Chopstick or Fork?: Serving Hawaii's Working Class

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Abstract

Working at a historical saimin shop, I often have the opportunity to get to know the local people of Hawaii as they indulge in the very dish that has shaped their lives. Through the text, readers will follow my journey in discovering what makes saimin unique to the islands and how it encompasses all that is local Hawaii culture. I attempt to unravel saimin's questionable past until it found its home here on the islands. From the dusty sugar plantations of old to the bustling urban landscape of our modern age, saimin has comforted and sustained our working-class for over one hundred years.
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Soft, thin noodles, pulled from a pot of boiling water, now lie nested at the bottom of a big plastic bowl. Hot, golden dashi is filled to the brim. Garnishes are added to give color and texture to the dish. The pink swirl of a fishcake slice sways under the surface. Slices of Spam stick together while shreds of char siu begin to bleed their sweet red. Cabbage fills the empty spaces. Chopped green onions wander out of the noodle nest. The old cracked bowl is put down before you. A dollop of hot mustard sits in perigee. The steam rises up into the air and licks at your face.

Saimin: The holy grail for aunties, uncles, small boys and small girls alike. When that giant bowl is placed before you on a cold, rainy night, you could swear you saw God's face peeking at you somewhere between the kamaboko and the Spam. Even on the hottest, most humid day, when Kam highway is backed up with cars making a full circle around the island, that dashi is an elixir of life, those long noodles, a spiritual healing, and somehow, you aren't dying of a heat stroke.

There's a certain comfort found at the bottom of every saimin bowl. There, you'll find the peace to meditate over a hard day's work. In those noodles, you'll find the longevity and strength to go on, fight traffic, and do it all again tomorrow. Sitting shoulder to shoulder with loved ones or complete strangers, there's a human connection in every bite. The connection is in the unique struggle to make a living in Hawaii. It's not a dish to impress. It isn't dressed up with frills. It is the ultimate Hawaiian comfort food to remind you of a place you call home.

Working behind the counter of a historical saimin shop, I'm lucky enough to serve this bowl of comforts to all kinds of Hawaii locals: The tired, dirty construction workers; the manicured and prim business professionals; and the elderly retirees shuffling behind their sassy teenage grandchildren. But every once in a while, some smiling tourists will enter the shop. They look around the small dining room, at the cracks in the floor, at the tear in the dusty window screen flapping in the wind. They tower awkwardly over the tables and chairs. The locals around the room silently raise their eyes from their bowls, noodles cascading from their mouths. Their expressions ask the wordless question: What are they doing here? At a table of tourists, one person might be brave enough to ask: "What's say-meen?", followed by "Oh, so it's just ramen" or "Do you like it? Is it
popular?" After eating, they might say that "it was good" while wearing a poker face, sitting upright, then giving a small "thank you" as I lift the bowl, an abandoned kamaboko with a nibble at the corner left floating in cold dashi.

For many who don't live on the islands, it is hard to understand what saimin is all about because Hawaii's history has formed it into what it is today. There are even a number of local Hawaii residents who don't stop to wonder about this everyday culinary phenomenon. Saimin is a local dish found only in Hawaii, but how did it get here? It surely isn't a native Hawaiian delicacy. How is it different from any other noodle dish in the world? What exactly is saimin?

My journey in finding the very tip of the noodle has been a long, slippery one. There have been many varying accounts as to where it all started and what it really is. A brief description and some clues about the dish can be found in the etymology of its name. The word "saimin" comes from the Chinese characters: pronounced xi or sai meaning "thin", or by some sources, Cantonese for "water", and pronounced as min or mein meaning "wheat noodle" (Laudan 255). From its name, we can conclude that saimin has roots in China. However, the earliest form of noodles were invented in China back in the year 25 A.D., and since then, all noodle dishes that we see in every other part of the world have been adapted from the original creation. So, while it is safest to say that saimin was invented in China, the very claim seems over-generalized. All noodles were invented in China.

