

clover food lab



Phil here,

I'm the Development Chef here at Clover. For today's Veggie Monster, I'm sharing some tips about making great vegetarian ramen. Before joining Clover, I spent years working in a Japanese kitchen at Cafe Sushi and would go to Japan once (sometimes twice) a year to learn more about ingredients and regional cooking techniques.

Here, I'm going to be sharing some tips for how to get the most out of these great ingredients. (The ingredients pictured are from [Maruichi Japanese Food & Deli in Brookline, MA](#))



Kombu

Aside from rice, there is probably no single ingredient more essential to Japanese cuisine than kombu. Kombu is an edible kelp/sea vegetable, prized for the deeply savory flavors that can be coaxied from it, and for its delightfully robust texture when cooked. Used in dashi (a Japanese stock), sometimes as the only ingredient apart from water, kombu provides a rich umami background to many Japanese foods. The best kombu comes from the cold waters of Northern Japan off the island of Hokkaido. After curing for up to two years, kombu is usually sold in long, leathery sheets. When buying these in a store you may notice a fine white powder on the surface of the kombu, this is from the natural sea salts drying on the surface of the kelp and can either be removed with a damp cloth or left on to add additional brininess to a dish.

Good kombu is a cornerstone of a tasty vegetarian ramen; to use it to its fullest effect measure out the amount of water you plan to use for your soup stock and bring the water and kombu up to just below boiling. Maintain that temperature for about an hour. Be careful not to boil your kombu during this stage as you could end up bringing out some less desirable flavors. After this soak/simmer, your kombu will have given up most of its rich flavor to the stock- you could discard it at this point or save it for making kombu-tsukudani (my favorite filling for onigiri!).

Dried Shiitake

Dried Shiitakes are exactly what they sound like- air-dried shiitake mushrooms. These are great in lots of veggie applications; profoundly savory with an addictive meaty texture, they are great for adding flavor or as the central component of many dishes.

They come in a few styles- for ramen/soup stocks I would generally opt for tight rounded caps called donko; these mushrooms haven't fully opened yet and have a more robust flavor.



For vegetarian ramen I usually add these after the kombu has been removed from the stock. Allowing them to cook slowly in the stock will add another great level of umami richness to your ramen broth. After about 30 minutes they will have given up most of their flavor to the stock, you can then slice them up for use in other dishes or as a topping for your finished ramen (even better if you sauté them with a little shoyu, mirin, and garlic, to make up for the flavor they imparted to your stock).

Ramen Stock

Once you've made a dashi using kombu and dried shiitake, you can get pretty creative with the other vegetables you use for your ramen broth. A collection of alliums is a good place to start, onions, shallots, negi (Japanese green onion) are all great. I would start by sautéing these very briefly in the bottom of your stock pot along with any other aromatics you like (ginger is usually a good addition).

Roughly chop any other veggies you'd like to flavor your broth with, just be careful with things like carrots that may end up imparting too much sweetness to your finished soup. Add your other veggies on top of your alliums/aromatics and then pour your dashi over them and simmer for about an hour. Unlike their meaty counterparts, veggie ramen stocks generally do not need to cook nearly as long since you aren't trying to extract flavor from bones.

Once you have a delicious ramen stock you can decide which stylistic direction to take your final ramen in. If you like your stock so much that you could basically eat it as-is you could make a **shio** (salt) **ramen**; for this you would simply strain your stock, season to your liking with salt, and serve with noodles and whatever toppings you like.

For something a little more robust, **shoyu ramen** would be the next step up in intensity. Shoyu ramen can be flavored either by adding shoyu directly to your broth or by making a shoyu-tare that gets added to the bowl ahead of adding your broth/constructing the rest of your dish.

And finally, if you want a very rich ramen experience, **miso ramen** (my personal favorite) is made by incorporating miso paste into your otherwise finished ramen broth. It is essential to add the miso after the rest of the cooking is complete. Miso has a myriad of subtle flavors that break down when excessively heated.

NOTE: if you are a vegetarian, make sure the miso you are using is vegetarian! While most miso is 100% vegan, some miso products have had concentrated fish stock added to them.



Noodles and Toppings

For toppings there are endless great options. Sauteed, seared, simmered, even grilled vegetables make great toppings for ramen. For something a little more traditional, menma, or young bamboo shoots are a great place to start (you can get these pre-cooked in soy). Soft boiled eggs are always great, especially marinated as [ajitama](#). Mushrooms are also a great addition; you can use the same dried shiitakes you used for your dashi or fresh ones. A square of crisp nori on top or slid up the side of your bowl adds another hint of the ocean and great textural contrast, just be sure to eat it before it gets too soggy! Vegetables like parsnips or celeriac can add another layer of savoriness to your ramen and when braised or slow roasted can be a good stand-in for chashu (the roast pork seen in many ramen dishes).

While you *can* repurpose dry ramen from your favorite packet version, fresh-frozen ramen noodles are pretty widely available and are a vastly superior option.

Enjoy!

And if you try making ramen, send us a note! I'd love to see what you make!

