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So Many Possibilities: A History of Noodles & Pasta

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Introduction

Searching “universal foods” on the internet brings up what you would expect to find. Potatoes, rice, beans, corn, the list goes on and on. But one food that is never mentioned, but definitely should be, are noodles. Think about it. Noodles (and pasta) are eaten everywhere. There are many different cultures and places around the world that have some type of noodle or pasta dish. The classic Italian-American dish of spaghetti and meatballs, the popular street food of Thailand’s pad thai, Vietnamese pho, Japanese ramen, Chinese Lanzhou Lamian, German spaetzle and hundreds of other noodle dishes are consumed every day by people in different countries, on different continents. In 2020, 116.6 billion servings of instant noodles were eaten across the globe.¹ In 2021, 16.9 million tons of pasta were produced worldwide.² There is no denying that the noodle has made its impact across the planet.

But noodles also remain an overlooked type of food when they are such a large part of so many people’s diets. From the bowls of ancient peoples over 4,000 years ago to the instant ramen consumed by millions today, noodles have thrived as a diverse cuisine. The noodle highlights the commonalities and connections humans have in culture, food, religion, and history. It is also an example of the ability for humans to learn over generations and build upon already existing ideas to develop culture, society and the human population. The question is where did the noodle originate? How did noodles become such a worldwide phenomenon? And how has the noodle evolved to the present day after thousands of years of history?

Noodles vs Pasta

Noodles and pasta seem to be used interchangeably as words to describe dishes we all know and love. But saying noodles in reference to dishes from East Asia, while pasta is used to reference the food from around the Mediterranean, specifically Italy, is more accurate. Although foods from each region are similar in some senses, like shape, they are different in many other senses like taste, ingredients, and preparation, thus the different names. This mirrors the development of the respective pasta and noodle cultures of Italy and China, which had some similarities, but mostly grew as different entities. As said in *Pasta and Noodles: A Global History*, “...we see the evolution of two different and complimentary culinary traditions, each of which influenced their respective worlds, and across the centuries evolved to garner loyal followings throughout the globe.”³

Origin of the Noodle

The origin story that is most widely known is that Marco Polo, an explorer whose narratives have been proven to be unreliable, brought back noodles to Italy after a visit to China in 1296 and also introduced spaghetti from Italy to China.⁴ In doing this, he brought the noodle to the center stage. This common story has been the most popularized among the general population but debunked by many historians and scholars. This myth actually comes from “the fertile imagination of the editors of the *Macaroni Journal*, the newsletter of the National Macaroni Manufacturers Association, an association of American pasta makers.”⁵ It was an advertisement involving Marco Polo sailing to China and a crew member named Macaroni going to shore to discover noodles, a tale that is entirely false. In fact, noodles are believed to have been in both Italy and China long before Marco Polo ventured down the Silk Road.

Historians then turned to more recent archaeological discoveries to explain the emergence of the noodle. Some point to the evidence of two early domesticated wheat varieties and production tools found at an archaeological site in Southwest Asia in the Fertile Crescent. This evidence is around 10,000 years old from the Neolithic period. People during this time were nomadic and would have needed preserved foods to sustain them as they traveled. Unfortunately, noodles were probably not what they were eating and it was more likely some kind of bread. This is not to say that they didn't have some type of early noodle, but it wasn't part of their main diet and all the credit for being the “inventor” of the noodle can't be attributed to these early societies.⁶

Other more concrete evidence comes from China. In 2005, archaeologists at Laijia, a Bronze age site on the Yellow River between the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai, unearthed ancient bowls containing 4,000 year old noodles. Those noodles sat, uneaten for centuries, after being preserved by a catastrophic earthquake and flood. This was a surprising discovery because it was widely believed noodles became popular in the Han Dynasty and spread around China before becoming a global phenomenon, but this noodle predated that time in Chinese history suggesting that noodles had been around long before we had expected.

