

## INTRODUCTION

# Instant Noodles as Quotidian and Ubiquitous

Instant ramen noodles—tasty, convenient, cheap, shelf stable, and industrially produced (unlike “real” ramen noodles)—are consumed by huge numbers of people worldwide. Invented by Momofuku Ando in 1958, apparently to assist his war-torn Japanese compatriots, they have become so pervasive and commonplace that our friends often expressed surprise at our interest in them. “Why study them?” one asked. “My kids grew up on them.” Were they, in other words, significant enough to be of any particular interest, to be informative about anything of importance? *The Noodle Narratives*, written by three anthropologists—Deborah and Fred from the United States and Tatsuro from Japan—is our answer to this question and a demonstration that instant noodles are perhaps one of the most remarkable foods ever.

The fact that instant noodles are so quotidian and ubiquitous is noteworthy. Their mass-produced ingredients are inexpensive as well as widely available and, for most of the world’s population, broadly acceptable: wheat, vegetable oil, and assorted flavorings, usually including salt, monosodium glutamate (MSG), a meat or chicken essence, sugar, and flavorings readily blended for local preferences. The World Instant Noodles Association (WINA), created to improve the quality of instant noodles and increase their consumption worldwide, estimates that 95.39 billion packages and cups of instant noodles were sold during 2010 across an impressive range of markets.<sup>1</sup> Almost everyone eats or has eaten instant noodles.

Instant noodles are so inexpensive and widespread that they can be used as economic indices. Thus, in 2005, “Mama Noodles,” the largest instant noodle producer in Thailand, launched the Mama Noodles economic index to reflect the country’s recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis; this index was based on the theory that the increase in sales of usually cheap instant noodles occurred because people could not afford more expensive foods.<sup>2</sup> They are so central to the lives of many that their pricing and availability may be a matter of political concern. C. K. Lal, for example, argues that the rise of Maoism in Nepal derived partly from frustration with the market mechanisms that absolved sellers from responsibility for the “quality, quantity, and the price” of products such as instant noodles. (Nepali consumed some 590 million packages of instant noodles during 2009.<sup>3</sup>) Their marketing is so extensive that, as of 2008, instant noodles became a cornerstone of the Nestlé Corporation’s strategy of selling a line of “popularly positioned products” to those poor people who live at the “bottom of the pyramid.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, because they are so tasty, convenient, cheap, and shelf stable, as well as so widely familiar and acceptable, instant noodles figure prominently in relief feeding. WINA donated 550,000 packages to quake-hit China on June 23, 2010, and 10,000 packages to flood-stricken Hungary on May 28, 2010. Similarly, during 2011, Nissin Foods donated one million servings to tsunami-ravaged Japan along with seven “kitchen cars,” each capable of serving about eighteen hundred cups of noodles daily even where water and power supplies had been interrupted.<sup>5</sup> (On a less grand scale, instant noodles provided the sole sustenance for four Colombian drug smugglers in their small submarine, discovered by the Coast Guard in 2006 to be crammed with “two hundred and ninety-five bales of cocaine, weighing more than seven tons and with a street value of \$196 million.”<sup>6</sup>)

In part because instant noodles are so commonplace, they are frequently the subject of telling elaborations. Here are a few illustrations: During their midday break, Papua New Guinean schoolchildren may purchase cups of instant noodle soup from a mobile cart, drink the liquid, and place the remaining noodles in a scone to make a noodle sandwich. On the other side of the globe, inmates in contemporary American prisons not only snack on instant noodles but also blend them with other commissary-purchased foods into imaginative and often shared “spreads.” In fact, numerous websites are devoted to these prison recipes, which make life inside more tolerable, more nearly normal.<sup>7</sup> Bobby B. reports that he was able to make a “version of a peanut

butter and grape jelly sandwich” from instant noodles, peanut butter, and grape Kool-Aid.<sup>8</sup> Also in America, although in a very different social context, largely middle-class listeners to National Public Radio responded to a request for noodle-focused personal reminiscences, attesting to the multiple ways instant noodles could articulate with life’s circumstances. Sometimes instant noodles figured in happy memories of family conviviality, as with campground meals improvised from whatever was available—meals often commemorated in cherished recipes. Sometimes instant noodles featured in somber recollections of personal endurance, as with recovery from cancer measured by an increasing ability to consume a full bowl.<sup>9</sup>

