

The secret is out

New west-side ramen shop is the real deal

Have you ever had a personal “secret” restaurant? One so good that if word spread, it’d be overrun with customers and you’d be lucky to get a table again? I recently discovered a new Chico spot that I might have kept to myself. But I arrived to this party way too late.

Coco’s Ramen just opened in December, but it is already hopelessly popular. Given its reputation for being packed, I’ve showed up before it opened on two different occasions, and both times there was already a line forming outside. The fact that the place is dinky and open only for dinner is part of the reason, but mostly its because the ramen is legit.

story and photo by
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Coco’s Ramen
1008 W. Sacramento
Ave., Ste. 1A
965-5541
Open 5:30-9:30 p.m.
(till 10 p.m. on
Fridays and
Saturdays)

My ramen barometer on a first visit had to be the tonkotsu, the pork bone-broth standby. Coco’s version is made with a tonkotsu base and pork-and-chicken stock and topped with a choice of meat (chashu pork, braised pork belly or beef), black mushrooms, bamboo shoots, green onions, a sheet of nori and half an egg. For all the ramens, you also choose your spice level (regular, mild, medium, hot or extra hot) and whether you want added garlic, black garlic or no garlic at all. First time in, I went with medium heat, no garlic and braised pork belly on top.

It was wonderful. The broth was opaque and meaty, and the noodles were elegant—chewy and silky in the rich broth. My wife had the same order, but with “regular” spicy level, and I have to say that the full porky effect of the slow-cooked broth was much more



Tonkotsu ramen

Owner Steve Zou has another Coco’s Ramen on Mission Street in San Francisco, and he has opened his second one in the mini mall that shares a parking lot with Safeway on Nord Avenue (in the end spot that’s been home to a succession of doughnut shops over the years).

The ambiance is exactly what you want in a fun hole-in-the-wall spot. The walls are painted red, bottles of sake line shelves behind the bar, and there isn’t an inch of extra space as diners share tables and counters; servers squeeze by one another holding trays overhead.

pronounced with the heat out of the way.

Most of Coco’s ramens are \$11.95 (seafood is \$13.95 and veggie \$10.95). And while the minimal toppings were the perfect complement for me—especially the earthy black mushrooms and nori—there are extra ones available, including kimchi, fried tofu and corn (\$2 each).

On another visit, I tried the curry ramen (just “mild” heat added). With a curry base and pork-and-chicken stock, plus toppings of meat (pork belly for me again), potatoes, carrot, green onions and half an egg, it was similarly excellent, with a slightly sweet fragrance and the absorbent potatoes and carrots steeped with flavor.

Most recently, my wife and I toured the appetizer menu with a to-go order sampling of six items: fried baby squid (\$6.50), pork belly yakitori (\$4.50), pork gyoza (\$5), agedashi tofu (on special for \$3), panko shrimp (\$6) and pork katsu (\$5). All were good, but my two personal faves were the tiny squids skewered, battered and fried without losing the squid flavor; and the meaty pork belly with green onions on a stick. The juicy, garlicky gyoza and the breaded, fried katsu were also nice.

Being a new business that’s also constantly busy, it’s understandable that not everything at Coco’s is running perfectly smooth yet. If you prepare yourself for long waits (even on to-go orders), you won’t be disappointed.

For my appetizer binge, I made my to-go order, then simply sat and enjoyed an Asahi lager at the bar as I waited and watched the place fill up. Problem solved. □

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