



AMERICA'S
NEXT TOP Noodle

Ramen has had its share of glory. Now meet udon—and the man who'll show you how to make it a star in your kitchen.

*Sylvan Mishima
Brackett, making
udon noodles.
Opposite: Roast
duck udon.*



BY JESSICA BATTILANA

Photographs by Aya Brackett



It should be almost too hot to eat,” says Sylvan Mishima Brackett, setting a bowl of his homemade udon soup in front of me. The noodles lie coiled in a steaming, caramel-colored broth, topped with a soft-cooked egg and a mound of thinly sliced green onions.

Brackett brings the bowl to his mouth and slurps, his eyes watering from the heat. Following his lead, I slurp too: The wheat-flour noodles are silky and chewy, flavored by the smoky broth. It’s robust and hugely satisfying—comfort food at its best. “Here in the States, ramen has become a cult thing,” notes Brackett, “but in Japan, there are just as many people obsessed with udon.”

Brackett, the owner of Peko Peko, an Oakland-based catering company that specializes in Japanese food, developed his own passion for udon over a lifetime. Born in Kyoto to a Japanese mother and an American father, he grew up in an off-the-grid 17th-century-style Japanese home near Nevada City, California, that his dad, an architect, built by hand. His family ate what he calls “typical Japanese house food,” including udon, and spent many summers visiting relatives back in Japan.

Brackett loved to eat—so he learned to cook. For his senior project in high school, he launched a pop-up restaurant, serving his classmates everything from Japanese beef curry to pizza. After a post-college gig at Chez Panisse as Alice Waters’s assistant, he decided to start Peko Peko. “I wanted to cook something I had a native understanding of,” he explains.

But first, he wanted to study with the masters in Japan. At 29, “I was already too old to apprentice as a sushi maker or a *kaiseki* chef,” he says (the Japanese believe that both require a lifetime of training). So he learned to make udon noodles instead, during a six-month apprenticeship at a Tokyo countryside restaurant called Soba Ro. “The food at Soba Ro wasn’t fussy, but it was precisely done,” says Brackett. “I try to emulate that.”

In his Japanese-style home kitchen, which he constructed in an outbuilding behind his Oakland house, Brackett makes that precision look effortless. He mixes the dough—just flour, water, and salt—rapidly with his fingers in a giant metal bowl. Then he wraps a square of the dough in oilcloth and—here’s the fun part—kneads it by foot. He works the wrapped square with his stockinged feet until the dough within is smooth, uniform, and has, he says, “the texture of an earlobe.” In udon production facilities, the kneading has been mechanized, but in restaurants, this traditional method is still the norm. “It’s kind of like Pilates,” Brackett jokes.

After letting the dough rest overnight, Brackett rolls it out with a fat wooden dowel and cuts it into thick noodles. The kneading and resting give the noodles their signature texture: “Slippery but also chewy is the Japanese ideal,” says Brackett. In the world of Japanese noodles, udon is the most versatile. Ramen tends to have multiple toppings and ultra-rich broth; thin, delicate somen and buckwheat soba are usually presented simply. Udon can go both ways.

To show me just a fraction of what’s possible with udon, Brackett serves bowl after bowl of variations. We try a simple egg-and-scallion version first. A more elaborate bowl with slices of roasted duck and simmered mushrooms follows, and then a thick Japanese-style beef curry with dense chunks of kabocha squash. Our final bowl: a cold udon salad drizzled with sesame-miso dressing and topped with slivered vegetables, a bright antidote to this gray winter day.

Brackett plans to open a restaurant in San Francisco later this year, with udon on the menu. But he’s modest about his talents, swearing that even the home cook can master the art of udon. Using store-bought noodles, you can “make dishes that are at once traditional, exciting, and delicious,” he says. And for the truly obsessed: “You can make udon noodles from scratch that almost exactly replicate the best in Japan.”

Silky, chewy udon noodles in a bowl of steaming broth is comfort food at its best. Udon can be served hot or cold, simply or with lots of different toppings—and all are easy to make.



For Brackett’s from-scratch noodle-making method, go to sunset.com/bomemadeudon. For recipes, see page 74.



*Toppings
for Chilled
Udon Salad.*



*Udon with
Soft Egg and
Green Onion*





*Chilled
Udon
Salad*

UDON ESSENTIALS

You can find most of these ingredients in well-stocked grocery stores. A few, marked by asterisks, are sold only at Asian markets or online—but you can simply substitute the alternative ingredient listed in the recipe.

