

## **Sanbe Soba: The Original Buckwheat**

While rice is the starch most commonly associated with Japanese cuisine, noodles also hold an important place—particularly the hearty buckwheat noodles called soba. Nearly every region in Japan has its own version, varying the broth, dipping sauces, toppings, or eating methods to reflect local preferences.

For Sanbe's local soba, however, it is the plant rather than its means of consumption that is most remarkable. The strain of buckwheat grown here is an heirloom species, closer to wild varieties than the domesticated strains common elsewhere. It has been registered as a unique regional brand under the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries' geographic indication system, attesting to its close connection to the area's climate and culture.

As with many heirloom plants, the seeds of Sanbe buckwheat are comparatively smaller, but produce a more intense flavor than those of their hybridized cousins. This results in a smaller yield, but the soba flour retains more of the buckwheat's distinctive earthy aroma and taste. The mineral-rich volcanic soil at Mt. Sanbe's foot, coupled with the cool nights and warm days of the fall growing season, are thought to produce a particularly sweet soba.

Historically, buckwheat was cultivated in fallow rice fields or razed logging areas. A staple like rice and millet, it was particularly crucial in the postwar era, when food shortages were common. Today, there are only a few area farms that still produce it, but Sanbe residents continue to buy local buckwheat groats to grind themselves at home—maintaining generations-old family preferences for rough or fine milling, or a particular ratio of soba to wheat flour in their noodle recipes.

Another trait of Sanbe buckwheat is that it is more cohesive than the standard variety. Most soba recipes call for wheat flour as a binding agent to help the noodles hold together when boiled, but noodles made of 100-percent Sanbe buckwheat can hold their own, imparting a purer buckwheat flavor. It is also common for the noodle strands to be cut thicker here, requiring the diner to spend more time chewing. Locals like to say that this gives more time to savor them.

Trying some Sanbe soba is an essential part of any visit to Ōda, regardless of the season. In late September, however, a visit may include the unforgettable sight of Sanbe's buckwheat fields in bloom. The fields of delicate white flowers cluster at the western foot of Mt. Sanbe, attracting photographers seeking an image of the mountain in this fleeting seasonal garb.