

Restaurants

John Lanchester hadn't had truly great noodles. Until now...

There are three main types of Japanese noodle. Udon is a thick, soft flour noodle, which comes from the south of Japan; soba is a thick, firmer buckwheat noodle, which comes from the north. Both are served in a range of ways. The third type, ramen, originally from China but now a Japanese speciality, is a wheat noodle that's always served in a bowl of stock. Ramen was a central subject of the early 90s food-porn classic movie *Tampopo*, and because of that is probably the best-known Japanese noodle here.

All of these noodles are fast food. That doesn't mean they can't be very good, and it doesn't mean that they're fast and easy to make - quite the opposite. The key ingredients - noodles, stocks and sauces - have to be made a long time in advance, so the dishes are slow to prepare but quick to assemble and to serve. They are also supposed to be eaten fast. The Japanese like their noodles al dente, with a resistant texture; but noodles in hot stock keep cooking in the liquid and go soggy, so you have to get on with it. That's why the Japanese eat noodles quickly, with noisy slurps of air to cool the broth.

Fans of these noodles regard them as one of the world's great fast foods. (Other examples: south-east Asian street food, Neapolitan pizza.) Ruth Reichl, when she was restaurant critic of the *New York Times*, made her mark by giving three stars to a



MARTIN GODWIN FOR THE GUARDIAN

Japanese noodle restaurant. Speaking for myself, though, I'd never quite got it. I have no intellectual difficulty in believing that noodles can be super-great, but I'd never had noodles that scaled those heights. Good noodles, tasty noodles, satisfying and comforting noodles, yes; great noodles, no.

I've had them now, though. That is thanks to Koya, a restaurant that opened without much fanfare last year in Soho premises that used to be Alistair Little's deservedly famous restaurant. Koya specialises in udon. This is typical of Japanese restaurants, which, in their authentic form, concentrate on one type of cooking. The long noodles, rectangular in cross-section, are not handmade but footmade on the premises every

day. (They knead their dough the traditional way, with their feet.) The restaurant doesn't boast about this, or about its other many authenticities. That low-keyness is one of the nice things about it. The decor is bare and cafe-simple, with shared tables and a counter at the bar. They don't take bookings and there are often queues. We got there at opening time, 12 noon on the dot, and there were already 10 people waiting; by quarter past, the place was full.

Koya serves a variety of peripheral dishes, tempura and miso soup and whatnot. My advice would be to skip them and stick to the udon. (One side dish of mixed tempura included banana - what's that all about?) There are three basic types of dish: atsu-atsu, or hot udon in hot broth;

hiya-atsu, cold udon served with hot broth to dip in; and hiya-hiya, cold udon served with a cold sauce to dip in or pour over. Broadly speaking, the hot dishes are for winter, the cold for summer. It was a very cold day, but I felt I had to try both sides of the menu, so I had a cold dish of smoked mackerel with fresh herbs and leaves on a bed of udon with a sensationally good sauce. It was so vividly flavoured, and yet also so fresh and (thanks to the veg) so sharply green-tasting, that it added up to a perfect winter cheerer-up. As for the noodles, they were amazingly good, with a mystifying depth of flavour and a perfect texture. The hot dish was a beef atsu-atsu. I think the meat was brisket; slow-cooked, it was falling into shreds, and came with a broth of beautifully judged weight, meaty and enveloping without being too rich. The balance of these components and the great noodles was unimprovably good.

You might well say that at £9.30 for a bowl of noodle soup, it had to be good, because that price is only cheap if the food is outstanding. At Koya, it is; and there's something attractive about a place that concentrates on one thing and does it with such excellence. Noodle sceptics, your Damascene moment awaits. **Koya** 49 Frith Street, London W1, 020-7434 4463. No booking. Open Mon-Sat, lunch noon-3pm, dinner 5.30-10.30pm. Meal for one with drink, about £12-£15.



SOLUTIONS

The Quiz (page 77) **1** Ruth Ellis. **2** The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo, by Stieg Larsson. **3** Cadillac. **4** HMS Pinafore. **5** Burundi. **6** Zips. **7** Uranium, polonium and radium. **8** Coffee beans, part-digested by civets.

9 Captained England Ashes-winning sides home and away. **10** In Bristol. **11** Thunderbirds machines. **12** Liberty Bell: cast and home; LB Sousa march. **13** Directors-general of MI5. **14** Barbarian sacks of Rome.

15 Films featuring hitmen. **Scrabble** See board right. Answer: ARCHIPELAGO. Word of the week: WEBCAST - to transmit sound and images over the worldwide web. **Crossword** See board far right.

