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-inflated 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 chasu, 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 scarred 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 midsize 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 sunk into its flashy izakaya behind the Commons Brewery, which sports a deep sake list, two separate bars for dining and drinking, and an open kitchen larger than some entire restaurants. Many consider Afuri’s light, delicate broths the best in all of Tokyo—and celebrity ramen chef Ivan Orkin, describing the phenomenon of the “lady ramen shop” for Lucky Peach magazine, said it’s also one of the few ramen shops where as many women eat as men. (Tokyo ramen shops, believe it or not, can be rough and tumble.)

With Afuri, as with Olympia beer, it’s all about the water.

Afuri’s United States CEO, Taichi Ishizawa, tells WW he criss-crossed the country testing the water each place he went, trying to find water as pure as the waters of Mount Afuri in Japan. The minerals in hard water, he says, “steal the flavor” from a broth.

Portland has the softest water he found, a quality one can’t help but think has rubbed off on the people here. And while Afuri has expanded its offerings for the Portland restaurant to include robata-grilled skewers and precious spoon dishes with layered flavor bites, layered maki rolls and sashimi, every single meal there should include the yuzu shio ramen (see opposite page), whose aromatic, bonito-spiked chicken broth opens out like a flower.

Marukin, meanwhile, is here for personal reasons. Long ago in Japan, local investment broker David Rademacher was 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 overseasoned 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.

“[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.”

CONT. on page 17

The Soup Issue

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BEST BOWLS
The best ramen in Portland, by style.

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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 spicy- ass 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.

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 tonkotsus, 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 fatigue 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

Shoyu shio at Afuri ($15)

Afuri’s American CEO, Taichi Ichizawa, worries that its signature soup—a citric, clarified (chintan, as opposed to paitan) chicken salt broth—might be too subtle for Americans more accustomed to the pork-fisted appeal of tonkotsu. But holy hell: Though certainly light, this soup is beautifully simple, its flavor easing in like an old recliner; it’s as if the basic soy-sauce broth were always fermented soybean into the tare for a never-miss formula. Mirakutei uses the citrusy sweet-acid 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 chasu.

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, shiitake 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 unvegan it with Noraneko’s baconesque chasu and delightfully salty seasoned egg.

Shoyu

Torijara shoyu at Afuri ($15)

Shoyu is the O.G. ramen, the ramen from which all other 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.

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-acid 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 chasu.

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.

Tsukemen

Chicken tsukemen at Kizuki ($10)

Tsukemen has a thick noodle used for dipping into a much-condensed broth. It’s a strangely addictive ritual, accented by glutinous noodle and density of flavor, with greens and chashu also there for the dipping. You have shio and tonkotsu options, but Kizuki’s rich chicken broth is its true treasure. Once you’re done, pour in clear broth as dilution and drink your soup.

Abura soba

Abura ramen at Shigezo Kichinto and Yataimura Maru ($10, $5 at happy hour)

Abura soba, “oily ramen,” dates back to the ‘50s and is much, much better than the name would have you believe. The abu ramen at Shigezo, introduced at its Minizo cart, is perhaps the best thing Shigezo makes, a lovely soft-egg-sopped, chashu-thick ramen drenched in salty-sweet soy kaeshi and chili oil. Think of it as soy-chili ramen carbonara.

Wild-style

Italian miso at Yama ($11.95)

There is no reason for a Parmesan-cheese, Italian-spiced “Bolognese” beef ramen to exist—it’s like one of those alternate histories written by Newt Gingrich. And yet here we are, slurping a beefy, cheesy world ripe with miso ferment and satisfyingly alkaline, springy noodles. Can it really be wrong when it feels so right? The answer, when it comes to ramen, is always no.

RAMEN SHOPS VISITED:
Afuri, Akasaru, Boke Bowl, Boxer Ramen, House of Ramen, Kayo’s Ramen Bar, Kizuki, Marukin, Masu Sushi, Mirakutei, Noraneko, Ramen Ryoma, Shigezo Kichinto, Shigezo Yataimura Maru, Yama Sushi and Izakaya, Yuzu.