The truth about the origin of the noodle is that there really isn't one answer. The numerous origin stories of the noodle truly emphasize it as a food with many different backgrounds that emerged around the world in different ways. It is interesting to see the different kinds of noodle dishes prepared by different cultures because of that. China and Italy specifically

have risen to be two of the noodle pioneers of the world, with unique culinary and cultural traditions surrounding noodles. However this food first came to be, or whether there was a culture that used it first, the diversity and versatility of the noodle is a direct result of its many origins. Noodles wouldn't be the same today if the history of the noodle wasn't such a cross-cultural phenomenon.

A Brief History of Wheat

The origins of the noodle cannot only be described by who made it first but also by what allowed it to exist in the first place: wheat. Early kinds of wheat were discovered in the Fertile Crescent, in West Asia. Evidence of wheat domestication has further solidified proof that wheat originated in that region. The earliest forms of wheat that were present include *Triticum monococcum* or einkorn wheat, and *T. turgidum* or emmer wheat. When emmer wheat was introduced to the area between the Northern Iranian Plateau and Southeastern Caspian Sea, it was bred with another plant called *Aegilops tauschii* or Tausch's goatgrass. This led to the wheat variety of *Triticum aestivum* or common wheat. *Triticum durum* or durum wheat is also thought to have originated in this area. Both types of wheat are still used today to make all kinds of wheat products.

There were many ways that early humans first consumed wheat, mostly emmer and einkorn, but it eventually became something that was ground up to make dough, breads and some kind of mushy gruel.⁷ During the Classical period, there are extensive records of wheat being grown around the Mediterranean, especially by the Greeks and Romans, although they didn't make much pasta. The two kinds of wheat that were (and still are) grown were common wheat and durum wheat, which was specifically valued for its semolina and traded extensively. Common wheat was grown in dry, sunny areas and made good bread while durum wheat was grown in humid areas and made good pasta. Durum wheat is favored for pasta because of properties that allow pasta to be golden colored, which consumers have historically related to good, quality pasta.⁸ This led people breeding wheat to get that color so their pasta would sell better, resulting in the amount of healthy carotenoids increasing in durum wheat pastas.⁹ The gluten in this kind of wheat pasta also allows the pasta to be strong and harder to break. Durum overall makes better quality pasta than other types of wheat and is the main type of wheat used to

make pasta today, although some pastas are made with wheat local to the regions where the pasta is being made.

In China noodle history also starts with wheat.¹⁰ For many, many years wheat was not a common plant in China and other grains were more used in ancient history. The climate in China was not in favor of wheat crops like the areas around the Mediterranean. While areas around the Mediterranean had hot, dry summers and cool, wet winters, East Asia was the opposite and that heavily affected the ability of wheat to be grown. They also didn't have very many tools for processing the wheat and making it into flour. While the weather stayed the same, the tools changed. With the invention of the rotary mill and irrigation technology, flour could be produced quicker, and more noodles could be made. These different environmental factors influenced the way pasta was made in each region and drove China to be more of a "fresh noodle" and softer wheat country while Italy had more "dry pasta" and more durable wheat available.

History of Noodles in China

Noodles, first referenced by people as *bing*, became popular during the early Han Dynasty, although it is now known that noodles were present in China long before that. The term was originally used to talk about any kind of wheat-flour products whether that is bread or different types of noodles. In the Han Dynasty, *bing* was more of a snack or special treat that was eaten in between meals by royalty and noblemen, mostly emperors. As time went on, *bing* slowly made its way into the diets of common people, becoming more of a staple food like it is today. This turning point is documented in early poetry and literature. Writers would describe how noodles were used in the everyday life of people in China, not just how they were eaten among the upper class. They also documented how *bing* was not only a food consumed by an individual but something would be shared within communities of people and some of the techniques used to make these noodles. These poems, stories, and writings are most of what scholars have that indicate when the noodle first emerged in China, and help to trace it throughout Chinese history. Poems from people like poet and historian Shu Xi that have been significant in piecing together the history of the noodle in China.¹¹ Xi wrote the "Ode to Bing" and in one of its verses he describes a way in which *bing* was made:

In a stretchy, sticky dough

Kneaded with water or broth, it becomes shiny.
 For the stuffing, pork ribs or shoulder of mutton,
 Fat and meat in proper proportion,
 Cut into small bits,
 Like gravel or the pearls of a necklace.¹²

It is important to distinguish that the emergence of *bing*/noodles happened mostly in Northern China because it dictates how noodles are eaten and used in different regions. There is no one way that noodles are made or eaten and it is distinct between different areas, even today. In the North they are more of a staple food, whereas in the South they are eaten for certain meals, like breakfast. In the South, they also had limited access to wheat so rice noodles became more popular there than in the North. These many distinctions are an important factor in Chinese noodle history and noodle culture today.

After many years of *bing* being eaten in China, the first recipes for it appeared in the 6th century CE. These recipes were incredibly detailed in the techniques and artistry behind making *bing*, as well as ingredients and instructions to do so. By this time, the word *bing* became too broad of a term to describe what it had originally meant, wheat-flour products. The word *mian* became how people referred to wheat-flour noodle products.¹³ There were four different types of *mian* noodles that were made and categorized. The first category was noodles made in water: *shuiyin* which means “stretched out in water” and *botuo* which has an unknown meaning. *Shuiyin* were long, thin noodles that were prepared by chopping them into large chopstick-like pieces and then soaking them in water. *Botuo* noodles are made almost the same way except they are shaped into larger pieces before going into the water. Both of these types are then boiled in water and served. The other category of noodles was prepared and could be stored until it was time to eat it: *qiemian* and *luosuo*. *Qiemian* is a wheat-flour noodle kneaded and shaped into chopstick-like shapes, then cut up into smaller pieces. These pieces are steamed and then put out to dry before being stored until they are served with a meat broth. *Luosuo* on the other hand is entirely different. It is made of miller kernels that were steamed, put in water, drained, and dried. Similar to *qiemian*, it was boiled and served with meat broth.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the technique of making *luosuo* would be lost but there are a few different types of pasta that are like it today in Spain and Northern Africa.

Another type of noodle emerged which was starch-based instead of wheat based, which is a noodle that China is well known for. This noodle could not be kneaded or shaped before cooking so to help shape it, cooks partially gelatinized the noodle by putting it through a sieve over boiling water, draining it, and drying it for later use, which groups it with the *qiemian* and *luosuo* noodles that were also preserved for later consumption.¹⁵ During the Song dynasty, noodles spread rapidly through China as a result of Mongol invasion in the North and the center of Chinese civilization shifted to Southern China. This also caused foreign noodle recipes from other places in Asia and Eastern Europe to make their way into Chinese noodle culture. The spread of noodles throughout China further included ingredients like meat, seafood, and vegetables that were being added to different noodles. Noodle shapes also really began to take on a wide variety. This further diversified noodle dishes in China and established that noodles were artisanal and domestic, a food for the working class. Noodles were (and are) classified not just by how they are made but by shape, cooking crafts, seasoning, and different ingredients, indicating just how complex of a food they are. After this period, during the Ming Dynasty, the development of noodles was stagnant. There were no major developments until the industrial revolution.

Modern Noodles in China

The next large change of noodles in China came during the Industrial revolution. The traditional way of handcrafting noodles was replaced by machine made, mass produced noodles. Although the original noodle making techniques were still preserved and held on to, the industrialization of the noodle making process forever changed the noodle culture in China. Today there are thousands of ways to prepare noodles, the most widely used cooking technique being to cook the noodles in broth and add other meats, vegetables and toppings. Fresh noodles are also still prevalent in China and are eaten daily across the country. These developments came out of generations of passing down techniques and recipes that are still used to this day.