DRIED BONITO FLAKES (KATSUOBUSHI)

Dried smoked skipjack tuna (often called bonito), shaved into fluffy pink flakes and sold in cellophane packets. Buy bonito flakes that have a pinkish hue—they're fresher.

DRIED BABY SARDINES (IRIKO)*

These tiny silvery fish have a surprisingly clean, sweet taste.

DRIED SHIITAKE MUSHROOMS

Choose thick, firm caps for the most flavor.

JAPANESE GREEN ONIONS (NEGI)*

Like green onions (scallions) but up to 2 feet long and slightly drier.

JAPANESE WHITE SESAME PASTE (SHIRO NERI GOMA)*

Very smooth; from toasted sesame seeds.

KOMBU (DRIED EDIBLE KELP)

Look for uniformly shaped pieces lightly coated with a whitish powder, which is very flavorful and occurs naturally as the kelp dries.

MIRIN (SWEET RICE WINE)

Used for seasoning and glazing food. Look for true mirin without added sugar or corn syrup.

S&B'S CURRY POWDER

Made in Tokyo since 1923, curry has a warm sweetness from orange peel, nutmeg, and cloves. S&B Golden Curry Sauce Mix (actually a pressed block) is more widely available but includes thickeners. If you use it, don't add flour or cornstarch.

SEVEN-SPICE POWDER (SHICHIMI TOGARASHI)*

A blend of red chile, tangerine peel, sesame seeds, ginger, and other spices.

SOYBEAN PASTE (SHIRO MISO)

Also known as light or white miso; packaged in clear cellophane and stocked with the tofu, in the refrigerated section.

UDON (WHEAT-FLOUR NOODLES)

Store-bought fresh-frozen noodles have a supple texture that's closest to homemade, while the dried ones tend to be thin and flabby. To cook store-bought fresh-frozen udon, drop the frozen block into boiling water. When the water boils again, drain. Cook udon right before serving; the noodles get sticky as they sit.



*A mix of
mushrooms
for the duck
udon.*



Homemade
Udon

UDON BROTH (Iriko Dashi)

**MAKES 7 CUPS / 45 MINUTES, PLUS
OVERNIGHT TO STEEP**

The rich broth called *dashi* may be the most important ingredient in the Japanese kitchen, used daily for soups. This version calls for *iriko* (dried baby sardines), which give the stock a surprisingly mellow flavor, but if you can't find them, add another ounce of dried bonito flakes. Steeping the ingredients overnight brings out the sardines' savory taste—when boiled, they get bitter.

- 1½ oz. dried sardines (*iriko*)
- 2 dried shiitake mushrooms
- 3-in.-long piece kombu (dried edible kelp)
- 1½ oz. dried bonito flakes (*katsubushi*)
- ⅓ cup mirin
- ¼ cup soy sauce

1. Break heads off sardines and remove the small black pellet of innards just beneath each head (they're dried, so this isn't

messy). Put cleaned sardines, mushrooms, kombu, and 8 cups water into a medium pot. Cover and chill overnight.

2. Set pot over medium-low heat and bring to a simmer. When small bubbles form along sides and bottom of pot, but before it actually begins to simmer, remove sardines, mushrooms, and kombu.
3. Increase heat to high and bring to a boil. Add bonito flakes, pressing down with a spoon to submerge, and return to a boil; then immediately turn off heat. Let flakes settle to bottom of pot, about 15 minutes.
4. Strain broth through a cheesecloth-lined strainer into a bowl. Wring out all liquid from cheesecloth into bowl. Rinse pot, pour in strained broth, and heat over medium-high heat. Add mirin and soy sauce; simmer 5 minutes.

MAKE AHEAD Up to 2 days, chilled.

PER CUP 47 Cal., 3% (1.4 Cal.) from fat; 3.5 g protein; 0.2 g fat (0 g sat.); 4.8 g carbo (0.1 g fiber); 600 mg sodium; 1.4 mg chol. LC

UDON WITH SOFT EGG AND GREEN ONION (Onsen Tamago Udon)

SERVES 4 / 40 MINUTES

This simple dish is a gateway to the world of udon. It has a complex flavor and a range of textures—chewy udon, crunchy green onions, and custardy egg.

