



Crushing Bowls, Tokyo Style

An event for all ramen lovers
—the Tokyo Ramen Show 2018.

A display of the various kinds of ramen to be crushed at the Tokyo Ramen Show 2018.

For fans of ramen, Tokyo may be the best place on earth. With an estimated 7,000-8,000 shops serving ramen in Tokyo, a hot and delicious bowl can usually be found within a few minutes' walk from nearly every train and subway station. Almost any ramen-lover you talk to has their favorite shop or their favorite style, and the number of new exciting places to eat at is never ending. Tokyo really is an urban paradise of noodle experiences waiting to be had. Yet as vast as Tokyo's ramen scene is, it is just one part of Japan's ramen scene, which stretches to the furthest and most remote areas of the country. Regional styles available only in small geographic pockets make up a landscape containing an abundance of tastes and unique local styles. Furthermore, we are now in an age of ramen with new trends and never before used premium ingredients being

incorporated. The possibilities for ramen seem endless, and the world is happily waiting to see what comes next.

Ramen has a history of about 100 years in Japan. However, as the times and generations changed, so too, the popular tastes and flavors also varied. Any ramen shop that did not keep up with the trends might have had trouble sustaining their business. These days many young ramen shopkeepers are making ramen that is trendy. There was a time when ramen simply involved soy-sauce, salt, miso, or *tonkotsu* (pork bone soup stock), nowadays ramen soup stocks are being made from chicken, fish, and duck, and some chefs are being even more adventurous and experimental.

This growing world of ramen is highlighted each year during the peak of autumn, in an ever-popular event that has fans from far and wide coming together to slurp bowl

The line of ramen stalls, luring customers with colorful *nobori* (banners) announcing their respective features and flavors.



after bowl—the Tokyo Ramen Show. Held in Komazawa Olympic Park in the quiet residential area of Setagaya Ward, and in 2018 celebrating its 10th anniversary, the main draw of the show is, of course, the countless styles of ramen available to be eaten. As one enters the event area, the first thing noticed is the long line of ramen booths each serving up a unique piping hot bowl representing both Tokyo ramen and that of different areas of Japan. Unique to this Tokyo event, one can sample tastes and styles from all over the country without ever leaving the city. Some booths may serve regional styles, such as Wakayama style ramen, or Taiwan style ramen, which is actually a speciality of Nagoya. Others create totally new “limited” bowls created especially for the event—such as a triple shellfish *baitang* style white broth made with soy milk, topped with shrimp oil and a tiger prawn. The show is ramen galore, and because the bowls are roughly half size, sampling multiple genres can be accomplished easily. Seasoned slurpers come ready with their stomachs empty and have no trouble crushing several bowls in one sitting. In addition to the delightful ramen, the atmosphere is a festive one, with music, live performances, and various forms of entertainment.

A young Japanese couple from the northern island of Hokkaido were visiting the Ramen Show for the first time while they were also enjoying other tourist destinations of Tokyo during their vacation. “We just finished sharing three different styles of ramen, but we're both ready for another couple of bowls each!” they enthused. Another couple from Hawaii, visiting Tokyo for sightseeing, told us they had found out about the Ramen Show before leaving home and especially wanted to experience it. A ramen aficionado himself, the man said “The broth in Hawaii is

often thick, so I wanted to come to the true source and taste authentic *shio* (salt broth) ramen.”

The show founder and chairman, Hiroshi Osaki, is widely regarded as the most reputable ramen expert on the planet, having crushed a staggering 25,000 plus bowls in Japan over the past few decades. Osaki curates the show each year himself, bringing in a wide range of shops from across the country, both famous and up-and-comers alike. Many shops even collaborate with one another. He samples each menu constantly before and during the event to check standards and help consult with the chefs.

If this year's show is any indicator, ramen is most definitely surging in a positive and progressive direction, to the delight of both Japanese and foreigners alike. To some it is a delicious bowl of noodles in soup, to others it is the soul food of Japan. Regardless of personal opinion, no one can argue that ramen is getting bigger than ever, and the Tokyo Ramen Show is an ideal place to dive in and see for yourself.



A fresh bowl of steaming hot ramen is served.