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FOOD

Are noodles on this Bay Area tasting menu actually worth the \$175 splurge?

Noodle in a Haystack is a restaurant by and for dedicated ramen enthusiasts



Soleil Ho

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Chilled Tomato Ramen. Noodle in a Haystack is a tasting menu-style restaurant where the owners serve an exceptionally geeky take on ramen.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Few dishes so successfully straddle the low and high ends of the culinary spectrum as ramen.

For most people, our interactions with ramen — and the universe of instant noodle varieties that sprang from it — are a practiced set of movements that take place in our home kitchens. It's the activation of an electric kettle, the unwrapping of crunchy plastic packaging, the timed wait as dry fried noodles and desiccated chunks of carrot plump up in boiling water. If luxury is on the mind, it's in the form of a last-minute cracked egg, its wispy, semi-translucent whites swimming in the broth, or a Kraft single slowly melting over the noodles.

But even “high end” from-scratch ramen remains a proletarian pursuit: In Tokyo, the [Michelin-starred](#) ramen shops ask you to order your \$10 bowls via ticket machine. Locally, acclaimed shops like Ramen Nagi and [Mensho Tokyo](#) average about \$15-\$20 a bowl. In this context, the ticket price at Noodle in a Haystack, opened by married couple Yoko and Clint Tan in [San Francisco's Richmond District](#) in the spring, can seem shocking: \$175 for a ramen tasting menu?

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It's a total oddball, but I am here to tell you that it absolutely works.

You might think that the price would indicate something gaudy and ridiculous, like noodles spun from edible gold and topped with braised white rhino and nori harvested by virgins from an ancient seabed. The actual climax of the 10-course tasting menu is more subtle: a combination of well-sourced ingredients and superior, even geeky, technique that add up to a quality of ramen you won't find anywhere outside of Japan. It will likely be the best ramen you've ever had.

In the spring, it was abura soba, a brothless and oilier version of ramen — noodles bound with Wagyu beef fat and topped with a gooey slow-poached egg, bamboo shoots and fatty slices of picanha, or the top sirloin cap, cooked sous vide. The creamy texture, achieved when the liquid egg yolk mingled with the hot beef fat, was akin to carbonara; bits of chopped raw onion, soaked in water to take the edge off, kept the richness from getting overwhelming.

In late summer, it was ebi shio — noodles in a translucent salt-seasoned broth paired with spot prawns and meaty New Caledonian blue shrimp. An orange oil made from the crustaceans' shells perfumed the broth, made with the post-extraction shells and chicken, with the luscious aroma of shrimp heads. Garnishing the noodles were clusters of micro cilantro, and we were encouraged to squeeze halved key limes into the soup. If you closed your eyes, that combination of lime, cilantro, thin noodles and seafood made it a dead ringer for Vietnamese bún riêu.



Ebi Shio Ramen. Noodle in a Haystack is a tasting menu-style restaurant where the owners serve an exceptionally geeky take on ramen.

You'll find the noodles served in different forms depending on the type of soup (or lack thereof). The Tans work closely with local noodle maker Iseya Craft Noodle, founded by a former Amazon engineer, to commission custom sizes, hydrations and textures for their dishes.

It took [a long time for the Tans to open this restaurant](#), which they successfully crowdfunded on Kickstarter in the summer of 2021. Eight years ago, the couple, who have a shared background in the financial services world, moved here from Tokyo to be closer to Clint's family. They were pained to find that the local shops didn't come within a hair's breadth of the places that sustained them in Japan. To emulate what they pined for, they studied cookbooks translated from Japanese. In 2015, friends and family convinced them to do pop-ups.

At their home in Daly City, the Tans hosted frequently sold-out dinners via online platforms like Feastly and Eatwith. Customers would slurp down bowls of ramen in their living room, surrounded by family photos and the Tans' son's Minecraft toys. A surprisingly strong showing at the [2017 World Ramen Grand Prix](#) in Osaka, Japan, gave them the boost they needed to start taking their hobby seriously. The Kickstarter made triple its goal, and the restaurant finally opened this year.

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In this new space, built out from a former curry cafe with a new hood and wooden counter with about a dozen seats, the couple cook using an arsenal of tabletop induction burners and household appliances. There's plenty of time during the meal for chitchat with the chefs, who only rarely bring on friends or temporary staff to assist with service, and the atmosphere is always personable and unpretentious. The lo-fi setup bridges the gap between Noodle in a Haystack's early days and the sleek restaurant they have today.

To preserve the intimacy of the experience and to allow for the micromanaging of every noodle, the number of seats here is the same as the number of seats at the Tans' house. So of course, reservations are exceedingly hard to come by because there's only one seating every night. While reporting out this review, I began to feel like a theatrical understudy, fervently hoping that someone would catch a cold or lose a babysitter so I could swoop into their seat. My advice is to keep an eye on the restaurant's Instagram stories, just in case anything frees up at the last minute.