Like many cultures, food has been used in cultural celebrations and rituals in the past and present of China. Noodles are an important food to many different ceremonies and festivals across China. The article “Noodles, traditionally and today” describes the types of noodles eaten at different times of the year: “At birthdays, people eat *longevity noodles* (长寿面); at the time of marriage and moving into a new house people eat noodles with gravy (打卤面), which means

flavored life; on the day of lunar February 2 “dragon head (龙抬头)”, people eat *dragon whiskers noodles* (龙须面) to look forward to good weather. We eat different noodles in different seasons and different festivals”.¹⁶ Noodles are also a way of connecting with your community in China and showing love and appreciation to people close to you. They were and still are a very communal food.

Today, there are many ways that noodles influence the daily life and beliefs of people in China. Humans use food as a way to form relationships with other people and the world around them, which is how noodles fit into food culture in Chinese society. There are different types of noodles eaten to signify different events or connections. Eating noodles and peaches is a common way of celebrating a birthday and long noodles are associated with having a long life.¹⁷ Food, like noodles, linked with different customs, traditions, and stories, are ever present in Chinese culture and around the world. The process of handmade noodles not only connects people to each other but the customer to the cook who made the noodles and creates an appreciation for the craft. The noodle has certainly made its mark on Chinese culture and history, and we can now turn to Italy to see the development of another kind of noodle culture.

History of Pasta in Italy

Pasta is a long cooking tradition in Italy, although it is unsure when the first pasta appeared there. It was years after wheat was first grown in the Mediterranean but before Marco Polo went on his travels and “discovered” pasta in China, but historians have had a hard time pin-pointing exactly *when* before Marco Polo. In the *Jerusalem Talmud* there was a debate written around the fifth century about whether pasta violated Jewish dietary laws or not.¹⁸ It uses the word *itriyah*¹⁹ which can then be seen becoming a common word in Arabic to use for dried pasta, which is different from the fresh pasta which was called *lakhsha*. This is the oldest mention of boiled noodles in the Western world. There are also records from when Sicily was under Islamic rule of people eating pasta. One geographer, Muhammad al-Idrisi, wrote of his travels in 1138 to Sicily in a book called *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq* (The Book for People Who Enjoy Travelling around the World). He talks about *itriyah*, a stringy food that is dried and mass produced so people, like sailors, can have it on long journeys.

Other scholars point to Etruscan sculptures in La Tomba dei Rilievi depicting rolling pins and boards as evidence of pasta, even though pasta is nowhere to be seen in those artworks.²⁰

Others say that a dish called *laganum*, mentioned in early poetry written by Roman poet Horace, was the first sign of pasta in Italy. He wrote “I come back home to my pot of leek, peas, and laganum.”²¹ Descriptions of it barely resemble pasta as we know it today, although it might have been an early version of lasagna. Another mention of pasta occurred when Jewish people went to France in the 11th century CE and were making something like pasta called *vermishelsh*. To truly understand where pasta first emerges in Italy, it is important to look beyond the region to other parts of the world. Like it is stated in *On the Noodle Road* by Jen Lin-Liu, “The development of pasta in the country seemed to be the result of cross-pollination with other cultures, unlike in China, where evidence suggested that noodles were homegrown”.²²

In Italy, the progress of pasta was slow. For years and years, bread products were the dominant food to make with wheat-flour. Kneaded doughs shaped into bread became popular while pasta was mostly a gruel-like substance, hardly eaten. The earliest type of pasta in Italy that resembles what we actually have today is lasagne and vermicelli. These two pastas represent four of the pasta shapes that categorize all the various pasta shapes that they had back then and we have now. These categories are long goods, short goods, egg noodles and specialty products. Lasagne requires making a large sheet of dough while vermicelli requires making strands of dough. Lasagne appeared much earlier in Italian history than vermicelli did. The sheets of dough that were lasagne can be cut and made into lasagna, ravioli, tortellini, crosetti, longetti and various other types of pasta. Since vermicelli appeared later, historians have taken this to indicate that it was introduced to Italy by some other group of people, possibly from Southwest Asia. Vermicelli would be made into strands of dough that could then be made into early types of pasta like tri/tria, itrium, fidaws (an early word for fideos), and other pastas that evolved into what we have today. Dry pasta and fresh pasta were also categories of pasta that emerged. Vermicelli were generally dried pastas while lasagne were fresh and consumed after they were made.²³