- 4 large eggs, at room temperature
- ¾ lb. fresh or frozen udon noodles
- ¼ cup very thinly sliced Japanese green onions (*negi*) or regular green onions, white and pale green parts only
- 3 cups Udon Broth (recipe at left)
- ¼ tsp. seven-spice powder (*shichimi togarashi*) or cayenne

1. Try this method for custardlike eggs, based on a Japanese tradition of cooking them in an outdoor hot spring: Heat a large pot of water to 160°. Gently lower eggs into water and simmer 30 minutes,



keeping water temperature between 152° and 156° (add a tablespoon of ice water to control the heat's rise). Chill eggs in cold water, then carefully crack into a small, shallow dish. Or soft-cook eggs the way you like.

2. Boil udon (see "Udon Essentials," page 73). Using a large strainer, scoop out noodles into a large bowl and save water to heat soup bowls.
3. Meanwhile, put green onions in a bowl of cold water and vigorously swish around with your fingers to separate into rings. Drain; repeat twice.
4. Bring broth to a boil in a saucepan.
5. Warm 4 soup bowls by dipping them in hot udon-cooking water. Divide noodles among bowls. Scoop an egg into each, leaving behind most of white, and ladle broth over noodles. Top with green onions and a pinch of seven-spice powder.

MAKE AHEAD Eggs in shell, up to 2 days, chilled. Green onions, up to 1 day, chilled.

PER SERVING 207 Cal., 24% (50 Cal.) from fat; 11 g protein; 5.5 g fat (1.6 g sat.); 26 g carbo (1.2 g fiber); 616 mg sodium; 213 mg chol. LC

ROAST DUCK AND MUSHROOM UDON (*Kamo Kinoko Udon*)

SERVES 4 / ABOUT 1½ HOURS, PLUS OVERNIGHT TO MARINATE DUCK (1 HOUR FOR CHICKEN)

Pekin duck breasts are tender and small but can be hard to find; you can also use more widely available Muscovy duck breasts (double the cooking time) or boned chicken thighs instead.

- 1 lb. Pekin or Muscovy duck breast, or boned, skin-on chicken thighs
- 2 tbsp. each soy sauce, mirin, and sake
- 2 whole Japanese green onions (*negi*) or 12 regular green onions
- ¼ cup very thinly sliced Japanese or regular green onions (white and pale green parts)
- ¾ lb. fresh or frozen udon noodles
- 3½ cups Udon Broth (recipe on page 74)
- 7 oz. mixed wild and cultivated mushrooms, such as chanterelle, shiitake, and trumpet, tough stems trimmed off and mushrooms cut into bite-size pieces

1. Heat a medium frying pan (not nonstick) or cast-iron skillet over medium heat until very hot. Meanwhile, if cooking duck, score skin in a crosshatch pattern with a very sharp knife, being careful not to cut through the meat. (If cooking chicken, there's no need to score skin.) Pat duck or chicken dry and put in pan, skin side down. Immediately reduce heat to low.
2. Cook duck slowly, without turning, until most fat has rendered and skin is crisp, 7 to 10 minutes for Pekin (20 for Muscovy), reducing temperature if skin is getting too dark. Turn over and cook until medium-rare (cut to check), 4 to 5 minutes more (8 to 10 for Muscovy). Cook chicken until well browned, 7 to 8 minutes. Turn over, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook through, 7 to 8 minutes more.
3. Meanwhile, bring soy sauce, mirin, and sake to a boil in a small saucepan over medium-high heat and boil 2 minutes. Let cool. Put poultry in a resealable plastic bag, pour in soy sauce mixture, seal, and chill overnight (1 hour for chicken).
4. Preheat broiler for poultry and bring

a large pot of water to a boil for udon.

5. Meanwhile, prepare green onions: Cut whole onions into 12 (2-in.) lengths (white and pale green parts only). Heat a small (not nonstick) dry frying pan over medium heat. Cook green onions until charred on two sides, 3 to 4 minutes per side.
6. Put sliced green onions in a bowl of cold water and vigorously swish around with your fingers to separate into rings. Drain in a fine-mesh strainer. Repeat twice.
7. Boil udon (see “Udon Essentials,” page 73). Using a large strainer, scoop out noodles into a large bowl and save water to heat soup bowls.
8. Bring broth to a simmer in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Add mushrooms and simmer 2 minutes. Meanwhile, broil duck or chicken, skin side up, until skin begins to crisp, 2 to 4 minutes. Very thinly slice poultry crosswise (if using Muscovy breasts, halve lengthwise first to make small slices).
9. To serve, warm 4 soup bowls by dipping them into hot udon-cooking water. Divide noodles among bowls and top with duck slices. Arrange 3 charred green onions in each bowl and ladle broth over noodles. Top with sliced green onions.