Peering into the bowl, the hungry onlooker will often notice many ingredients and flavors from Japanese origin. Konbu (seaweed); dried ebi (dried baby shrimp); katsuobonito (dried, fermented, and smoked skipjack tuna flakes); shoyu (fermented soy bean sauce); and sometimes shiitake (edible mushroom native to East Asia) make up the golden dashi. Kamaboko (steamed fishcake) and sometimes tamago (sweetened scrambled eggs) can be found wandering in the pool. These ingredients hint at a strong Japanese influence boiled up in the pot. Avid noodle-slurpers can spot the similarities between Japan’s ramen and Hawaii’s saimin. Ramen dashi is often made with many of these same ingredients (including chicken stock, konbu, katsuobonito, and shiitake) but is further complicated with beef or pork bones and onions. Then, shio (salt), miso, shoyu
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or more pork can be added to take the dashi a step further (Lopez-Alt). Ramen recipes vary from place to place. Different regions in Japan will hold claim to different variations, further specializing and evolving the ramen recipe, and in this way, some of these initial ingredients may be played with, emphasized, or left out altogether. The same could be said about saimin, in that saimin shops will differentiate their dashi recipes in order to make them unique. Both saimin and ramen have very similar recipes, but while ramen dashi is commonly made up of pork or beef bones and miso, giving it a variation of colors, degree of oiliness, as well a range of weighty consistencies, saimin dashi is almost always made with shrimp and/or fish based stock (and sometimes chicken stock), making it golden in color, not oily at all, and carrying a light, watery consistency. Ramen recipes vary so widely, however, that it is very difficult to pinpoint a base-ingredient in the dish other than the soft, chewy noodles that rest dreamily at the bottom of every ramen bowl. Who is to say that saimin is not just another form of ramen? While considering the similarities between saimin and ramen's ingredients and also the regional variations of noodle recipes, some commonly uttered questions immediately come to mind: *Is saimin a Japanese food? What, really, is the difference between saimin and ramen?*

The uncertainty looming in these questions rattle the hearts of many local Hawaii residents because saimin is such a culturally comforting dish. While ramen shops are everywhere on our islands, we still don't recognize it as a local food. There's something about saimin that is a unique part of Hawaii's history, but is it truly exclusive to Hawaii culture or are we just coddling the idea in an effort to convince ourselves?

In order to answer these questions, we must start at the beginning, but generally, it all boils down to the aforementioned fact that all noodles came from China. So ramen is not a native Japanese dish either, but Japan's history and people made ramen a part of their own identity and culture. Ramen's first appearance in Japan is yet another slippery subject. George Solt, historian and author of *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze*, presents a number of myths about ramen's introduction to Japan. One of the stories associates ramen with the opening of Japan's ports to the outside world in the late nineteenth century,
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attracting Chinese and Westerners who then brought their native inventions with them. *Laa-mein* (or *Nanjing* noodles), a noodle soup consisting of handmade noodles in a light chicken broth was brought by Chinese visitors. This soup wasn't fixed with garnishes and was served at the end of meals at Chinese restaurants, so it is a bit removed from the ramen that we know today. Another theory credits Ozaki Kenichi, a customs agent in Yokohama, who opened up a shop called Rai-Rai Ken in the Asakusa district in 1910. The noodles that he sold are much closer to the modern ramen that we consume today and even slightly reminiscent of Hawaii's *saimin*:

Rai-Rai Ken incorporated a soy sauce–based seasoning sauce and served its noodle soup, referred to as *Shina soba* (basically meaning Chinese noodles) with *chāshū* (roasted pork), *naruto* (fish-meal cake), boiled spinach, and *nori* (seaweed)—ingredients that together would form the model for authentic Tokyo-style ramen (qtd. Lombardi par. 8).

While ramen's journey to Japan is still unclear, a number of sources recall that it wasn't until the Meiji period from 1868-1912 when it became a widely-consumed meal ("Ramen" par. 4). During the early 1900's, Japan began to transform into an industrialized and urbanized society. More and more people worked in cities and ate their meals in restaurants. Ramen was still seen as a foreign food at this time, but when the noodle-making machine was invented, ramen stands like Rai-Rai Ken popped up everywhere in urban areas, and as Solts puts it, "The short amount of time necessary to prepare and consume the noodle soup, and its heartiness compared to Japanese soba (which did not include meat in the broth or as a topping), also fit the dietary needs and lifestyles of urban Japanese workers in the 1920's and 1930's" (qtd. Lombardi par. 12). Across the Pacific Ocean, around the same time, Hawaii would see the birth of another noodle soup for the working class. Noodles were introduced to Hawaii in the very same way that ramen was introduced to Japan: With the open invitation to foreigners. Exactly which country brought the noodles, no one can say for sure, but many have their own theories.

