

Sakamoto Soba

For hundreds of years, the town of Sakamoto flourished as the gateway to Enryakuji Temple and Hiyoshi Taisha Shrine. The area is also known for its many smaller temples and well-preserved old town. The shopping street is filled with traditional wooden townhouses (*machiya*) and restaurants selling local specialties, one of which is soba (buckwheat) noodles.

The area's association with soba is as old as its temples. At Enryakuji, the Buddhist monks eat a vegetarian diet, and soba has long been a staple food there. It was especially useful as a meal to eat after fasting and other ascetic practices. Before the technique for making soba noodles was developed, people simply ate a mixture of buckwheat flour and hot water. During the Edo period (1603–1867), the monks at Enryakuji began making the traditional soba noodles for which Sakamoto is known. Even today, Sakamoto soba is eaten at the temple on celebratory occasions.

There is no single kind of Sakamoto soba, but restaurants tend to stick to traditional recipes for cold or hot noodles and to cook with local ingredients. There is soba with seafood from Lake Biwa as well as vegetarian soba dishes made the way the monks eat it.

Tsuruki Soba was the first soba restaurant in Sakamoto and was started in 1716 by a priest who was in charge of cooking at Enryakuji. The restaurant began serving soba not only to the local monks, but also to pilgrims and visitors to Enryakuji, Hiyoshi Taisha, and Saikyoji Temple, establishing Sakamoto's reputation for quality noodles. Tsuruki Soba still serves the monks in Sakamoto, including those at Enryakuji. The restaurant's traditional two-story wooden building has crane-shaped cutouts adorning its decorative balcony. The building is 130 years old and was moved from central Otsu to replace the restaurant's previous structure. Because of its well-preserved facade, it has been designated a Nationally Registered Tangible Cultural Property.