MAKE AHEAD *Broth, up to 2 days, chilled. Green onions, up to 1 day, chilled.*

PER SERVING 359 Cal., 9.1% (33 Cal.) from fat; 39 g protein; 3.6 g fat (0.7 g sat.); 35 g carbo (3.1 g fiber); 1,202 mg sodium; 163 mg chol. LC

BEEF CURRY UDON (*Kare Udon*)

MAKES 4 SERVINGS / ABOUT 1½ HOURS

Although it has some ingredients in common with Indian curry, Japanese curry is slightly sweet as well as spicy, with a thick, almost clingy sauce. Brackett adds kabocha squash, which can be eaten peel and all.

- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil
- 12 oz. beef chuck eye, cut into ½-in. cubes
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 1 Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored, and grated
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 2 tsp. minced fresh ginger
- ¼ cup sake

- 2 tbsp. mirin
- About ½ tsp. kosher salt
- 2 tbsp. S&B curry powder or a 3.5-oz. block of S&B Golden Curry Sauce Mix (medium or hot), chopped
- 1½ tsp. garam masala*
- 2 tsp. soy sauce
- 1 tbsp. dark brown sugar
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 large carrot, peeled and cut into ½-in. dice
- 1 large Yukon Gold potato, peeled and cut into ½-in. dice
- ¼ kabocha squash (about 8 oz.), seeded and cut into ½-in. dice, or ½ small butternut squash (8 oz.), seeded, peeled, and cut into ½-in. dice
- 1 lb. fresh or frozen udon noodles
- 1 tbsp. each cornstarch and flour

1. Heat a medium, heavy pot over medium-high heat 2 minutes. Swirl in oil to coat bottom. Add beef in a single layer, working in 2 batches if necessary, and brown well all over, about 10 minutes.
2. Reduce heat to medium-low. Add onion and apple and cook, stirring often, until onion is very soft and golden brown, 15 to 20 minutes. Add garlic, ginger, sake, mirin, and ½ tsp. salt and cook, stirring, until liquid is almost evaporated, 3 to 5 minutes.
3. Add curry powder or chopped block curry, garam masala, soy sauce, brown sugar, and chicken broth and simmer, uncovered and stirring occasionally, until beef is tender, about 30 minutes. Add carrot, potato, and squash and cook until vegetables are tender, about 20 minutes. Season with salt to taste.
4. Meanwhile, boil udon (see “Udon Essentials,” page 73). Using a large strainer, scoop out noodles into a large bowl and save water to heat soup bowls.
5. Mix cornstarch, flour, and 2 tbsp. water in a small bowl until smooth. (Omit this step if you are using chopped block curry.) Set a fine-mesh metal strainer in pot of curry and slowly pour in cornstarch mixture, stirring within the strainer (this will prevent lumps). Remove strainer and continue simmering, stirring often, until curry thickens, about 5 minutes.
6. To serve, warm 4 soup bowls by dipping

them into hot udon-cooking water. Divide noodles among bowls and top with curry.

**Find garam masala, an Indian spice blend, in the spice aisle of well-stocked grocery stores and at Indian markets.*

MAKE AHEAD *Curry, up to 4 days, chilled.*

PER SERVING 494 Cal., 22% (110 Cal.) from fat; 23 g protein; 13 g fat (1.9 g sat.); 67 g carbo (6.4 g fiber); 1,481 mg sodium; 47 mg chol. LC

CHILLED UDON SALAD (*Hiyashi Chuka Udon*)

SERVES 4 / 1 HOUR

Typically made with ramen noodles, this salad is also delicious with udon. Use leftover dressing on ordinary salad greens.

- ¼ lb. haricots verts or green beans, trimmed and cut into 2-in. lengths
- 3 eggs
- 2 tsp. sugar
- 1 tsp. cornstarch
- ¼ tsp. salt
- Vegetable oil
- ¼ cup Strong Bonito Stock (recipe at right)
- ¼ cup Japanese white sesame paste (*shiro neri goma*) or ¼ cup toasted sesame seeds, ground to a sandy paste in a clean coffee grinder
- 1 tbsp. toasted, ground sesame seeds
- 1½ tsp. shiro miso
- ⅓ cup soy sauce
- 6 tbsp. rice vinegar
- 1½ tsp. toasted sesame oil
- 1 tsp. sugar
- ¾ lb. fresh or frozen udon noodles
- ½ small red bell pepper, cut into very thin matchsticks
- ½ seeded Japanese or English cucumber, cut into very thin matchsticks (about 2 in. long)
- 1 large carrot, peeled and cut into very thin matchsticks (about 2 in. long)
- 4 tbsp. pickled red ginger, homemade (recipe at right) or store-bought

1. Blanch haricots verts in boiling water 2 minutes; drain and rinse with cool water.
2. Mix eggs, sugar, cornstarch, and salt in a bowl with chopsticks or a fork. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer.