Other forms of elaboration are prompted by instant noodle producers themselves. The Indonesia-based companies Indomie and Supermie earned places in the *Guinness Book of World Records* during 2005 by creating, respectively, the largest package of instant noodles and the largest serving of instant noodles. Momofuku Ando, who not only invented instant noodles but also founded the instant noodle giant Nissin Foods, achieved his well-publicized dream of sending instant noodles into space when, in 2005, a Japanese astronaut ate Nissin’s specially blended (ultra-high-altitude) instant noodles while aloft in the space shuttle *Discovery*. (Nissin’s triumph presumably more than equaled the accomplishment of rival Maruchan, whose instant noodles were consumed in 1987 at the top of Mount Everest.) Through such feats, instant noodle producers tout their capacity for more mundane product development and elaboration. For instance, central to Nissin’s strategy of remaining ahead of the field is a commitment to continual innovation, as evidenced in the some three hundred new varieties the company releases annually in Japan—a number equal to those of its competitors combined. This elaboration by Nissin and its myriad competitors is subject to further elaboration, including the commentaries of connoisseurs with highly developed sensibilities who revel in the range of instant noodle offerings. Perhaps the most famous of these is Ton Tan Tin, a Japanese blogger who, as of 2012, has posted reviews of 5,008 varieties of instant noodles he has eaten in diverse parts of the world—reviews commented upon by his many readers, who share his obsession.<sup>10</sup> On occasion, these commentaries veer in a darker direction, as in the tale by videographer and conservation activist Michael Sheridan about environmental degradation—a tale about the transition from an Indonesian rainforest to an oil palm plantation and finally into a palm-oil-prepared package of instant noodles.<sup>11</sup>

So significant are instant noodles that, in a 2000 survey of Japanese opinion, they were voted the most influential invention of Japan in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> As a “cultural icon,” they ranked ahead of personal stereos, computers, small cameras, and even karaoke.<sup>13</sup> Their significance is additionally reflected by the more than 3.5 million results found in response to an April 2012 Google search. Given their pervasiveness and infiltration into daily life virtually everywhere, we think that their story can provide unusual insights concerning the workings of the industrial food system in the contemporary world economy. In this sense, the study of instant noodles is an anthropology of large-scale capitalist provisioning.

We—Tatsuro, Deborah, and Fred—were all familiar with instant noodles before we began this project. Tatsuro is from the home of instant noodles, where they are not only eaten widely but also commemorated at three museums. Two of these museums, near Osaka and in Yokohama, are dedicated to Ando’s achievements. The third, also in Yokohama, focuses on the importance of noodles, both instant ramen and customary (“real”) ramen, in Japanese life. Deborah and Fred come from American university settings, where students famously rely on instant noodles and can consult a self-help book about their future lives as grownups called *No More Ramen*.<sup>14</sup> Yet we had missed the story instant noodles could tell until we encountered them during anthropological fieldwork, in Papua New Guinea (PNG) for Deborah and Fred and in Nepal for Tatsuro. In both places, instant noodles arrived during the mid-1980s and rapidly became a staple for the urban and peri-urban poor, who must purchase much of their food. By 2003, one Nepali journalist opined that, with rapid urbanization, Nepal had become so awash with instant noodles that “if all the packaged noodles sold in Nepal during the past two decades could join hands, they might reach the top of Mount Everest. . . . [Nepali are eating] tons of the stuff.”<sup>15</sup> Comparably, by 2006, urban-dwelling Papua New Guineans told Deborah and Fred that instant noodles were among the few foods that they could afford.

This study of capitalist provisioning thus concerns how rich and poor, living in diverse parts of the world, have become caught up in the global phenomenon of instant noodles. In formulating our story we have taken particular notice of Sidney Mintz’s classic study of sugar—an industrially produced foodstuff that also, with remarkable speed, became quotidian and ubiquitous. In *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz documents how slave-produced Caribbean sugar came to connect the world

in important relations of inequality.<sup>16</sup> Once an exotic taste and luxury treat for the aristocracy, sugar soon became a commonplace necessity for all, with sweetened tea and treacle-smear bread the sustaining staple of British factory workers. Eventually, inexpensive sugar pervaded Britain, Europe, and much of the globe, fostering a world food system and transforming contemporary diets—not to mention spreading class-related obesity—with the proliferation of sugar- (and fat-) laden industrial foods.

