

Obanazawa Soba

Fields of blooming buckwheat herald autumn in Obanazawa. Their delicate white flowers form the seeds harvested to make one of Japan's most ubiquitous dishes—soba noodles. Regional varieties of soba can be found throughout the country, including Obanazawa.

Yamagata Prefecture has Japan's second largest buckwheat production area, but Obanazawa's harsh climate presents unique challenges. Its winters are long and snowy, but there is an ample supply of fresh water during the short planting season in summer. Summers are hot and sunny, with significant temperature differences between day and night. Buckwheat is resilient and can thrive even in these conditions.

In Obanazawa, soba is associated with hospitality. Some records show that soba was served to the famous haiku poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) when he stayed in Obanazawa for 10 nights during a journey captured in his travelogue, *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North). In 2009, chefs, farmers, and volunteers from around the city formed the Yu-Yu Sanmi Kai, a group dedicated to researching different aspects of soba to refine its production, protect Obanazawa's native Mogami-wase soba varietal, deepen the community's connection with the dish, and create an umbrella Obanazawa Soba brand. The chefs test different strains of buckwheat and different ratios of buckwheat to wheat in the noodles. They also experiment with the ingredients in soba dipping sauce (such as bonito, kelp, and soy sauce). Each restaurant has its signature style, using similar ingredients differently.

The best place to sample Obanazawa Soba is along the city's Soba Kaido, a route connecting nine soba restaurants. By sampling each restaurant, visitors can taste the depth and range of this popular dish. In July, the restaurants of the Soba Kaido offer an Obanazawa specialty: *yukigura* soba. *Yukigura* soba is made from Mogami-wase aged over winter in a *yukigura*, a container which is naturally cooled by the snow, and has a richer, sweeter flavor.