In search for some answers to the burning questions about Japan's influence on *saimin*, I recently made my way to the Waipahu Plantation Village. Ken Kaneshige, my tour guide and the son of a Japanese immigrant (or *Nisei*), took my group through the
grounds while detailing the history of Hawaii’s plantation era. Beginning in the late 1800’s, Hawaii’s sugar plantation oligarchy searched for new labor sources to fuel its lucrative sugar industry. King David Kalakaua visited Japan in 1881 to express his desire for Japanese workers, and on February 8, 1885, the first steamer, the "S.S. City of Tokio" arrived at Honolulu Harbor (Iwasaki 5). According to Kaneshige, Japan's immigration continued to flow from 1868 until 1924 when the Japanese Exclusion Act took place. Like every other immigrant, the Japanese people brought what they could of their traditions, religion, and culture.

I struggled to keep up with Mr. Kaneshige's outpouring of information, and after over an hour of moseying through modeled plantation homes, cramming names, dates, and landmarks into my feeble mind, we finally reached the Shiroma’s Saimin stand at the end of the tour. Mr. Kaneshige shared his thoughts about saimin's history, and I was very surprised at the confidence in his manner. He seemed very convinced that the Japanese natives who immigrated to Hawaii introduced this Chinese-style noodle to the islands. He claimed that saimin stands began appearing all over Oahu in the late 1880’s; however, if his assumption about the introduction of saimin by Japanese immigrants is true, then it seems strange when we consider Solts' theory about ramen's first appearance in Japan only becoming popularized by Rai-Rai Ken in 1910. If we consider Kaneshige's claim, it seems more plausible that the first kinds of noodles that appeared in Hawaii were closer to the naked Laa-mein noodles in chicken-based dashi that were brought to Japan's ports in the late-nineteenth century. If this theory is correct, it would make more sense that the Chinese immigrants brought their Laa-mein noodles to Hawaii rather than the Japanese immigrants because according to Solts, ramen wasn't generally accepted as a traditional Japanese dish. Whatever the story behind Japan's influence on saimin may be, it doesn't seem like a mere coincidence that saimin's appearance and the Japanese immigration to Hawaii happened during the very years of ramen's growing popularity in Japan.

However, even to this day with all of the technology of archiving information, it is still extremely difficult to pinpoint a specific source to the beginning of our island noodle. Chinese men were the first to arrive and work alongside the native Hawaiians until the
Chinese exclusion act in 1858 (Kaneshige). These original Chinese immigrants could very well have introduced their noodles to the islands before the first Japanese immigrants had arrived. In this way, these Chinese noodles could have evolved on their own in Hawaii while simultaneously evolving differently in Japan.

Our beloved state noodle really could have come from any country, but it is the multi-ethnic population that evolved a bowl of noodles into a boiling pot of cultures. Shunzo Sakamaki of the University of Hawaii explains the ongoing debate: "Saimin is a term peculiar to Hawaii. We do not know when or how it was coined. Local Chinese think saimin is a Japanese dish; local Japanese think it's a Chinese dish. One thing seems certain: It's a local (Hawaii) dish" (Laudan 50). Hawaii did not have a noodle dish before the mass immigration to our islands' workforce. During the plantation era, people from 34 different nations immigrated by the thousands in hopes of supplementing the economy back in their native lands. Many of the immigrants came from a culture that had its own noodle dish, and according to Linda Stradley, writer for a website called What's Cooking America, "Each new wave of immigrants adapted their native cuisine to fit the Islands’ available ingredients" (Stradley par. 2). The immigrants worked alongside each other, creating a hybrid language to communicate, and eventually learned about the different cultural practices and food from around the world. Rachel Laudan, author of The Food of Paradise writes:

When the immigrants first arrived on the plantations, the food of their employers was as strange as the language. The newcomers had to create a makeshift cuisine from what was provided and what they had brought with them, adapting familiar cooking methods and eating habits to the work schedule of the plantation. Try as they might to preserve their traditional cuisines, these were inevitably transformed (Laudan 17).

