

PASTA × 麺 (men)

A Thousand Years at the Table — Read from Today's Japan

Shinjuku, Tokyo — February 10, 2026 · Public conversation (streamed online)

A bowl of noodles registers pressure faster than most cultural objects do. Time and heat shift its structure; rest time decides what the bite becomes. The surface can stay familiar while texture has already changed, and that gap between appearance and structure makes pasta and 麺 a strict lens for cultural change.

On February 10, 2026, Billionaire Inc. in Shinjuku hosted a public conversation titled “PASTA × 麺: 1000 Years of Food History and the Future—What We Eat Today.” Chef and TV personality Francesco Bellissimo and historian of science Daniele Macuglia (Assistant Professor, Peking University; PhD, University of Chicago) treated pasta and noodles as evidence. Anyone can picture them, yet the details reward close attention; standards reveal themselves, and so do the moments when they slip.

Bellissimo spoke from present-day Japan. Price hikes, he argued, rewrite habits first; timing shifts, and solo eating rises quietly. He pointed to the convenience store as food infrastructure in plain sight: logistics and hygiene meet design choices that make speed feel normal. AI entered the discussion at household scale. Instructions come easily; responsibility stays human, and the meal still begins with a question—who is it for, and what kind of day is it meant to hold together?

Macuglia kept the comparative frame calm and exact. He treated “pasta” and “麺” as technique families that become public once they are teachable beyond one kitchen and recognizable across a city. That turn leaves traces historians can work with. Drying mattered because it made storage routine and let goods travel; trade followed, and paperwork began to count goods. Counting marks the birth of a system.

One historical thread anchored the dialogue. Mediterranean sources preserve ancient terms connected to rolled or sheeted dough; meanings drift across centuries, and the safer reading stays with families of practice. A firmer medieval anchor came from al-Idrisi's geography (1154), often cited for its description of dried *itriyya* produced near Trabia in Sicily for trade. After that stage, commercial and fiscal documents treated such foods as listable goods; technique had entered organized exchange.

In continental East Asia the evidence takes a different shape. Agronomic and technical writing stabilizes vocabulary around grain foods and noodle techniques, and the sixth-century *Qimin Yaoshu* is often cited as a landmark in this register. Archaeology adds another kind of testimony. The noodle-like remains from Lajia, reported in *Nature* (2005) and identified as millet-based, still draw debate, and the debate keeps attention on method and material. Japan's record shows adaptation inside daily life. Edo urban culture consolidated *soba* as a public practice with shared expectations; *Soba Zensho* (1751) stands as an early attempt to set that practice down in teachable form. In the modern city, ramen became another chapter of standard-making at street level, shaped by shop practice and by what customers came to expect in a city that runs fast.

Two writers served as tools of precision, used sparingly and kept close to the problem of quality. Primo Levi, a writer with a chemist's training, offered a model of attention to how process and outcome align; his pages treat matter as something that records every shortcut, even when the surface looks fine. In noodle-making, rest time can change internal structure while appearance holds, and a rushed boil can flatten the "core." Kawabata Yasunari brought a sense of threshold, the line past which balance fails. His aesthetic trains attention on restraint and on what remains untouched; kitchens under cost pressure feel that line more sharply, and energy use and waste reduction shift it again.

The event stayed a dialogue, and the room heard it as such. The exchange moved from a technical hinge—rest time, boiling pace—to the pressure it revealed: what remains teachable when time shrinks, and where quality slips first. In print or broadcast, the material arrived already shaped; each turn left one concrete example on the table, and one consequence that landed with a general reader.

Francesco Bellissimo — Chef, culinary researcher, TV personality; CEO, Billionaire Inc.

Daniele Macuglia — Historian of science; Assistant Professor, Peking University; PhD, University of Chicago