



**COUCH
BUSINESS**

Hua Gan Chen, the highly skilled noodle expert of Huguifly restaurant in the East Village, hand-kneads his dough before sending it aloft.

SPRING THEORY

With Manhattan in the happy grip of noodle mania, Jeffrey Steingarten becomes versed in the ancient art of hand-pulled pasta. Photographed by Raymond Meier.



Whenever I return home from amazing trips in Asia—is there any other kind of trip?—I am more than over-convicted that noodles are the secret to world peace, to freedom from want, to the elimination of hunger.

We may have to include fried rice as well. I could live on a diet of noodles and fried rice

supplemented with a little meat and eggs. That's what I've been doing for much of the past month, so I know it's true.

Noodles are the perfect food, not in the sense of being nutritionally complete, as eggs are often said to be, but in all the other ways of being the perfect food. They are inexpensive. They are nutritious. They are filling. They are (or can be) delicious. They can be made from a wide range of raw materials, including flour from wheat, rice, buckwheat, and lentils—and are easy enough to create that, say, cows or lobsters. They cook quickly and easily. They can be eaten hot or cold. And when noodles have been dried, they become portable and will keep for quite a long time.

Is there any place on Earth where they don't eat noodles? The answer is yes—inexplicably, unaccountably, ridiculously, stupidly, astonishingly, yes. Take the ancient Romans. They grew wheat, they knew how to grind it up into flour, they knew how to turn flour into dough for bread, and they knew how to boil water. All they needed to do was add some dough, and they'd have achieved a noodle. (But according to one authority I trust [that not the other authority I trust almost as much], the Romans never connected the dots. And so the question becomes, What in the world was the matter with the Romans? (Anyway, let's not call them Romans. They were Italians. Calling them Romans is like referring to everybody in France as Parisians. Is it only that "Roman" sounds better than "Italian"?) If Shakespeare had written Mary Antony's famous line about Brutus as "This was the noblest Italian of them all," we probably would have giggled.)

For that matter, what in the world is wrong with the people of India? Have you ever been served a noodle in an Indian restaurant or in India proper, a subcontinent that possesses the most magnificent collection of wheat breads on Earth, with the possible exceptions of France, and the ability to grind rice, lentils, and chickpeas into flour? Yes, the spicy Indian snack mix known as *chaat* includes squares and rods of flattened

dough, but as these are typically and deliciously deep-fried, I don't think we should classify them as noodles. One is reminded of the stories of the Maya Indians of Mexico who invented the wheel but used it only as a child's toy, not realizing its potential, while their slaves painfully dragged impossibly large blocks of stone over long distances to build pyramids. My good friend Maclean Jeffrey nationalistically (but, I'm sure, accidentally) tells us that the Indians of India have had noodles since 6000 BC. They must have gotten tired of them.

Have you ever run into a noodle in Spain? Spain's only world-class achievement in the starch category is, well, as I can tell, pasta. Spain lacks any bread that would rank in the world's top ten, its traditional cuisine could well have benefited from a proliferation of noodles. One must admit that the dish called *fillois* is pasta with vermicelli or angel-hair pasta chopped into inch-long pieces and substituted for the famous Valencian rice) could be called a noodle dish, but it was invented only in the states in neighboring Galicia (which now holds a yearly *fillois* contest—undoubtedly very fit attention). Being much easier to prepare than real pasta and, one must admit, pretty tasty, it has grown extremely popular, but it hardly challenges Philippe Cassin's observation that "noodles traditionally are of little importance in Spanish cuisine." A genuinely Valencian pasta-cooked *saucisson* over a fire of vine cuttings, simmered slowly and gradually like risotto, and served when a delectable crust has formed on the bottom (one of the 100 greatest dishes of the world, maybe in the top 50).

