

【Hegi Soba】

Hegi soba noodles are unique to Tōkamachi, and the story of their creation is linked to the town's history of textile production. For much of Tōkamachi's history, women wove thread made from plant fibers during the long winters. Since the thread could be rough, during the Edo period (1603-1867) women started using *funori*, a marine alga also known as glueweed, as an adhesive to smooth and strengthen it. The dried *funori* was transported from the coast, where it was also used as a cooking ingredient.

Soba, or buckwheat noodles, have been made in Tōkamachi for centuries. Though no records exist to document the start of the practice, it is believed that in the early nineteenth century, *funori* was added to the soba dough as a thickener, and Tōkamachi's characteristic soba was born.

The name *hegi* comes from the flat wooden boxes in which the noodles are served. *Hegi* were originally used to store skeins of woven thread, and they could commonly be found in Tōkamachi households at the time. Legend has it that the tradition started when someone asked a neighbor to share some of her delicious soba. Lacking a suitable container, the neighbor reached for a *hegi*. Out of habit, she coiled soba portions into the same figure-eight shapes as skeins of thread, which was recognized as being both practical and attractive. This serving method is still used today.

Hegi soba has a smooth, lustrous appearance unlike that of soba made entirely from buckwheat. The texture is firm and springy, and it tastes less nutty than standard soba. Wasabi is commonly used as a condiment in other regions, and in the Tōkamachi area, chopped leaf mustard and the dried bulb of *asatsuki*, a type of chive, are used as well.