

COOKING Ready-Made Store-Bought Noodles

Semi-fresh *han nama men* 半生麺・乾麺 **Dried** *kan men* • 冷凍麺 **frozen** *reitō men*

When I don't have the time (or a group of people to help me stomp, roll and cut noodle dough) to make fresh-stomped *udon*, my personal preference is to purchase **han nama udon** or semi-fresh *udon* noodles. *Han-nama udon* are easily available in stores throughout Japan.



However, when buying Japanese noodles overseas, *kan men* or “dried noodles” are usually a more reliable choice. Many brands will have *Sanuki* 讃岐 as part of their name; this refers to the Sanuki region of Shikoku (current day Kagawa prefecture) known for its *udon*.

Ishimaru brand (logo above) produces many excellent kinds of Sanuki-style *udon* noodles; two dried *kan men* products I have used while in the U.S.A. are **té uchi hōchō-giri** (“knife cut”) noodles and regular **Sanuki udon** noodles. Pictured below, left to right: regular DRIED Sanuki-style udon, DRIED *té uchi hōchō-giri* Sanuki-style udon, SEMI-FRESH Sanuki-style udon.



Store all dried and shelf-stable noodles as you would any pasta, on a cool, dark, dry shelf. After opening the original packages, transfer remaining contents to a lidded jar, canister, or sealed bag (include the packet of drying agent that came with the original package). Label the container with the date the package was opened; it is best to use the product within a few months, though spoilage is rare even a year later.

Cooking times for packaged Japanese noodles vary enormously according to the type (dried *kan men* or semi-dried *han nama*), and from brand to brand. Look to see if instructions are provided on the package you have. If so, follow the printed guidelines. If no guidelines are available (or you are having trouble “reading” the instructions), follow these basic procedures:

- **Use plenty of water... and a pot with lots of headroom** (for every bunch of dried noodles, typically 100 grams/ 3.5 ounces, use about 500 cc/1 pint of water and estimate at least 1-inch headroom).
- **DO NOT** salt, or add oil, to the water.
- **Bring water in your pot to a rapid boil over high heat.**
- **Scatter the noodles** and poke them occasionally (to keep from sticking together) until the water returns to a boil.
- **Begin timing your noodles from the moment the water RETURNS TO A BOIL.** Adjust your stove to maintain a steady, but less vigorous, boil.

Cooking-Time Guidelines for Various types of noodles:

In addition to the shelf-stable products pictured above, refrigerated fresh (uncooked) *udon* is occasionally available outside Japan. These products should remain refrigerated until use and consumed no later than the date printed on the package. If they had been frozen in shipment to the store, DO NOT RE-FREEZE.

Surprisingly good (the technology has improved vastly in the past few years), pre-cooked *udon* noodles are often available frozen. These need only to be dipped, still frozen, in boiling water allowing the water to return to a boil before draining the noodles. Do not re-freeze; use on or before the sell-by date on the package. Katokichi is a well-known manufacturer of noodle and rice products.



COOKING STORE-BOUGHT UDON NOODLES

If instructions are provided on the package you purchase, follow the guidelines printed there. If no guidelines are available, refer to basic procedures described here.

If cooking **semi-dried** (slightly flexible, shelf stable) *udon*, boil for **6-7 minutes** before testing for tenderness; if cooking **dried** (brittle, shelf stable) *udon*, boil for **9-10 minutes**. Test by plucking a noodle from the pot, plunging it in cold water, then biting. Ideally, the noodle will be tender with no hard core; the outer surface will be slightly slippery but not overly soft. This condition is what the Japanese refer to as *koshi*, or “substance,” just as the Italians enjoy their pasta *a la dente*. If necessary, cook for another minute and check again. If the test noodle is still very hard (with a visible white line in the center), turn off your heat source, place a lid on the pot and set the timer for 2 minutes. The noodles will continue to cook by *yonetsu* (residual heat).

During this time you can warm your bowls if you will be serving the noodles in hot broth. Take some of the boiling-hot water from the pot and ladle it into individual serving bowls. After the 2-minute wait, test another noodle. If still hard, re-lid and wait another minute. When done, drain and rinse well under running cold water to remove surface starch, **EVEN IF YOU WILL BE SERVING THE NOODLES HOT** later. Drain again.



Pour off the hot water that had been warming your bowls and fill with well-drained noodles. Pour hot Sanuki Broth (see separate recipe) over the noodles. Serve with condiments (grated ginger, chopped scallions) and/or toppings (tempura, fried *tōfu*, eggs etc).