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## Revolution in a bowl

### RAMEN INVENTOR FUELED VALLEY INNOVATORS

By Paul Saffo

Silicon Valley has lost one of its own: Momofuku Ando, the inventor of instant ramen and Cup Noodles, died Jan. 5 in Osaka, Japan, at 96. Although Ando never designed a circuit or built a computer, Silicon Valley owes him a debt of gratitude -- over the years, his instant ramen has sustained countless teams of manic hackers working far into the night at countless start-ups.

In fact, instant ramen is to hackers what MREs are to our troops in Iraq: instant nutrition that doesn't interfere with the job at hand -- though, of course, one must be careful not to spill the broth on one's keyboard. As In-Q-tel founder and venture capitalist Gilman Louis recalls, "It was the only meal you could buy for a quarter and cook in minutes."

It is especially appropriate that Ando's invention has fueled Silicon Valley innovators because Ando's own story very much honors the entrepreneurial ideals the valley represents. Like Steve Jobs, Ando says he was motivated to change the world, getting the idea for instant ramen after watching Japanese civilians suffer from poor nutrition during the final years of World War II.

### Luxury item

Like William Hewlett and David Packard, Ando did his inventing in a shed behind his house. Dogged by the vision of creating a healthy low-cost meal for his countrymen, he finally released his first product -- instant chicken ramen -- in 1958.

Instant chicken ramen was a triumph in every respect -- except cost. Like some overpriced new gizmo, Ando's ramen sold for more than five times the price of a bowl of fresh ramen. But Japanese consumers didn't care. Ando's ramen became an overnight sensation, embraced as a novel and tasty luxury item.

Of course, cost was not an issue for long. As demand soared, the price of Ando's noodles plummeted and sales went through the roof. Ando's backyard operation quickly grew Google-like into Nissin Foods, now a \$3 billion global company and the cornerstone of an entirely new industry. Nissin Foods reports that Japanese consumers now eat approximately 45 portions of instant ramen each year, while worldwide the product is consumed by more than 100 million people a day.

Nissin has never rested on its success. Ando's ramen has been revved countless times. The most dramatic advance came with the introduction of Cup Noodles in 1971, freeing ramen from pots, bowls and stove-tops. For hackers, Cup Noodles are to the original instant ramen what MREs are to the old C-rations -- vastly more convenient and perhaps tastier.

Some will argue that instant ramen is hardly nutritious (it's loaded with salt and saturated fat), but it is certainly healthier than other hacker staples like Jolt cola and Doritos. And unlike Jolt, ramen can be rounded out with other healthy ingredients.

In-Q-tel's Louis recalls adding Spam to the ramen at his start-up. "We would add one can of Spam to four

packs of ramen and feed a whole development team," he reminisced. His efficiency was limited only by the number of burners on the stove in the kitchen of his parents' home, where the company was based.

### **Busy students, workers**

Of course, Ando's instant invention has fortified more than Silicon Valley. Over the past half-century, it has fed everyone from starving students to hikers, cops, firefighters, soccer moms and office workers too busy for anything except a quick bite at their desks. Homeless people camping out on heater grates eat the stuff, while the privileged can find it offered as a snack in first class on jets crossing the Pacific.

Ando's instant ramen went global long before the term ``globalization" became fashionable. It is eaten from Cupertino to Chennai, from Fremont to Singapore. So thank you, Ando-san. You fed us all through college and our hacker days. And your culinary, entrepreneurial genius has given us one of the most enduring legacies of postwar Japan.

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