In the Middle Ages, pasta started to become a popular food in Italy and the surrounding areas. Fresh pasta shops would line the streets and dry pasta was making its way around the Mediterranean and beyond. Sicily was a pasta hub and a large reason for the success of pasta. They had fantastic durum wheat crops that made excellent pasta. The pasta producers of Sicily also found themselves to be in control of many of the steps of pasta creation, from wheat production to selling the product. This was mainly because many pasta makers were good with business and had the financial and commercial resources to produce pasta. Sicily was also,

geographically, in an advantageous spot. The island was at a global crossroads, “at the intersection of the Christian and Muslim worlds.”²⁴ Sicilians also consumed wheat products more than other places because there was easy access to it and demand for pasta was high. Sardinia, Pisa, Naples, and Genoa were also notable pasta hubs, Sardinia especially because of its similar situation as Sicily; at the crossroads of global trade and the growth of quality wheat crops. The pasta trade was ever present in Pisa, Naples, and Genoa as well but not on the scale of Sicily or Sardinia at the time. There was extensive trade between these areas as well as outside of the Italian peninsula, with North Africa and other parts of Europe. Over time these trade networks became very interconnected and complex.

There was also specific demand for dry pasta or fresh pasta based on the location. Dry pasta was underappreciated because it was seen as inferior to fresh, artisanal pasta, especially among the upper class. Even so, pasta was a luxury and dry pasta was important in its own way. It was able to last for a while and be used on long journeys or kept in the house to be cooked for different meals. The technique used to make this early pasta is up in the air because there are not a lot of sources from this time. We know that kneading dough, shaping the pasta, and tools like rolling pins were used but not much else was recorded from this first generation of pasta makers.

Modern Pasta in Italy

This era of pasta eventually led into the fresh and dry pasta developing at the same time and Italy becoming the leading expert of pasta in the Mediterranean. Many areas even started to adopt the Italian language surrounding pasta, stretching as far as Northern France and England. While pasta was still handmade in local shops with few tools being used, a dramatic switch, some may even say a revolution, happened around the 16th and 17th centuries. Pasta makers began to create guilds and went to seek out their own economic paths. This allowed pasta to be produced faster and for cheaper, with the inclusion of new tools like the brake and extrusion press.²⁵ This in turn drove up the demand for pasta, popularizing it further, and with the skill and the finest durum wheat semolina of pasta makers, they set in stone the future of industrial development during the industrial revolution. The Industrial Revolution led to that transition from handmade, artisanal pasta to mechanized, mass production of pasta as seen in China with noodles. Machines replaced people and many pasta makers no longer needed to make the pasta

by hand because there was a machine for every step. This was a radical change that increased its availability to the world beyond Italy and made the region famous for its pasta.

Today people are reverting back to handmade pasta, as a way to connect to the past and preserve the techniques and recipes of the original pasta makers in Italy. Pasta traditions have survived, passed down through generations, and as the pasta industry grew as Italians immigrated out of Italy and to the Americas, spread to other parts of the world. The variety of local and regional traditions across the world would not be where it is today without the Italian influence and Italy would not be one of the pasta hubs of the world if not for the many influences of early societies around the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

The noodle, like the other universal foods of rice, potatoes, and beans, are not limited to where they are most popular or where they have the most history. Noodles have become a staple of many countries across the world and, as a result, noodle dishes have evolved even more to fit the different tastes of a diverse number of cultures.

