The Near-Miracle Meal  
Sustains Billions Each Year  
And Proves Everybody Loves Ramen  
By Mark Luce

Ramen noodles

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April 2007

Golfdom

Out of Bounds

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

early 50 years later, the directions remain impossibly simple — boil water, cook for three minutes, add flavor pouch, stir, eat.

As anyone who has ever been a poor college student, a lazy bachelor or just a plain bad cook knows, we speak of Ramen Noodles. But for all the folks who take a yearly dive into either the packet form or the bowl form of the noodles, only a few know the name of Momofuku Ando, who died Jan. 5 at the age of 96.

Ando, you see, invented the cost-conscious culinary delicacy, and his story deserves to be told. In 1948 Ando was tossed into a Japanese jail for tax evasion, though he said he gave the unreported money to students for scholarships — how ironic, since they would later become a large part of his empire. After two years in the clink, Ando tried and tried to become successful in business.

In post-war Japan, food shortages were a major problem, and Ando, seeing endless lines at noodle stands, wanted to find a way to get more food to more people. After failure upon failure, Ando eventually figured out — in a backyard workshop in 1958 — that flash-frying noodles with palm oil could make a quick, easy, and, eventually, super cheap meal. Of course, he didn’t know that the invention would lead to a company that darn near printed its own money — a profit of $317 million last year — but to a sprawling museum dedicated to instant noodles in Ikeda City, Japan.

Not one to rest on said laurels, in 1972 Ando took those noodles and squeezed them into a Styrofoam cup, making an already simple-to-make meal even easier with Cup Noodles. And with that invention, foreign sales boomed.

While I do sometimes have a palate that craves foie gras, fine steak and finer scotch, I can honestly say that I always enjoy Ramen — even back in the cashless days when I ate it out of necessity rather than desire.

My dear aunt, I’m sure partially as a joke and partially looking out for my own money — a profit of $317 million last year — nor to a sprawling museum dedicated to instant noodles in Ikeda City, Japan.

Thanks, Mr. Ando, for that simple pleasure.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where his newest favorite Ramen flavor is creamy chicken.