Ingredients that a person could have needed for an authentic native dish might have been difficult to grow or import, and in this way, Hawaii's cuisine became its own type of fusion that we now call "local food". On each plantation, numerous communal halls were built where workers could socialize and eat together. Faustino Baysa, a Filipino immigrant who worked in the Waialua plantations, recalls his experience in the communal halls:
We started making [i.e., participating in] that Cosmopolitan Social Club before. We had school teachers and plantation supervisors. But among the workers, they were either not willing to go in, or they were shy. Well, we joined in, and since we started playing together, play games, we began to understand that there was a gap. You go in there, and pick a little piece of paper, grab a subject, and supposedly talk about it, just to talk even if it were funny. We had to try our best, and since the intention was to socialize together and trying to know each other more, we began to like it (Baysa 4).

A number of sources make the claim that leftovers from different ethnic groups were thrown in to garnish the noodles and nourish their tattered bodies, and in this way, saimin became a communal dish to feed the working class in large numbers. Different garnishes from each ethnicity served to comfort the workers who had traveled thousands of miles from their native country. In each bowl, a representation of their own homes.

Similar to Rai-Rai Ken's legend in Japan, saimin began to catch on among Hawaii's working-class. Numerous saimin stands popped up near plantation villages to serve the thousands of tired and hungry. *The Food of Paradise* illustrates further details:

Many Japanese set up saimin stands, one of the easiest small businesses to start. All that was needed was a two-burner pushcart and permission from a local gas station to use its premises after hours. During the day you made noodles and broth at home, and then as darkness drew in, you trundled noodles into a pot of boiling water, pull them out and drain them, and ladle them into a bowl of hot broth (Laudan 51).

Saimin served as a quick and easy fix for meals. The plantation didn't pay much, but saimin was a cheap, hot, and filling. It offered protein from meats, nutrients from the vegetable garnishes, and calories from a heaping tangle of noodles. All of these elements made the dish perfect for the underpaid and overworked immigrants.

One of these iconic shops was the Shiroma Saimin stand that now rests in the Waipahu Plantation Village. In 1997, The Honolulu Star Bulletin covered the business's history:

The Shiroma Saimin shop opened in 1932 with a small stand in Waipahu's Higashi Camp, ewa of today's Hans L'Orange Park. The stand was situated ideally, near a single men's boarding house and a furo, or Japanese public bathhouse. The stand opened 17-1/2 hours a day, seven
days a week. Sugar plantation workers would stop by at lunchtime and dinner for a soul-satisfying bowl of handmade noodles swimming in long-simmered broth (Enomoto par. 2-3).

The dashi consisting of dried *ebi*, soup bones, and *konbu* was made daily in a giant pot; noodles were rolled by hand; and slices of round steak, *kamaboko*, and green onions topped the bowl. At the time, a small saimin was sold for 5 cents and a large saimin was sold for 10 cents. With a large percentage of the workers immigrating as single men, many of them lived in boarding houses with no wives to help prepare meals during the work day. Saimin stands were an important source for meals. These conditions helped these family-run businesses to flourish.
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During the plantation era, shops like Shiroma's were everywhere. In fact, Laudan claims that "half a dozen such stands were strung out along Waialae Avenue between what is now the University campus in Manoa and the upmarket suburb of Kahala" (Laudan 51). Today, however, there are only a handful of saimin shops scattered around the islands, and even fewer of them originate from these early plantation days. Today, the last remaining vintage saimin shops are those that originally opened in the 1940's or later.

