

Mr Noodle

By Lawrence Downes

The news last Friday of the death of the ramen noodle guy surprised those of us who had never suspected that there was such an individual. It was easy to assume that instant noodle soup was a team invention.

But no. Momofuku Ando, who died in Ikeda, near Osaka, at 96, was looking for cheap, decent food for the working class when he invented ramen noodles all by himself in 1958. His product — fried, dried and sold in little plastic-wrapped bricks or foam cups — turned the company he founded, Nissin Foods, into a global giant. Aggregate servings of the company's signature brand, Cup Noodles, reached 25 billion worldwide in 2006.

Ramen noodles are a dish of effortless purity. Like the egg, or tea, they attain a state of grace through a marriage with nothing but hot water. After three minutes in a yellow bath, the noodles soften. The pebbly peas and carrot chips turn practically lifelike. A near-weightless assemblage of plastic and foam is transformed into something any college student will recognize as food, for as little as 20 cents a serving.

There are some imperfections. The fragile cellophane around the ramen brick tends to open in a rush, spilling broken noodle bits around. The silver seasoning packet does not always tear open evenly, and bits of sodium essence can be trapped in the foil hollows, leaving you always to wonder whether the broth, rich and salty as it is, is as rich and salty as it could have been. The aggressively twisted noodles form an aesthetically pleasing nest in cup or bowl, but when slurped, their sharp bends spray droplets of broth that settle uncomfortably about the lips and leave dots on your computer screen.

But those are minor quibbles. Ramen noodles have earned Mr. Ando an eternal place in the pantheon of human progress. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Give him ramen noodles, and you don't have to teach him anything.

Adapted from *The New York Times*, January 9, 2007

Note du jury (ne pas traduire) : Ramen is a Japanese noodle dish of Chinese origins. In North America, Japanese noodles were imported starting in the 1970s bearing the name "ramen" and today this name most commonly refers to instant noodles. (Wikipedia)

Question

To what extent can fast food be considered as beneficial to mankind?