



Hidehito Uki



Was it a dutiful son answering his father's call or the allure of Hawaii that compelled young Hidehito Uki to take the proverbial leap of faith?

Those are compelling reasons enough but as Hidehito's story reveals, there was a budding entrepreneur ready for the challenge. He embodied all the attributes: perseverance, a willingness to take risk, creative problem-solving and the drive to succeed.

### THE RISING SUN NOODLE

His Sun Noodle journey began when his father's business partner pulled out of their project in Hawaii just prior to opening. With the noodle-making machine already in Hawaii the opportunity to operate his own business was his if he wanted it.

It was 1981, he was 19 and he didn't speak any English when he left his home in Tochigi, Japan bound for Honolulu with a suitcase in hand.

It was truly a leap of faith, he had no idea of the Hawaii noodle market. He discovered that there were just three ramen shops and 20 other noodle factories, producing mostly Chinese noodles and saimin.

And in Japan, there are hundreds of varieties of flour milled specifically for ramen. In Hawaii, there were none.

He went to Hawaiian Flour Mills and luckily the owner spoke Japanese and agreed to mill flour to Hidehito's specification.

At the time, nobody in Hawaii really knew about ramen, other than the instant version that came in a foam cup. So, when he started approaching restaurants, it was one rejection after the other.

To address the lack of demand, he devised a strategy that would become his new business model. The strategy: produced noodles tailored to each restaurants' specifications.

That strategy worked and together with his wife, Keiko, the Sun Noodle customer list steadily grew. They worked hard, they did good work and built a good name. In time, that good name became its own currency.



Recognizing Hawaii's diverse cultures, Hidehito started to produce other types of noodles such as Hawaii's own saimin, chowmein and chowfun to name a few. His wife Keiko is Uchinanchu and through her he learned about Okinawa Soba. In his constant quest to make the best possible noodles, Hidehito flew to Okinawa to learn the traditional way of making Okinawan Soba. To this day, Sun Noodle is one of the only manufacturers that produces authentic Okinawan Soba in the United States.

### THE RISE OF RAMEN

In 1985, the Japanese movie *Tampopo* made its debut. The film popularized ramen and created a whole new level of awareness. When the American indie film *Ramen Girl* debuted in 2008, where the making and eating of ramen was portrayed as a spiritual experience, the floodgates burst open. Americans had an insatiable appetite for this now iconic Japanese dish. Sun Noodle was well positioned to satisfy this new and fast-growing demand.

Sun Noodle rapidly grew by expanding eastward, first to California and then to New Jersey. Culinary luminaries such as chef David Chang of Momofuku credits Sun Noodle for the unprecedented rise of the ramen culture in the United States. In a matter of a few years, the demand outgrew the capacities of both the California and New Jersey factories. They recently expanded in both states by moving into new and larger facilities.

This rapid expansion would not have been possible without the commitment of the next generation. Daughter Hisae and son Kenshiro Uki were instrumental in the company's extraordinary growth. The Uki family together with their key personnel rose to the challenge of fulfilling demand and capturing market share. The Sun Noodle company possesses the intellectual property, logistical and marketing expertise and the brand to expand sales across the United States, Canada, Mexico and into several other countries throughout South America and Europe.

### COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Hidehito has demonstrated time and again that being a good steward of his community is one of his core values. He has embraced his wife's heritage by supporting the Okinawan community. For over 30 years he has provided Okinawan Soba for the annual Okinawan Festival. In 2016 at a screening of a national PBS show at the Hawaii Okinawa Center, he donated Okinawa Soba, complete with bowls and garnishes to a sold-out room of over 500 people. And at the recent Okinawan Festival, he invited internationally renowned singer and recording artist Rimi Natsukawa, who performed to an appreciative audience of over 10,000 people.

The Okinawan community is forever grateful to Hidehito Uki and his family for their kind generosity and support for many, many years.