In Thailand, where the variety of available foods may be as wide as anywhere on Earth (because they eat insects and worms in addition to most of what we eat, although they are not great fans of cheese), there is nonetheless a noodle stand on every street corner. And now New York City—Manhattan in particular, a place crisscrossed with restaurants and markets, food trucks and pushcarts—is in the happy grip of noodle mania. It began five or so years ago when several little shops opened in Chinatown, all within a few blocks of one another, serving hand-pulled noodles in generous, savory soups, a most satisfying meal priced at \$5 or \$6.

Noodle soup has been a stock-in-trade of Chinatown forever. But the new wave of noodle shops offers a novel attraction: When a customer orders a dish of noodle soup, the noodle man takes a handful of dough, rolls it into a log, stretches it into a snake and twists it into a rope, shaking it up and down, doubling it back, stretching it again, and repeating a half-dozen times, he magically (continued on page 28)

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ends up holding a skin of noodles, each the thickness of plump spaghetti, 64 of them, which he drops into a stockpot of boiling water. These are utilitarian little restaurants, not set up for show, but often there's a window to the kitchen so that customers can see their dinner being pulled. Most of the noodle workers seem to have come from Fujian province in southeast China sometime in the past decade, but their noodles are made in the manner of Lanzhou in northwest China. How these became all the rage in far-off Fujian and were then transported to New York's Chinatown is a question I hope to answer by the time you finish reading this article, but I'm not making any promises.

The first time I watched Chinese pasta being pulled right before my eyes was in the early eighties, when the Chinese government, following President Nixon's opening to China, sponsored a restaurant on East Forty-sixth Street, near the United Nations, and named it Beijing Pavilion. Every day, right around noon-time, a Chinese man wearing a floppy chef's hat stood before a table set up at the front of the restaurant and produced, in a cloud of fine flour dust, a thick skin of more noodles than anybody could count. The Chinese apparently call them "dragon beard" noodles, on the theory that a dragon, which does not exist, has a beard that, despite the animal's great size, is made up of extremely fine hairs. No matter how often I found myself on East Forty-sixth Street at lunchtime, the fascination never faded, even though the dishes made with these noodles were not memorable.

I tried halfheartedly at home. I had no recipe, no Internet, and no YouTube, which now has a vast proliferation of pulled-noodle demonstrations. Success completely eluded me.

In 2008, Fingar dispatched me to Beijing so that I might recommend ten or fifteen restaurants to readers on their way to the Olympic games. At the Noodle Loft, I watched and consumed more types of handmade noodles than I had imagined existed. Not were the theatrics of noodle-making ignored. All the cooking was done out in the open in the center of the restaurant. One chef was stretching noodles by hand. Another held a hunk of firm noodle dough the size of a small turkey and, with the cleaver in his other hand, shaved thin slices of dough directly into a pot of boiling water. A third hugged a wide metal bowl packed to the brim with dough, and with his free hand quickly scraped a chopstick against

the dough so that, amazingly, the noodles eight or ten inches long would fly into the water. And then there was a young cook pulling an endless, continuous thin round noodle from somewhere below the counter and right into a steaming stockpot, using a technique that will, I'm afraid, remain a mystery—at least until I am once again dispatched to Beijing.

By now, there must be at least twelve Fujian-Lanzhou noodle shops in Chinatown and its suburbs. (Whenever a new place opens, the event is usually first announced by the indispensable and apparently noodle-obsessed Robert Siemons of the *Flavor Trav*.) The menus are typically poetic, as in “Mount Qi Beef Noodle is famous for its thin, chewy, shiny, flat, sour, spicy, and good smell.” If you’re in the neighborhood, you might try Sheng Wang or Kaito An.

New hand-pulled noodles have snaked up from Chinatown and into the Manhattan mainland. Xi’an Famous Foods established an embassy on St. Marks Place in the East Village, where flat hand-made noodles are torn in half lengthwise, emerging with a rough and oily edge that perfectly catches one of many available sauces and carries it to your mouth. And then came the hopeful news, a few months ago, that a new pulled-noodle place named Hang Ry would be opening on Bond Street, also in the well-loved East Village. As soon as I walked in, I recognized Amadeus Bognor, co-owner (with Sheila Wilson Mark) and a longtime acquaintance of mine who has served as manager of several of my favorite eating places.