Clint and Yoko Tan serving one of the courses at Noodle in a Haystack, a home for ambitious and upscale ramen in the Richmond District.
Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

At Noodle in a Haystack, the Tans and their team use the early courses to deconstruct and dissect the components of ramen. That approach was especially clear in the spring menu, which felt like a medical school-style seminar on all the ingredients that make ramen tick. Bean sprouts, an often undersung garnish, were blanched and mixed with a sesame sauce that vibrated with Sichuan pepper and chile flavors. In a tiny bowl, a silky block of fresh tofu and crab meat was doused in a Cantonese-style thickened dashi, with sea beans adding a different kind of oceanic bite.

The notion was clearest in the opening shot of a deviled egg, made from the typical marinated egg you'd see floating in a bowl, repurposed as an hors d'oeuvre. Its yolk was whipped with Kewpie mayonnaise, concentrated fish powder and pickled daikon radish juice and topped with garnishes of [fried chicken](#) skin and [boba](#)-like marinated salmon roe. Like Willy Wonka's three-course chewing gum, that single half of an egg seemed to contain a full narrative in itself.

That course has since been replaced with a coat button-sized brown butter financier topped with a fluffy dollop of creme fraiche whipped with smoked soy sauce. The morsel was scented behind the ears with dabs of garlic oil, and it was all finished with a briny plop of black caviar. It's not so obvious an act of foreshadowing, but it got everyone at the counter cooing with pleasure.

The new menu has also leaned harder into the seasonal produce conventions of California cuisine. A delightful miniature ramen came disguised as a pomodoro pasta, complete with a potent Early Girl tomato jam, a kelp-tomato broth and even some burrata topped with chile crisp oil. The Tans also got on [the corn train](#): For a scallop and sea urchin dish, they pureed Brentwood sweet corn and turned it into an airy, whipped version of corn potage, the French-influenced cream of corn soup that you can buy from vending machines on the streets of Tokyo.

A consistent course is the fried pork belly, which I hope never leaves the menu. At the National Palace Museum in Taipei, the star exhibit is a Qing Dynasty-era piece of banded jasper carved to look like a piece of braised pork belly; this dish, in a strange reversal, reminds me so much of that rock.



Kakuni Karaage (pork belly). Noodle in a Haystack is a tasting menu-style restaurant where the owners serve an exceptionally geeky take on ramen.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

The pork is braised for 16 hours, until it's basically a meat jelly, then coated in starch and fried. That results in a mouthwateringly melty texture not unlike a marshmallow toasted in a campfire or, as the Tans put it, like xiaolongbao. The craggy coating clinging to the meat also has a quartz-like quality to it, making the piece look like something you've carefully dug out of a cavern wall. On the side, you get a solid mixed greens salad and a pair of shiso leaves, marinated in a chile sauce, to refresh your palate. With this and the ramen, you'll definitely walk away satisfied.

It's an uphill battle for a restaurant like this to make good on a relatively steep price of admission, especially when it's focused on a dish that's widely considered to be cheap. Ramen and many dishes like it are beloved around the world because they're fast food — a working person's fuel. And you can palpably sense that sentiment in this restaurant, which celebrates even the most overlooked aspects of the dish in ways that consistently surprise and delight the senses.

Noodle in a Haystack

4601 Geary Blvd. (at 10th Avenue), San Francisco.

www.noodleinhaystack.com

Hours: Generally one seating at 6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday.

Accessibility: Lower counter seating available; single restroom. No printed or online menu. Indoor seating only.

Noise level: Moderate, depending on who's sitting near you.

Meal for two, without drinks: \$350.

What to order: Ten-course tasting menu (\$175), with limited substitution capability.

Meat-free options: None.

Drinks: Beer and sake. A \$70 sake pairing of four 3-ounce pours is available.

Transportation: Easy street parking.

Best practices: Reservations required. New reservations are released on Tock every second Sunday of the month at 9 p.m. Get on the waiting list or keep an eye on the restaurant's [Instagram page](#)

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Written By
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Reach Soleil on

Soleil Ho is an opinion columnist and cultural critic, focusing on gender, race, food policy and life in San Francisco. They were previously The Chronicle's Restaurant Critic, spearheading Bay Area restaurant recommendations through the flagship Top Restaurants series. In 2022, they won a Craig Claiborne Distinguished Restaurant Review Award from the James Beard Foundation.

Previously, Ho worked as a freelance food and pop culture writer, as a podcast producer on the Racist Sandwich, and as a restaurant chef. Illustration courtesy of Wendy Xu.

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