

He hit on the idea of preserving tomatoes, and drying them in the oven overnight, while deriving most of his water not from tomatoes but from his cooked-down jus of mussels and the wine he adds in the braise. The result was a denser flavor: more tomato, more thickness, more seafood, more everything.

But, Hanson says, “the thing that makes cioppino is the heat.”

Hanson discovered that researchers at the Oregon State University Food Innovation Center had begun fooling around with growing Peruvian aji amarillo peppers on Sauvie Island.

The farming experiment worked. “But they never came back for the peppers,” Hanson says. So now they’re in Jacqueline’s kitchen.

Hanson made an aji amarillo concentrate that tastes like the molten core at the center of life itself: bright, vinegary, citric. This is the source of most of the cioppino’s heat, but the acid burst of flavor also brings out that dense, garlicky tomato, wine, onion, Herbsaint fennel and garden pepper stock that forms the base of his broth.

It is a blockbuster—the first cioppino since I was 8 years old that has offered that same heart-shaking sense of discovery. It also indulges that affinity, natural to coastal people, for the primitive crack of shell and tomato spatter up to your neck, amid swirling herb and a touch of fire.

“Honestly, I thought more people would complain about the mess,” Hanson says. “Really, it’s what keeps my restaurant in business. The old-school fish-house fare lets me experiment, make fancier things elsewhere on the menu. You can’t just be fancy everywhere.”

GO: Jacqueline, 2039 SE Clinton St., 503-327-8637, jacqeulinepdx.com.
The ‘Stans of Central Asia are a melting pot of cultures in a way much more profound and ancient than the United States. Tucked between Europe and Asia, countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are a fulcrum between two empires, Russia and China. Both influences show up in the pots on their stoves.

Among the interesting twists on the region’s food is lagman—the ramen of the ‘Stans. If the dish were called “Russian ramen,” who knows, it might be the next cronut. Instead, it’s one of Portland’s rarest exotic soups, and a ready-made lesson in the way most foods we eat today qualify as “fusion.”

The place to eat lagman in Portland is at Traditional Russian Cuisine, a cart that recently moved to Northeast Sandy Boulevard. Despite the name, this cart serves more than borscht, blini, piroshky and pelmeni, digging into the Central Asian specialties of co-owner Bella Abdullaeva’s Uzbek grandmother.

Noodles emigrated from China to Central Asia along with two Muslim minorities: the Uyghur and the Dungan (Hui). Noodles’ popularity grew in places like Uzbekistan until they became part of the local cuisine. Tsarist Russia in the 19th century and Communist Russia in the 20th century each conquered most of Central Asia, not only importing the natural resources, but some of the food as well. So if you search YouTube, you’ll find Russian cooking shows demonstrating how to make lagman.

“Lagman” sounds authentically foreign, even to enlightened hipsters who insist they have no friends who voted for Donald Trump. Like ramen, it was inspired by China’s lamian (literally “pulled noodles”), a limitless canvas for the cultural influences of the cook making it. It can be served wet or dry and with whatever toppings or vegetables are local and seasonal.

Compared to Japanese ramen, lagman is closer to the Chinese original. Ramen primarily uses pork or chicken broths. Lagman, like the original lamian, usually begins with beef or lamb. And the noodles for ramen are usually thinner; typical udon noodles are closer in size to classic lamian. Ramen is usually made by cutting thin sheets of dough, much like Italian pasta. Lamian is stretched, twisted, divided and re-stretched, during what looks like an impossibly convoluted game of cat’s cradle. The finished product is similar: round, slightly chewy wheat noodles.

Traditional Russian Cuisine doesn’t employ either technique—it uses dry noodles because, as Abdullaeva explained, not enough people order the lagman to justify the labor of handmade noodles.

But her soup ($7) is still enjoyable and unique to Portland. The broth, tinted red from tomato, is meaty, punctuated with chunks of stewed beef. Cabbage, scallion, carrot and squash give it heartiness. Pelmeni, dumplings filled with ground lamb, swim in the broth as well, providing a more delicate, yet toothsome noodle for the soup.

**GO:** Traditional Russian Cuisine is at Rose City Food Park, 5235 NE Sandy Blvd., 503-449-1531, pdxrussiancuisine.com. Nick Zukin is the owner of Mi Mero Mole on Southeast Division Street and in Old Town, and co-author of The Artisan Jewish Deli at Home.
HOW TO EAT AN XLB LIKE A PRO

If the soup ends up anywhere other than your mouth, that’s a fail. Likewise, popping a fresh-from-the-steamer XLB directly into your gob is a no-no unless seared flesh is your thing. Bearing in mind that there is no one correct way to eat an XLB (see YouTube), Jasper Shen offers his preferred method:

1. Using the sides (not the points) of your chopsticks, carefully remove an XLB from the steamer basket to a waiting Chinese soup spoon.