In other East Asian countries, such as India, Japan, and South Korea, noodles have had different paths. In India, the cultural significance and community meaning of noodles in Chinese culture resonated with ideas of Hinduism in India at the time when the noodle was being introduced.²⁶ This caused the noodle to become a staple food in India and even as the ideas of community change, noodles change with it. Maggi, an instant noodle brand, represents individualistic ideas that are developing in India in the modern day. In Japan, Korea, and other parts of the world, the instant noodle has also been a cultural sensation. Ramen and other noodles also make up a large part of food culture in East Asian countries, showing that the influence of the noodle has spanned centuries. Southwest Asian countries have been thought to be the origin of early domesticated wheat, different types of noodles, and different techniques of making noodles which have all had influence on the noodle history of Italy and China.

In North and South America, iconic dishes of spaghetti and meatballs, macaroni and cheese or tallarines verdes would not be possible without Italian immigrants moving there. In North Africa, dishes like couscous and rechta emerged, offering a new version of pasta. They also were prolific in the wheat industry and trade throughout history. And finally in Europe, countries like Spain, Germany, England, and others were creating their own pasta dishes and

kickstarting the spread of an industry that would become international. These examples are only a few ways noodles and pasta show up across the histories of countless countries.

The history of noodles and pasta is not a single country's history to claim but a global history of the generations of pasta and noodle makers who perfected their craft and taught it to younger generations. It is said that “Culture evolves through the collective accumulation of small variations”²⁷ like the individual cooks' innovations on recipes leading to the variety of pasta and noodles today, or the inventions of different people that led to the machines that would make pasta and noodles a global sensation. We owe this fabulous food to all of the cultures and people who came before, which echoes the communal nature and love of noodles and pasta around the world.

Endnotes:

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2. “Annual Report,” International Pasta Organization, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://internationalpasta.org/annual-report/>.
3. Kantha Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2016), 95.
4. Peter Jackson, “Marco Polo and His ‘Travels,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 61, no. 1 (1998): 82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3107293>.
5. Françoise Sabban and Silvano Serventi, *Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food*, trans. Antony Shuggar (Columbia University Press, 2002), 10.
6. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 7-8.
The argument that the early nomads didn’t have pasta and were much more likely to have some kind of flatbread is that there are many steps and tools required to process durum wheat and to make pasta, which wouldn’t really fit with a nomadic lifestyle. This isn’t to say that they didn’t have an early form of pasta, only that it is less likely than other evidence of early pasta and noodles. This debate also speaks to the speculation surrounding the many origins of pasta and how evidence can be interpreted differently.
7. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 305- 308.
8. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 37.
9. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 37.
10. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 96.
11. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 271.
12. Sabban and Silvan, *Pasta*, 273. “The Ode to Bing” is one of many poems written by Shu Xi and explores the ways in which pasta fits into the cultures of early China. It recounts noodles eaten during the different seasons, how noodles are prepared and even different noodle shapes like “dog tongues”, “piglet ears” or “dagger laces”.

13. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 275.
14. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 306.
15. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 306.
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18. "Jerusalem Talmud," Jewish Virtual Library: Project of AICE, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/talmud-jerusalem>. The *Jerusalem Talmud*, also known as the *Palestinian Talmud*, is one of two Talmuds. They consist of notes from Rabbi's on the Jewish oral tradition of Mishnah.
19. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 18.
20. Shelke, *Pasta and Noodles*, 17.
21. B. L. Ullman, "Horace Serm. I. 6. 115 and the History of the Word Laganum," *Classical Philology* 7, no. 4 (1912): 442-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261474>.
22. Jen Lin-Liu, *On the Noodle Road: From Beijing to Rome with Love and Pasta*, (Riverhead Books, 2013), 581.
23. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 24 - 34.
24. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 43.
25. Sabban and Silvano, *Pasta*, 64.
26. Vaishnav Shetty, "The Historical Role of the Noodle in Indian Society by Vaishnav Shetty," Noodles on the Silk Road, Accessed January 2020, <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/noodles/2018/07/03/the-historical-role-of-the-noodle-in-indian-society-by-vaishnav-shetty/>.

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