

# Food & Drink

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Eat and drink your way around town



## Ramen gospel

*Butao King's bowls are worth getting evangelical about, p42*

photography by **Calvin Sit**



**Absolutely oishii** Butao King serves up possibly the best ramen in town

★★★★★

### Slammin' ramen

A scattering of uncomfortably narrow bar stools sit just a few feet away from a giant steaming vat of soup; tables are overrun with chopstick holders and open containers of seasonings, pickles, spices and sauces. It's Cramped. Humid. Noisy. Believe it or not, this is the setting for the best ramen in town.

The dingy eatery goes by the name of Butao King and was set up with the hopes of filling the local dining scene's gap for truly kick-ass ramen. Behind the kitchen counter stacked high with plastic red bowls, two Japanese chefs throw handfuls of noodle into soup, ladle the soup into bowls, pass the bowls to customers, and do it all over again. It's a well-oiled, adrenaline-fuelled machine. One of the men stationed behind the counter is Ikuta Satoshi, a Fukuoka native who's spent 14 years perfecting his ramen skills and earning enough accolades to warrant crazy bragging rights. Having spent his entire career in Japan where he established the famous noodle chain Nagi Ramen, Ikuta-san agreed to a proposal to bring his carefully honed

craft to the Hong Kong shores. As a sort of initial testing ground for his style of noodles, Butao is just a dingy 15-seater that sells a capped number of 200 bowls of ramen a day.

Every bowl of noodles that comes from the counter is custom cooked, with mix-and-match options based around four basic broth choices: Butao King (original pork bone broth), Black King (pork broth dyed dark with squid ink), Red King (spicy miso) and Green King (an Italian fusion soup made from a pesto-like combination of olive oil and basil). From there, a small white sheet lists the many different ways customers can doll up their noodles. How concentrated do you want your broth? Want a soft-boiled egg with that? How much minced garlic? Chopped scallions and seaweed? Homemade miso paste? Even the degree of the noodles' al dente-ness can be ticked off on the single sheet of paper and executed as requested in the bowl.

The noodles served here aren't the more readily common yellow telephone wire Tokyo variety, but instead are the millimeter-thin straight strands that hail from Japan's Hakata region. For any

good bowl of Hakata ramen it's the tonkotsu pork bone soup that makes the soul of the dish, and at Butao they have this down pat. When the eatery's signature Butao King (\$75) arrives at the table, the big mass of noodles is hidden under a milky, tan-brown broth enriched and perfumed by over 20 hours of cooking time with pork bone. It's a broth with a profound depth to it – the only kind that Ikuta-san will allow served to his customers.

### Butao King was set up to fill the local dining scene's gap for truly kick-ass ramen

While the Butao King ramen is a shining tribute to traditional Hakata cuisine, the Italian-Japanese crossover Green King ramen (\$90) is a testament to Ikuta's creative streak. The soup is laced with a combination of pork fat, olive oil and a generous mound of grated cheese. It's a strange concept that

results in a surprisingly mature mix of flavours. The strands of ramen glisten under the coating of fat-slicked broth, picking up a thick mess of flavours in every bundle. It's unabashedly rich, unashamedly fat, and undeniably awesome.

Levelling the pork broth, Butao's char siu is another dish worth getting evangelical about. The marbled meat is delivered to the store in a huge log form and is lovingly slow-cooked in red wine on site. Sliced thin to order, the texture of the meat transcends melt-in-the-mouth status. It is so tender it literally falls into strands in the soup. When all the noodles are finished, you end up swishing your chopsticks around the opaque broth, just hoping and praying that you'll manage to salvage any bits of leftover pork.

Without a doubt, Butao King is onto something great. And despite the cramped surrounds, the atmosphere is exactly right for this kind of food – it's ramen eating the way ramen should be eaten. And that's all that really matters.  
*Dorothy So*

11-12 Wo On Ln, Central, 2530 0600. Mon-Sat 11am-3pm & 6pm-9pm. Meal for two: around \$200.