Hang Ry is a handsome, modern restaurant. Amadeus’s idea is to use only high-quality, organic ingredients, and to serve traditionally hand-pulled noodles in soups created by chef Michael Hodgkins that are American and up-to-date while keeping the deeply savory character of the Chinese originals. There are soups of smoked pork belly and tongue, veal cheek, marrow, and liver with spinach and Japanese sweet potato; black-bean chicken breast and leg, with a soft egg; and a vegetarian squash broth with charred tomatoes and peppers. After my second visit and with several gallons of noodle soup under my belt, I asked Amadeus if I might possibly have a lesson in pulling noodles.

A few days later, I watched Hua Can Chen, the highly skilled noodle expert at Hang Ry, make a batch of dough—enough to yield 60 to 70 bowls of noodles—from high-gluten flour and water. In some noodle shops, the dough was kneaded by machine; in others, the

flour was well, by machine, and easier to handle. It took Chen about 40 minutes of strenuous hand-kneading before he was satisfied with the texture of the dough. I was exhausted and felt guilty when I later ate a bowl of his noodles. Amadeus feels that a stiff, hand-kneaded dough made with high-gluten flour is absolutely necessary to produce chewy, silky-smooth, and fine-textured noodles. He told me that finding an expert like Chen is extremely difficult. Chen is from Fujian.

Then, behind the counter of the open kitchen, I stood next to Chen, held a log of his dough, and attempted to mimic his technique. Our communication was in a new form of Spanish. It took Chen a little while to get used to my clumsy handling of his precious dough, but he was a gentleman as he waited almost patiently for the initial to cease. Yes, I was able to form a rope of dough, stretch it out to arm’s length, double it back, produce two ropes instead of one, and stretch it out again. That’s when one or two of the five strands broke, leaving me 60 noodles short of a full bowl. This would be considered, in the noodle business, a total and complete failure.

How could it be otherwise? Who could possibly learn anything with a grumbling teacher at his side and a small crowd of giggling onlookers? Besides, it had taken Chen a year or three years or whatever to master the art. So I asked him for a large piece of dough to take home. That evening, I watched several YouTube noodle-pulling videos, then got down to work. Without the distractions and humiliations of Hang Ry, I approached the dough with a degree of optimism. This lasted for upwards of 30 seconds, which was when the dough broke into several pieces and fell to the counter. Amadeus called the next day, apologetically explaining that the water Chen uses to moisten the dough is not simply water. It is highly alkaline “kan-su” water, which allows one to stretch a piece of dough far longer without breaking it. I made a quart of kan-su water with a bag of chemicals containing potassium and sodium carbonate and phosphoric acid, which Amadeus had bought in China. But I was no longer in the mood for pulling noodles. They had lost much of their magic for me. For I had learned about the lagman noodles of Xinjiang in far western China. And they had become my purpose and my ambition.

My assistant, Rachel, reviewing the endless supply of pulled-noodle videos on the Internet, stumbled on this—<http://time.com/9156205>. It shows the former chef at Bibik Jaha, which boldly claims to

be “Chicago’s only Kyrgyz restaurant,” making lagman noodles, an endeavor that becomes quite magical near the end when the noodles appear to be drawn out of the dough like yarn. But Chicago is far away. The other lagman video we found shows an older woman with powerful arms who, it turns out, lives in Istanbul, which is even farther away. But whose daughter Rukiya Sabit resides in Brooklyn. The videographer, Dave Kahn, helped me get in touch with Rukiya, who suggested we visit the Café Karlik in Brighton Beach, one of two eating places in Brooklyn that specialize in lagman dishes.