Other anthropologists have written about globally permeating, industrially produced foods—products somewhat familiar to virtually everyone. Their accounts include consideration of the extent to which these foods both transform people and practices and, as some of our instant noodles examples suggest, are transformed by those who take them into their bodies and lives. For instance, in a masterful analysis of the worldwide spread of Coca-Cola, Robert Foster emphasizes the ways in which local people inflect the product with their own meanings—as when PNG women use Coca-Cola cans to cook rice, or PNG men use Coca-Cola cans as shield motifs. Coca-Cola is distinctively configured in Trinidad as well. According to Daniel Miller, it has become racially inflected as a “black sweet drink,” which, when mixed with rum, is the favored local alcoholic beverage. And for those accustomed to eating a burger along with a Coca-Cola in the fourteen minutes typical of a fast-food meal, James Watson’s edited collection about the various ways that McDonald’s engages East Asians is instructive. Although McDonald’s has altered Asian customers’ expectations by insisting that they form orderly queues as they approach the counter, customers, in turn, have altered restaurant procedures by lingering as long as they wish at their tables after their (relatively expensive) meals. In Russia, Melissa Caldwell has found that Muscovites have accepted many of McDonald’s standards but in addition demand that meat and produce be domestically sourced and that McDonald’s meet indigenous assumptions about sociality.<sup>17</sup> (Similar processes of two-way transformation between commodity and consumer also appear in studies of such thoroughly permeating items of capitalist consumption as used clothes and denim—items that, like food, are intimate, although worn on rather than incorporated into the body.<sup>18</sup>)

Of these world-pervading industrial foods, instant noodles are distinct. All are seen as modernist, often appealingly so, in the transformations they effect and are affected by. Nevertheless, Coca-Cola and soft drinks more generally refresh people, while instant noodles sustain

them. And unlike Coca-Cola and other internationally recognized brands of soft drinks, instant noodles, regardless of brand, are always inexpensive. Burgers and fries—whether sold by McDonald’s, other international chains, or local fast-food establishments—also supply nourishment. However, relative to instant noodles, they are expensive—in some cases, extremely so. (The 2009 Big Mac Economic Indicator, as compiled by the UBS Swiss Bank, compared the average working time necessary to buy a Big Mac in seventy-three cities worldwide: workers in Chicago, Tokyo, and Toronto need twelve minutes, whereas those in Mexico City, Jakarta, and Nairobi need well over two hours.<sup>19</sup>)

Moreover, though instant noodles occasionally come under fire for their reliance on ingredients with questionable impacts on environmental or personal health (palm oil, salt, MSG, and sugar), they rarely draw much outcry. In this regard they are unlike McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, which periodically attract negative attention, if not serious pushback: in the case of the former, for culinary imperialism (in France), religious insensitivity (in India), or supersizing its patrons (in America); in the case of the latter, for environmental depletion (of water in India), labor intimidation (in Colombia), or supersizing its patrons (in America).<sup>20</sup>

Instant noodles, thus, are a uniquely universal, inexpensive, relatively low-profile belly filler—a humble food that permeates all locales, infiltrating everyday life without receiving too much critical attention.<sup>21</sup> As a baseline of the adequate, they become the material means for people to present themselves—to themselves and to others—as acceptably ordinary, and they provide an excellent substrate for various customized appropriations and elaborations.

In fact, instant noodles may well be the most successful industrially produced food, at least in terms of world penetration: they constitute a huge social reality—and one inviting attention. Much like sugar, instant noodles are a capitalist provision that provisions capitalism. In other words, they have an important—and perhaps increasingly important—role in capitalism’s reproduction and spread. Because they feed people quickly and cheaply, they appeal to busy and economy-minded people everywhere. This includes students in the United States, Japan, and Papua New Guinea, striving to make ends meet at their time of life. It includes entrepreneurial programmers in the United States and elsewhere, striving to make their start-up companies what the venture capitalist Paul Graham termed “ramen profitable”—that is, accepting modest returns (i.e., sufficient to allow for subsistence on cheap foods such as instant noodles) while waiting for a big buyout in the future.<sup>22</sup> Finally, it

