

On Monday evening, the Culinary Historians of New York gathered on Manhattan’s Upper East Side to discuss the political and economic underpinnings of ramen-noodle soup. “Next month’s meeting is called Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop, ” a member named Linda Pelaccio reminded the audience of about fifty students, foodies, and septuagenarians from the podium. “But now, Professor George Solt!”

Solt, an assistant history professor at New York University, had been hunched over his notes in the first row. He is thirty-five, with close-cropped hair and a slightly Snoopy-ish air about him. He rose and took in the room; many in attendance were slurping quietly from small bowls of ramen provided by the Harlem restaurant Jin Ramen. Solt chose to open with a caveat: “First off, I don’t know how to cook ramen or where to get the best ramen,” he said. “I’m approaching this from a historical perspective.”

Twelve years ago, Solt, who spent the first decade of his life in Tokyo, before moving to New England, began researching his dissertation at the University of California, San Diego. Entitled “Taking Ramen Seriously: Food, Labor, and Everyday Life in Modern Japan,” it delved into the food production, labor practices, foreign trade, and national identity wrapped up in Japan’s now famous noodle soup. He has published other noodle-related academic writings, including an article in the *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, “Shifting Perceptions of Instant Ramen in Japan during the High-Growth Era, 1958-1973.” But his most accessible piece of work on the topic is a book borne of his doctoral dissertation, “The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze,” which was published in February.

His talk traced ramen from its origins, as a distinctly Chinese soup that arrived in Japan with Chinese tradesmen in the nineteenth century, through the American occupation after the war, to the proliferation of instant ramen in Japan in the seventies; the national frenzy in the eighties and nineties that gave birth to ramen celebrities, ramen museums, and ramen video games; and, finally, America’s embrace of ramen and Japanese culture today, as exhibited by the cultlike craze surrounding the sixteen-dollar bowls of ramen served by the celebrity chef David Chang.

“Ramen is one of the most minutely documented foods in Japan,” Solt writes. A number of geopolitical and economic factors—the reindustrialization of Japan’s workforce during the Cold War, the redefining of national identity during twenty years of economic stagnation—all combined to elevate ramen from working-class sustenance to a dish that is internationally recognized, beloved, and iconic. His research involved reading everything from ramen graphic novels to government documents produced during the U.S. occupation. In what Solt describes as an “Aha!” moment, he discovered that when the U.S. occupied Japan it imported wheat as a way to contain Communism. “The more Japan experienced food shortages, the more people would gravitate towards the Communist Party,” he said. By providing the wheat needed to make ramen noodles, America won the Cold War, sort of.

The crowd listened, mostly rapt, as Solt showed photos of Japan’s ramen museum (not to be confused with its instant-ramen museum), which opened in 1994 and cost thirty-eight million dollars. “The ‘sun’ sets indoors every fifteen minutes because it’s supposed to make you hungry,” Solt said. He also showed the first packaged instant Chikin ramen, from Nissin Foods Corporation, which hit shelves in 1958. The first Cup O’ Noodles came to America in 1973, Solt said, and, as he showed a photo of the hut where Nissin’s founder, Momofuku Ando, allegedly invented the dish, he noted, with gravity, that Ando’s innovation had to do “both with Styrofoam and the fact that more noodles were concentrated at the top, so it cooked evenly.” In Japan, the dish was embraced widely as a practical emergency food after a live television broadcast of a hostage standoff, seen by almost ninety per cent of television viewers, showed policemen eating cupped ramen in sub-zero temperatures as they waited for the hostage to be released. Bento boxes and *onigiri*, their usual forms of sustenance, would have frozen solid. Instant, cupped ramen, to this day, remains a ubiquitous food in times of natural disaster.

After the talk, Solt opened the floor to questions. One woman wanted to better understand the alkalinity of the ramen noodle, and the historical and political importance inherent in the noodle itself. Another audience member raised her hand. “I’ve heard that someone in Los Angeles, or New York, is making a ramen that is curly,” she said. Long beat. “Is that O.K.?” Solt nodded thoughtfully, then said, “I think so.” He stayed an additional fifteen minutes after the evening officially wound down, speaking with a long line of ramen fans.

Afterward, on the way to the nearby Naruto Ramen, on Third Avenue, Solt was aglow. “So many people showed up!” he said, revealing how lonely a decade of ramen research can be. Perusing the menu at the crowded bar, as woks sizzled and smoked behind the counter, he elaborated on America’s love of the dish. “Sushi became the representative food of Japan in the nineteen-eighties abroad, when Japan was a major business competitor to the U.S.,” he said. “The whole embrace of Japanese popular culture in the last ten years is because Japan is no longer an economic threat. That image got transposed to China. It used to be Japan’s burden.”

Over a bowl of *shio* (salt) ramen, Solt spoke about moving beyond noodles. He’s now researching the first authentic Indian curry in Japan, a dish markedly different from the sludge-like, bland curried rice introduced by the British Navy during the Meiji era. The spicier version came to Japan in the early twentieth century, largely owing to a revolutionary from British India, who fled to Japan after trying to kill a British viceroy. There, Japanese ultra-nationalists sheltered him as he developed an Indian curry recipe in the back kitchen of a Shinjuku bakery.

“Now, that’s a great story!” Solt said, finishing the last of his ramen. “But, actually, I don’t want to keep doing food. After curry, I don’t know what else there is. Soba? There’s a limit to how long you can do this kind of stuff and take yourself seriously.”

*Photograph by Thomas Acop/Getty.*