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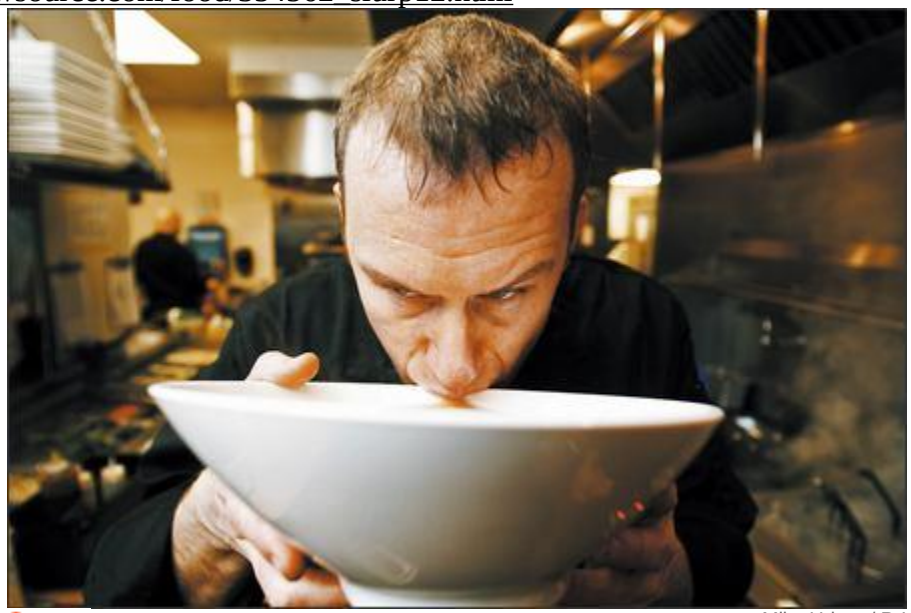

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Boom Noodle executive chef Jonathan Hunt tastes some fresh broth in his Capitol Hill kitchen. He toured Japan to absorb the flavors and styles of the food.

On Food: Suck it up and slurp your soup

It's only polite, no matter what you've learned

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Your mother was wrong, and so were the etiquette handbooks. Do slurp your soup. Please!

At least, slurp when eating ramen soup at Boom Noodle, where staffers have imported so many aspects of the staple Japanese lunch -- including an attempt to introduce the noisy, fast, vigorous way it's meant to be eaten.

They have even planted slurping friends in the restaurant to "make lots of noise and let people know it's completely acceptable," said executive chef Jonathan Hunt, who toured Japan to absorb the flavors and styles of the food before Boom (1121 East Pike St.) opened in January. Owners Steve Rosen and James Allard (also of Blue C Sushi) produced "slurp goggles" as a gag gift to encourage open season on the spraying that takes place when noodles and broth fly.

But it's hard for an American audience to overcome early training in table manners, even knowing that in many Asian cultures slurping is considered the practical, preferred, even polite way to eat the ubiquitous soup.

In Japan, ramen is "like soul food, like a street food," said Boom head chef Satoru Sugitani, a native of Tokyo. More ramen shops crowd together on the average corner there than coffee shops compete on Seattle streets. Sugitani's mother makes it daily at home.

"All the people love noodles," he said, more so than the sushi or tempura or other foods typically seen here as "Japanese."

But, except for the pork-alicious Samurai Noodle in the International District (expanding soon to the University District), restaurants with such a strong focus on ramen are hard to find in Seattle -- and the noisy slurp correspondingly rare.

"It does sound very complimentary," Hunt said, demonstrating the robust, swishing sound while eating Tokyo-style ramen with Sugitani.

"It's like everyone in the restaurant is sitting there, saying, 'Mmm! Mmm!' So that sound, there's an excitement about it. It's kind of an anxious sound, like, 'I've got to get some more! Hurry!' "

Practically, slurping allows the soup to be eaten at its steaming, aromatic best, with the air cooling it in the mouth before it's swallowed. The soup needs to be delivered to the table quickly, and should be eaten quickly, Sugitani said, which encourages the slurp. The noodles, less forgiving than European-style pasta, arrive al dente, and if they spend too much time in the broth they'll get too soft. The broth will be too starchy and the seasonings will be off. By slurping, the noodle "kind of finishes cooking while you're eating it, you're really breathing in the noodle in many ways," Hunt said.

It's a key (and better known) tasting technique when it comes to other foods and drinks as well.

For wine tasting, the slurp is an established best practice.

"Generally, slurpers sip the wine while taking in air with it. And aeration is what you are trying to do," said local wine and food writer Braiden Rex-Johnson. The idea is "to pull more air over the palate and through the wine so you can better detect its nuances -- the predominant fruits, spices, leather, etc., that make each wine unique." (Her own style is less of a slurp; she quickly swishes her tongue through the wine to aerate it.)

Olive oil tasting calls for a slurp as well, Rex-Johnson said, with the product so intense it "actually causes professional tasters to sneeze."

And at Peet's coffee on Queen Anne, where manager Angela Billington regularly leads customers through coffee "cuppings" that involve quick slurps of a row of steaming samples, she said the idea is both to cool the liquid and to better appreciate the taste.

"There are different centers on your palate that taste different things," she said.

"When you slurp it, it sprays the coffee all over as many different centers as possible. It gives you more different flavors all at the same time, if that makes sense. It just allows you to pick up on that a little better."

There are ways to navigate a successful slurp, said Hunt, plucking noodles out of the bowl with his chopsticks and comparing his skills to Sugitani's -- but ultimately it's more than technique.

"You need to get used to it," he said.

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