2. While still holding the XLB with your chopsticks, bite a small hole in the side of the XLB and pour all the soup into the spoon.

3. Drink the soup from the spoon.

4. Place the dumpling back on the spoon and pour a little dipping sauce over it and add a few threads of ginger.

5. “Shoot” the dumpling, scraping lightly with your teeth if it doesn’t slide off the spoon on its own.

FINALLY, THE XLB SOUP DUMPLING CRAZE IS COMING TO PORTLAND.

BY MICHAEL C. ZUSMAN @mcdaw

It took chef Jasper Shen two and a half years to master the pinching, pulling and twisting technique needed to create a perfect Shanghai soup dumpling. “It’s all about feel,” Shen says, as he demonstrates his routine in my kitchen.

In Portland, it’s heartening to see Shen’s expert technique as he lays out the dumplings. He practiced, he says, every day of those two and a half years. By the time his restaurant, named XLB, opens in North Portland in January, he will already have put in hundreds of hours of reps, all devoted to making the perfect dumpling.

Until the ’90s, almost no one in America had ever tasted a xiao long bao soup dumpling—XLB for short. But since Taiwanese dumpling chain Din Tai Fung took the XLB international two decades ago, opening shops all over the world, the cult of the dumpling has become fervid. New Yorkers and San Franciscans who move to Portland cast around desperately and vainly for a good XLB.

Though dumplings are of ancient provenance, the XLB has a relatively short history. San Francisco food writer Patricia Unterman attributes the XLB’s origins to an unknown, late-19th-century Chinese baker who set up a soup dumpling stand outside a popular public garden in Nanxiang, a village on the outskirts of Shanghai.

Encased in a delicate, nearly translucent pleated purse of noodle dough, each XLB contains a shot of blistering pork broth and a nugget of ground pork. The allure lies in the tender bite-and-slide of noodle, the subtle seasoning and chew of meat, and the mouth-filling savor of the soup. Maybe there’s the element of risk, too—not falling to get soup, meat and noodle down the hatch without spilling or of ingestive scalding soup.

Whatever the source of its ineffable attraction, once you’ve had a perfect XLB, you too will forever crave the elegant harmony of its ingredients.

I stumbled on my first XLB at a branch of Din Tai Fung in Sydney after noticing a line of supplicants and then the exhibition kitchen, with its brigade of prep cooks in white smocks and surgical masks turning out dozens of dumplings. The experience was revelatory. The soup burn on the roof of my mouth healed quickly, and I had to go back the next day. I was powerless to do otherwise.

Although you can get XLBs from two Din Tai Fung outlets in the Seattle area, Portland’s XLB offerings have been hit-and-miss at best, though the newly opened Duck House Chinese Restaurant near Portland State University makes a decent version. That’s expected to change in January, when Shen, who co-founded Portland’s Aviary restaurant after years of cooking in high-end New York City kitchens, opens his own XLB counter in the former Lardo location on North Williams Avenue. Shen’s restaurant will serve a few kinds of buns, noodle dishes and stir-fried greens. But the focus will be on its namesake dumplings.

Those looking for a romanticized recounting of a young Jasper learning how to make soup dumplings at the knees of his grandma are in for disappointment. A self-professed ABC (“American-born Chinese”), the 37-year-old Shen picked up the craft watching YouTube videos.

But already, each element of Shen’s XLB is its own art form. “The dough has to be made with all-purpose flour and warm water to allow for faster gluten development,” Shen explains. The dough is weighed out into small pieces and shaped into balls, which are rolled out with a dowel to paper-thin circles maybe 3 inches in diameter.

Although Din Tai Fung offers pork and pork-and-crab versions of its XLB, Shen is sticking with pork alone. The ground meat is combined with ginger, soy, sesame oil, rice wine, a little cornstarch and Shen’s own nontraditional touch, minced garlic chives.

The broth begins with water and pork bones accompanied by a mirepoix (chopped carrots, onions and celery) plus whole black peppercorns, Sichuan peppercorns, coriander seeds, a bit of clove, dried shiitake mushroom and kombu. With all those glutamates in the mix, you know this broth is going to have plenty of body. The mixture gets cooked down for about six hours. Then, it’s strained and refrigerated overnight. The resulting gelatinized broth goes into the food processor “until it pebbles,” says Shen, to be mixed with the meat before the XLBs are assembled.