- Heat an 8-in. nonstick skillet over medium heat. When hot, very lightly oil with an oiled paper towel (if you have too much oil, the egg will not form a pancake). Pour 1 tbsp. egg mixture into pan, swirling it around the bottom to form a thin, even omelet with no browning (lower heat if it starts to brown). Cook 1 minute, until surface of omelet is dry; no need to flip. Carefully lift out onto a plate, trying to avoid folds and wrinkles. Repeat with remaining egg mixture, layering each onto the one below, until you've made 10 omelets. Roll omelets and slice into 1/8-in.-thick ribbons of egg.
- Whisk broth, sesame paste, ground sesame seeds, miso, soy sauce, rice vinegar, sesame oil, and sugar together in a bowl.
- Boil udon (see "Udon Essentials," page 73). Rinse well in a large bowl of ice water.
- Arrange udon on a platter. Top with alternating piles of haricots verts, bell pepper, cucumber, carrot, and egg ribbons, with pickled ginger in center. Serve with a pitcher of dressing on the side, or pour the dressing over the salad.

MAKE AHEAD Broth, up to 2 hours at room temperature. Vegetables and egg, up to 1 day, chilled.

PER SERVING WITH 3 TBSP. DRESSING 367 Cal., 30% (109 Cal.) from fat; 16 g protein; 12 g fat (1.7 g sat.); 49 g carbo (6.9 g fiber); 1,684 mg sodium; 159 mg chol. LC

STRONG BONITO STOCK (Katsubushi Dashi)

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP / 45 MINUTES

Made with dried smoked bonito (skipjack) tuna, this makes a flavorful main ingredient in salad dressing.

2-in.-long piece kombu (dried edible kelp)
1 oz. bonito flakes (katsubushi)

- Put kombu and 2 cups water in a small pan. Bring to a simmer over medium-low heat, about 20 minutes. Just before water begins to bubble, discard kombu.
- Increase heat to high and bring to a boil. Add bonito flakes, pressing with a spoon to submerge, and immediately shut off heat. Let flakes settle to bottom of pot, about 15 minutes.

- Strain through a cheesecloth-lined strainer into a bowl. Wring out all liquid from cheesecloth into bowl.

MAKE AHEAD Up to 2 hours at room temperature.

PER CUP 45 Cal., 4.2% (1.9 Cal.) from fat; 5.2 g protein; 0.2 g fat (0.2 g sat.); 4.5 g carbo (3.3 g fiber); 412 mg sodium; 4.7 mg chol. GF/LC/LS

PICKLED GINGER (Beni Shōga)

MAKES ABOUT 3/4 CUP / 25 MINUTES, PLUS OVERNIGHT TO STEEP

Pickled ginger is easy to make and tastes fresher than store-bought. Brackett prefers young ginger because it's juicier and less fibrous (a very thin skin makes it easy to identify). Regular ginger is fine too.

1 small red beet
4 oz. fresh ginger, peeled and cut into very thin 1-in.-long matchsticks
1/4 cup rice vinegar
1 tsp. kosher salt

- Put beet in a small saucepan with water to cover by 1 in. Bring to a boil, then simmer until tender when pierced with the tip of a small knife, about 25 minutes. Drain. When cool enough to handle, peel and cut into quarters.
- Meanwhile, put ginger in a medium saucepan with water to cover by 2 in. Bring to boil. Drain and repeat process once or twice more, depending on the spiciness of the ginger. It should have a strong taste but not be too spicy.
- Combine rice vinegar and salt with 1 cup water in a small bowl, stirring to dissolve salt. Add ginger and beet, cover, and chill overnight.

MAKE AHEAD Up to 2 weeks, chilled. 🍴

PER TBSP. 11 Cal., 7% (0.7 Cal.) from fat; 0.3 g protein; 0.1 g fat (0 g sat.); 2.3 g carbo (0.4 g fiber); 387 mg sodium; 0 mg chol. GF/LC/VG



Other great Japanese recipes:
sunset.com/japaneserecipes.