Fortunately, I work at one of the oldest remaining saimin shops that rests in its original location. Forty Niners in Aiea opened in 1947. On any day at work, I will hear an aunty or uncle recall their early memories. Most of the time, customers share their personal experiences with saimin spontaneously. Working the afternoon and night shifts, I'll usually start my workday at the peak of traffic rush hour. The heat swelters through the big picture window and, framed within it, cars inch forward through the intersections of Kam highway. Every so often, someone will swing open the old, dirty plywood doors, and I'll perk up at the sound of the rusted bell hanging from the hinge. Almost always, that person coming in will be wearing some sort of work attire: An aloha shirt with the top buttons undone; a cotton polo with the company name embroidered over the breast; a fluorescent-yellow t-shirt with red dirt stains at its tails; and usually, a sheen of sweat with tired eyes. She might test out the bearings of the soda fountain stools at the counter. He might throw himself onto the torn vinyl seats. And before I get to ask "chopstick or fork?", their memories start rolling out: "Ho, I nevah come hea long time." Locals men and women in their 60's, 70's, and 80's will often stop me from walking away after setting a bowl of saimin in front of them. They all have the same expression; their eyes start to focus on something in front of them that I can't see. They search the depths of their memories before they begin with "my dad used to bring me here," or, "I used to come here after school when I was a small boy." I often hear things like "I haven't been here since 1979 when I got back from Vietnam. I walked here with a 60 pound backpack from Pearl Harbor and ate a bowl of saimin," or, "I've been nagging him to take me here since before we got married in the 50's, and this is the first time we've been." Each time, I picture that person at a younger age. I picture the island...
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recede back in time from an urbanized landscape to a tropical paradise. Each time, I see my job a little differently. I see saimin a little differently.

For many customers, saimin is their pau hana (done with work) ritual, and I get a chance to hear about their day. I watch their kids grow up from eating a plain saimin to a "big boy" saimin. I hear about their life changes from their financial struggles keeping up with Hawaii’s economy to their recent successes of purchasing a home. One of my regular customers, Curt Kiriu, food enthusiast, entrepreneur, and general contractor of Independent Living Builders, often comes by after work for a steaming bowl of saimin. During a slow afternoon, I recently got to ask him a few questions about his experiences and opinions with the dish:

Me: "So, how long have you been eating saimin?"
Mr. Kiriu: "I guess, since I was a small kid."
Me: "What are your earliest memories of saimin?"
Mr. Kiriu: "Earliest memories would be my mom making saimin in the kitchen and having it on a small little on Japanese table with my father. I guess my sister was a baby. That and going to my grandparents' house like a family get-together. Them making like a huge pot of saimin 'cause my mom, my grandparents had like 11 kids. So, I have a bunch of cousins, second-cousins, their kids."
Me: "Wow, you must have a huge family."
Mr. Kiriu: "Plus, you figure, saimin is inexpensive to make when you gotta feed like, a clan."
Me: "So, were your parents from here? Are your grandparents first-generation?"
Mr. Kiriu: "My grandfather came on a boat from Japan in, I think it was 1910, when he was 18-years old."
Me: "Wow, that's amazing that you know the exact year."
Mr. Kiriu: "Oh, only because after he passed away, my aunty them had to go through his stuff, so he had, like a, passport back then. You know, was Japanese, black hair, brown eyes."
Me: "So, he came here to do field work? Do you know what area he lived in? Or what island?"
Mr. Kiriu: "Well, it had to be Oahu 'cause they first lived in Palama. Palama settlement, you know, like Tamashiro Market, that area? Then, they moved out to Wahiawa side."
Me: "Do you feel that saimin is unique to Hawaii? And in what way?"
Mr. Kiriu: "Well, it's kind of like ramen. But most people in Japan have no idea what saimin is. It's either ramen or yaki-soba or something. The noodles are different. I think saimin is more of a combination of different cultures. There's a lot of stuff in there from the Chinese, the Japanese, Korean, Filipino, all different. 'Cause almost all the asian cultures all have noodles. Whether it's called panceit [Filipino noodles] or bi bim kook soo [Korean noodles]."

At this point, the restaurant started to fill up, so we had to end our conversation. Mr. Kiriu finished up his saimin and bid his farewell. Like Mr. Kiriu, many Hawaii locals hold on to early memories of saimin. Most of these memories have humble beginnings, whether it be in a tiny mom and pop restaurant or a pot of boiled noodles with some eggs cracked in. With saimin, no one is expected to dress up or place a folded napkin in their lap; it's a dish to unwind with and to share the experience of living and breathing in Hawaii, our home.

