

Just add Boiling Water

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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TIHAA has developed nine flavors of instant noodles to satisfy the palates of the survivors to whom Tzu Chi volunteers deliver aid in the wake of disasters.

Empty a pack of noodles and the accompanying seasoning packets into a large bowl, pour in boiling water, and cover the bowl. Let it sit for three minutes for the noodles, spices, and dehydrated vegetables to wake up and form a tasty combination. When a tempting aroma emanates from under the lid, lift it off for a simple yet satisfying meal.

A pack of instant noodles and two packets of seasoning are soaked in a bowl of boiling water. The once dried, hard noodles and dehydrated vegetables swell up and stretch outwards in all directions. Soon the bowl is filled to the brim with puffy, supple yellowish noodles and colorful vegetables, and a delicious aroma fills the air.

The beginning

The Angke River in Jakarta flooded its banks in early 2002. Among the volunteers who went to deliver aid to victims were some successful entrepreneurs. They witnessed firsthand the hardships of daily life caused by the disaster. Upon returning to Taiwan, they started to work on a solution that would allow food to be delivered to victims as quickly as possible so they would not have to starve. Instant noodles were part of their solution, according to Wei Ying-chong (魏英宗), chairman of the board of Wei Chuan Foods Corporation in Taiwan and head of the TIHAA food work group.

Instant noodles are an established product in Taiwan. They are light and easy to carry, and they have a long shelf life. TIHAA took the noodles and modified their volume, flavoring, preservation methods, and nutrients to make them more suitable for international relief missions.

For example, curry flavoring is a logical choice because the spice is popular in Southeast Asia, a region where the foundation does a fair amount of its international relief work.

The noodles

Commercial instant noodles are usually perceived as unhealthy because they are deep-fried and laden with preservatives. TIHAA decided to make its instant noodles entirely without MSG or preservatives--vitamins C and E are used as natural anti-oxidants to replace artificial preservatives. Non-fried noodles are also offered.

The instant noodles produced by TIHAA come in nine flavors: toon (*Toona sinensis*), tomato, miso, medicinal herbs, curry, collard greens with shiitake, gingered Chinese sauerkraut, Japanese-style miso, and Korean kimchi. The first five flavors are deep fried. The remaining four flavors are steamed. These two ways of manufacturing involve completely different processes and costs, although both need to go through a dry-aging step to remove water from the noodles.

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Xie Nian-hua (謝年華), manager of the food plant that produces the noodles for TIHAA, explained, "For the deep-fried variety, noodles are fried in oil for 90 seconds, then quickly dehydrated until they contain less than three percent water. In this state, water becomes rather inactive, making the noodles inhospitable to germs; the need for preservatives is therefore greatly reduced. If not fried, noodles are steamed at around 105 degrees Celsius (221°) to achieve dehydration. It takes a longer time for steamed noodles to dry-age."

The two ways of making the noodles yield products with distinctive characteristics. According to Xie, fried noodles are more porous. They soak up water more readily and expand better, making them fuller, smoother, and easier to eat. By contrast, steamed noodles are more densely packed, harder, and take longer to cook. But they are more supple and chewy.

A variety of vegetables (greens, carrots, corn, and seaweed) are dried and generously packed into seasoning packets. TIHAA does not buy ready-made dehydrated vegetables. Rather, it buys fresh vegetables and cleans and dries them for the seasoning packets. "We exercise strict control over the ingredients we use," Xie noted.

Each pack of fried noodles (including seasoning) is about 100 grams (3.5 oz) 12% larger than the usual 85 grams (3 oz) in commercial products--providing about 450 calories to fill hungry stomachs in distressed zones. Steamed noodles average about 85 grams of total weight and yield about 300 calories.

There is only one problem with the super-sized noodle blocks and seasoning packets. The noodle packs sometimes jam the machinery on the production line and inevitably slow it down. "We normally roll 4,500 boxes containing 30 packs of commercial noodles off the line in an eight-hour shift," said Xie, "but that pace is slowed to just 2,500 boxes for TIHAA noodles." Because he readily identifies with TIHAA's ideals, he works closely with his staff to overcome the hurdles and improve the production efficiency.

Disasters can strike anytime, and so TIHAA, by necessity, makes and stockpiles enough noodles to ensure a prompt emergency response. Because these noodles are preservative-free, they remain fresh for six months and can become stale after that. To prevent such a waste of resources, TIHAA has made the noodles available for sale to Tzu Chi people in Taiwan. All profits from the sale are donated to the foundation's international relief fund.

This turns out to be a win-win situation for TIHAA, the foundation, and the purchasers, who love the noodles. This arrangement allows TIHAA to always have a ready supply for any disaster while the consumers get to satisfy their appetites and contribute to the foundation's international relief missions.

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