includes the chronically cash-constrained urban and peri-urban poor (and not just in developing countries), for whom instant noodles suppress the discomfort as well as the distractions of persistent hunger—helping them hang on either as potential workers or as low-wage workers. To refer to another of Mintz’s arguments, instant noodles join sugar (as well as tea and coffee) as a “proletarian hunger killer,” albeit of a more contemporary variety.<sup>23</sup> Thus, they partially offset the low wages that might adversely affect the productivity of workers and the survival of their families. In sustaining workers, instant noodles foster a self-perpetuating cycle of production and consumption: workers producing for a market become consumers of what the market offers. Reliably available whenever wanted, instant noodles enable much; whatever the job at hand, they help get it done.

These attributes lead to related and complementary transformations as capitalism extends its reach and penetration into the developing world. Instant noodles not only provision capitalism; they normalize capitalism. They help make routine a world in which commodities, marketed for profit as “goods,” circulate, subject to consumer evaluation and choice. Quotidian and ubiquitous—selectable and delectable (enough)—instant noodles may serve as an introductory course in consumption. They shift the daily expectations and activities, the “habitus” (to use the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s term), of those who acquire and eat them.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in urban and peri-urban Papua New Guinea, this shift in habitus has become pervasive, reaching literally from cradle to grave: babies are often weaned with instant noodles and elders are celebrated in death rituals with instant noodles as elements in ceremonial exchange. Because they are so readily incorporated into daily life, instant noodles ease people worldwide along a path of capitalist acquisition and consumption, shaping who they are and what they do. Instant noodles help produce consumers, “similar kinds of subjects on a global scale” (in the words of the anthropologist Jonathan Friedman), while inflecting, and being inflected by, local realms “of practiced meaning” as they assimilate into familiar engagements, activities, and preferences.<sup>25</sup>

As capitalism extends its influence into the developing world, instant noodles may serve as an antifriction device. We refer here to the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s concept of “friction,” which exposes “the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine.”<sup>26</sup> We agree that capitalist penetration is a complex process of conjuncture, filled with the gear-clashing uncertainties and inefficiencies of pause, drag, and

redirection (and of “spasms,” “seeps,” and “spurts,” as characterized in the economic analysis of J.K. Gibson-Graham).<sup>27</sup> However, we believe that certain globally flowing, industrially produced commodities grease the skids of capitalism. And when a commodity is as intimate as everyday food—food that is inexpensive, widely available, generally acceptable (or readily modified for local tastes), and relatively easy to convey and prepare—the socioeconomic transformations attendant on globally flowing products may happen with little apparent fuss or muss.

Instant noodles not only reliably sustain and normalize socioeconomic transformations but also contribute to a procapitalist system of value. As unobtrusive and humble fare, they don’t call attention to themselves in a manner that would compel many consumers to probe the social processes that brought them into being: to defetishize them.<sup>28</sup> Unlike Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, for instance—and certainly unlike sugar—they don’t have many potentially disconcerting secrets. Those they do have are largely generic to industrial foods and remain largely overlooked, especially because instant noodles represent, at least in terms of what you get for what you spend, good value. Finally, as instant noodles find their place within various contexts, they lend themselves to the culinary elaborations that add value. In short, they insert themselves deftly into people’s lives, nourishing their bodies and often pleasantly rousing their imaginations.

Of course, remarkable as instant noodles are, they didn’t get to all corners of the world by themselves. They both required and accumulated an entourage. Inventors, food scientists, producers, marketers, consumers, and bloggers, among others, all contributed in different ways and to different degrees; each brought a different range of competencies, interests, and commitments to the product that links them, directly or indirectly. We spoke to as many of these people as possible, collecting their accounts and perusing their specialized literatures in our multisited ethnographic and historical project. Attempting to understand a permeating product with such a large, diverse, and dispersed entourage required us to be selective: to use a hybrid methodology that traded a measure of depth for breadth, a degree of the intensive for the extensive. We engaged in participant observation and monitored blogs; administered questionnaires and read intensively; conducted interviews and visited trade fairs; sat in food science classes and scrutinized instant noodle packages. Our objective was to describe instant noodles in a way that revealed and contextualized their brilliant career as a globally flowing industrial food under contemporary capitalism. And we sought to do

justice to this subject in a manner that made the best use of our anthropological strengths: theoretical, ethnographic, cultural, and linguistic.