The Café Karlik has two subtitles: Hald Kitchen and Uyghur International Food. Karlik is the westernmost city of China, in the largely Muslim region of Xinjiang, whose people, the Uyghurs, are considered an oppressed minority. The owner, head chef, and chief noodle-maker is Khasiyat Sobitova. Rukiya had telephoned in advance but was sorry her request had been understood. So we ordered gyoza (lagman noodles with meat and vegetables), beef lagman, and meat dumplings, and had a satisfying and amiable meal. And then, somehow, Rukiya, whose first language was Karlikish, and Sobitova discovered that they could converse, which they proceeded to do with increasing speed and laughter. What a relief!

Sobitova seemed happy to show us in minute detail how she makes lagman. We gathered around the stainless-steel tables in the restaurant’s kitchen, on which she had mounted four pounds of flour from the Dependable Food Corp., called Fantastic HG. (Further investigation revealed a gluten level of 13.6 percent, not easy to find in the supermarket.) She mixed in two tablespoons of salt, formed a ball in the center of the flour, poured in a liter of water, and gradually stirred the flour into the water. Soon she had a druggy dough, which she kneaded briefly, then covered with plastic wrap. As would happen many times over the next hour or two, we and the dough had to wait for ten to fifteen minutes after each step. There were many, many steps, and an equal number of rest periods.

Now the dough was kneaded for three separate ten-minute periods. Next, Sobitova flattened the dough and rolled it out into a rectangle about an inch thick, brushed it with vegetable oil, and allowed it to rest. Using a thin, shiny closer, she cut the rectangle into twelve long strips, stretched each one out by a few inches, doubled it over loosely, laid out the strips in two layers, brushed them with oil, and let them rest. *Continued on page 257*

(continued from page 237) Then, one at a time, she unfolded the strips, and by squeezing and pulling here and there, she shaped each one into a long, round, reasonably smooth rope, and dropped it on the table. Once it had rested, she spiraled—coiled—half the ropes in one flat layer on an oiled tray, each one picking up where the last left off, brushed the coil with oil, and coiled the remaining six in a layer on top of the first coil, brushed it with oil, and rested again.

And now, for the denouement, Sobatova uncoiled the ropes, somewhat stretching and thinning each one between her fingers, then left each rope again in its own separate pile on the table. She took the ends of those ropes, gathered them together, skinned them around her hands and wrists as though she were handling yarn, and slapped the noodles down against the table while she stretched the noodles a bit more. By now they were

nearly as thin as fat spaghetti. They swelled a bit after she dropped them into a stockpot of boiling, salted water. After a minute or two, they floated to the surface, a signal that they needed just another minute of cooking, whereupon Sobatova skimmed them out of the pot and onto a tray, tossing them with a little oil to keep them separate.

Two days later, after another failed attempt to pull noodles in the style of Lanzhou, I watched the videos I had taken of Sobatova in Café Kashkar, then watched them again, and without any optimism, any confidence, completely on a lark, I mixed flour, salt, and water, and began to knead with my knuckles. As everything seemed to be going well, I kept at it and two hours later lifted two bowls' worth of lagman noodles from the boiling water. In disbelief I photographed them from every angle—and realized that I had lost perhaps three-quarters of my noodles

along the way, usually when they stuck together because I was moving too slowly. It was nearly midnight, and we had no broth to submerge the lagman in, so I called a nearby Vietnamese restaurant and ordered several containers of beef-and-noodle soup, and when they arrived, I strained out the Vietnamese noodles and substituted my lagman treasures, the pride of the Uighur people of Xinjiang. They were wonderful—chewy and somewhat irregular, they revealed no hint of uncooked flour and, by absorbing some of the broth, tasted sweetly of beef.

Amadeus tells me that a serving of hand-pulled noodles at Hung Ry, without the soup, costs him about \$2 to produce. I had made two bowls' worth in two hours, for which I might earn \$2 an hour. But my hidden advantage was that, unlike Chen and Sobatova, I got to eat the noodles, too. Am I ready to give up my day job? I'll get back to you. ☐