Using just the right ratio of ingredients and forming the dumplings properly will allow them to steam to perfection. The only further addition is a little dipping sauce of red or black vinegar (optionally combined with soy sauce) and a few threads of fresh ginger.

As I watch Shen spin out XLBs with the muscle memory that can only come with countless hours of practice, he recounts common pitfalls that can yield torn and leaky soup dumplings—an insult to demanding customers. “Too much air or broth in the dumpling, or a skin that’s rolled out unevenly, can lead to a blowout,” Shen says. But even a well-made XLB can leak, especially in the hands of a novice nosher (see below for tips).

As we relax over a freshly steamed basket of Shen’s XLBs, he mentions two uncles who ran restaurants and offers a reflection on the Chinese experience in America that seems to run in his family: “The thing they know is food.”

GO: Jasper Shen’s restaurant XLB is expected to open in January at 4090 N Williams Ave.
Chef Ken Gordon Shares the Recipe for His Much-Loved Hungarian Mushroom Soup.

BY KEN GORDON @kennyandzukes

Few foods have the versatility of soups. They run the gamut from vegan to meat-laden, healthful to comfort food-rich. Some are complex and planned, others a fridge-cleaning-out hodgepodge of improvisation.

Everything I know about soup I learned while cooking in Paris, working under an old-school chef from Normandy who had spent a two-year apprenticeship doing nothing but preparing soups. He taught me about consommés and veloutes, thick porridges and light airy broths, stews and provincial porridges of vegetables and herbs. A master at extracting the maximum flavors from each ingredient, he passed his craft on to me.

I’d like to think the soups we make at my Jewish deli, Kenny & Zuke’s, honor his legacy. And of those soups, there’s no question about the most popular.

Our Hungarian mushroom soup has been on the menu since we opened, nearly a decade now. It has a loyal following that forbids ever removing it from the menu, even if we wanted to—which we don’t.

Compared to many of the soups I learned in Paris, it’s also a reasonably fast, easy and inexpensive recipe perfect for making at home. Willamette Week asked me to share the recipe.

INGREDIENTS

3 large yellow onions, peeled and diced  
2 peeled carrots, peeled and diced  
3 ribs of celery, diced  
1/2 pound of unsalted butter  
2 tablespoons minced fresh garlic  
2 pounds crimini or white mushrooms, sliced  
3 tablespoons sweet Hungarian paprika  
1 tablespoon dried thyme  
3 tablespoons flour  
1 cup heavy cream  
Salt and black pepper to taste

In a large, heavy pot over medium heat, cook diced onions, carrots and celery in unsalted butter, until the vegetables are softened. Stir in garlic and cook for 5 minutes longer, stirring occasionally. Don’t allow the vegetables to color. Turn up the heat to medium-high and add mushrooms. Stir frequently until mushrooms are cooked through. Season again. Sprinkle with paprika and dried thyme. (Note: Thyme is one of the few herbs I think are good dried, but if you want to use fresh, use a bit more and add it toward the end.)

Stir to mix well.

Turn the heat back to medium and sprinkle with flour. Stir well and keep stirring for 4 to 5 minutes while cooking, coating the mixture well and making sure the flour, which has now formed a roux with the butter, doesn’t stick to the bottom of the pot and burn. Add 2 quarts of hot water and stir well. Bring to a simmer, stirring frequently, and cook for about 10 minutes or so. Add a cup of heavy cream and bring back to a simmer. Correct the seasoning and serve. Should serve up to a dozen people.

Note: There are some customizations you can do to make this a bit finer, such as adding some wild mushrooms into the mix, or a little dry sherry a few minutes before the soup is finished. Feel free.

Another note: You’ll notice I season often. I don’t really add any more salt than I would if I just seasoned all at once, but seasoning each element of a dish as you go along gives more layers to the flavor of your food.

Ken Gordon is the owner and chef at Kenny & Zuke’s Delicatessen, 1038 SW Stark St., 503-222-3354, and Bagelworks, 2376 NW Thurman St., 503-954-1737, kennyandzukes.com.

THE SLURPTOWN RECIPE CONTEST

Submit your best. We will make five and have a panel pick the winner.

Do you have a great soup recipe? Either a cherished family recipe or even an especially fancy twist on a classic? Well, it’s time to share. In honor of our soup issue, Willamette Week is holding a recipe contest. Our editors will choose five of your recipes. Five staffers will prepare them and serve them to a panel of judges. Whoever submits the winning recipe will get a $150 gift certificate to spend on food and drink at Mississippi Studios. Email dish@wweek.com.