We intend our “noodle narratives” to be generous in scope, as they embrace a range of accounts in which instant noodles are central players. We begin with a focus on the human animal to explain the widespread appeal of instant noodles. Noodle manufacturers tap into universal human taste preferences to provide consumers with an inexpensive yet pleasingly filling hunger killer. Then, for insights into the global trajectory of instant noodles, we visit three markets in places broadly familiar to us that are distinctive in instructive ways. These markets reveal a variety of ways in which this humble form of capitalist provisioning enables differently located people to manage their lives.

The first is the Japanese market, where instant noodles were invented and received their greatest embellishment. With both historical and ethnographic data, we show how instant noodles enabled major transformations of post-World War II Japanese society. Eventually, as the Japanese market became saturated, instant noodles were subject to seemingly endless tweaking as variations in flavorings, toppings, and packaging enticed consumers (including the blogger *Ton Tan Tin*).

We then turn to the U.S. market, where instant noodles first embarked on their worldwide sojourn and have largely remained a relatively basic, price-driven commodity. With data derived from diverse sources—online postings, interviews, surveys, and conversations—we consider particular (and somewhat overlapping) groups for whom instant noodles remain important. We examine two generations of the middle class: those for whom instant noodles provide a nostalgic link to the exigencies and preoccupations of their youthful lives under capitalist provisioning and those—mostly students—for whom instant noodles provide an immediate link to the exigencies and preoccupations of their present lives. We admire the resilience of the incarcerated, who, in the face of institutional fare provided by the likes of Sodexo Marriott and Aramark, transform instant noodles and other ingredients from the prison commissary into a “taste of freedom.”<sup>29</sup> And we take note of the “heavy users,” the category of the poor targeted by instant noodle purveyors as the most promising.

Finally, we turn to the PNG market, where instant noodles arrived relatively recently and remain basic in form. With data based on long-term fieldwork, contemporary participant observation, interviews, and surveys, we provide examples of the workings of instant noodles in a developing country. Instant noodles, we argue, receive an enthusiastic welcome from Papua New Guineans because they help the chronically

cash-short deal with their urban and peri-urban circumstances and transform them into aspiring consumers of industrially produced products.

This three-fold contrast, we must caution, is not meant to suggest that the global trajectory of instant noodles follows a path of specific and inevitable evolutionary stages, as from infancy to maturity. To be sure, markets for instant noodles will change, though these changes may be various. Thus, the U.S. instant noodles market of the future should not be expected to replicate the Japanese market of today, nor should the PNG market be expected to replicate that of the United States. We could have chosen examples of other markets (though it is hard to imagine a book about instant noodles that didn't cover Japan) and would welcome other examples. We hope that this work encourages the contribution of other cases from other places akin to those compiled in Watson's collection describing the penetration of McDonald's throughout East Asia and in Miller and Woodward's volume on the global significance of denim.<sup>30</sup>

Our last data chapter extends our interest in the global success of instant noodles by focusing ethnographically on the contemporary world of industrial food production (whose major players are known collectively as "big food"). To do this, we attended university classes in food science, interviewed food scientists, and visited their laboratories. In addition, we joined the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT), went to IFT annual and regional meetings, pored over the IFT monthly journal, *Food Technology*, spoke with food company officials, and toured factory facilities. As one of the industrial food system's singular achievements, instant noodles are not only the product of this food system as it engages with, and is engaged by, people worldwide; they are, as well, a source of insight into this system in its more general attributes.

In our conclusion, we address the question of what it means to feed the world of the future with industrial food products like instant noodles. What does this mean to those committed to big food-focused capitalist provisioning, those who claim that their industry is both indispensable and virtuous in the contemporary world? What does this mean to the critics of industrial food? And what does this mean not only for who can take or leave these products but for those who might depend on them for cheap calories?

As we shall see, instant noodles have thus far been virtually unstoppable—and, as such, their accomplishments are worthy of serious attention. They are telling in what they facilitate and reveal about global capitalist provisioning; they make a lot happen and show a lot happening.