In every shop like Forty Niners, you'll find the same type of customers: The tired, the hungry, the working-class; but each shop will serve up something different. In an old cracked bowl at Forty Niners, you'll find extra thin noodles, chopped char siu, Spam, kamaboko, and green onions swimming in a dashi that has been made the same way from the first day that the doors flew open: konbu, dried ebi, shoyu, shiitake, and Hawaiian sea salt.
Forty Niners in Aiea (Est. 1947) - Large saimin: Char siu, Spam, kamaboko, and green onions with hot mustard on the side.

At Palace Saimin in Kalihi, which opened in 1946, they stick to the good and basic: Soft, curly noodles from Eagle's noodle factory, shredded char siu, and green onions with a homemade "secret" golden shrimp dashi.

Palace Saimin in Kalihi (Est. 1946) - Teriyaki beef stick with a small saimin: char siu and green onions with hot mustard on the side.
Shige's saimin in Wahiawa opened in 1990, but models their saimin after the historical Haleiwa saimin stand of the 1950's. Shige's dons flattened light-colored homemade noodles, strips of char siu, spam, kamaboko, green onions, and thin slices of scrambled egg with an optional addition of bean sprouts and cabbage.

Shigé's Saimin in Wahiawa (Est. 1990) - Cheeseburger deluxe, teriyaki beef stick, and a small saimin: Char siu, Spam, kamaboko, green onions, and scrambled eggs.

Shiro's Saimin Haven in Pearl City and Waipahu boasts a giant menu with a large variety of local dishes from all cultures to complement your steaming bowl of noodles. Their bowl includes soft, thick, yellowish noodles, luncheon meat, thin shreds of char siu, tamago, green onions, won bok cabbage and carrots.
Shiro's Saimin Haven in Pearl City (Est. 1969) - Teri burger with fries, shrimp tempura, maki sushi, small saimin with added vegetables and hot mustard on the side: Char siu, luncheon meat, won bok cabbage, carrots, tamago, and green onions.

Many locals recall having homemade saimin from their moms or grandmas. Konbu, katsuobonito flakes, and dried ebi, and shiitake were made to simmer in giant pots for hours creating flavorful golden dashi. Noodles were kneaded and cut by hand, while the garnishes were leftover ingredients from past meals. This became a great way to feed big families. Fast-forward to the 21st century. In our modern workforce, a big percentage of jobs in Honolulu are in business administration and construction/labor. With the urbanization of our islands and the ever-increasing cost of living in Hawaii, modern local families now need multiple sources of income and are always short on time. The endless construction on the islands has completely changed the tropical landscape in order to house more residents, and due to this urbanization, the majority of our workforce is no longer comprised of agriculture-type jobs. Moms no longer have time to knead dough or watch dashi boil on a stove. Things have changed since the plantation era, but saimin still has its presence here in Hawaii's work culture. Though there are only a few saimin shops scattered around the islands, the emergence of S&S Saimin and other brands of pre-cooked saimin noodles make it even faster and easier
to indulge in Hawaii’s state dish. Now, instead of boiling a giant pot of dashi for hours upon hours, noodle-lovers can use a microwave to heat pre-cooked saimin or just boil a pot of water for a few minutes to mix with powdered dashi. Today, it has become so easy to make saimin that it can be found at McDonalds, Zippy's, Anna Millers, and other fast food-type restaurants. Saimin is now a food that can be eaten on the go: At sports games, in movies, at the beach, or in the car.

But with all of these changes to saimin, is it really the same? Will saimin shops continue to close down as food becomes faster, easier, and more portable? Can it keep up with our demanding workforce or will it fall behind us?

History has tested these noodles for years, and like the people of Hawaii, they are ever-changing and adaptable. What makes saimin what it is lies in the history behind us, and follows with us today in the blood of each person and in the landscape of our islands. Whether you’re sitting over a bowl at a saimin shop on a rainy night or swaying exhausted over a pot of boiling S&S Saimin after work, swimming somewhere in that dashi there’s a part of yourself that you might have thought you lost or never knew: Your history, your family, your job, and most importantly, your home.

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