

Hegi Soba

Soba (buckwheat) noodles are eaten throughout Japan, but Ojiya's local specialty, *hegi* soba, has a unique twist: the buckwheat flour is mixed into a paste with *funori*, a delicate red seaweed that grows on rocks by the seashore. The seaweed paste acts as a binding agent and gives the noodles a velvety texture.

In Japan, soba is eaten both hot and cold. Hot soba is served in a bowl with dashi broth often with vegetables, tempura, or other toppings. *Zaru* soba, or cold soba, is served on a tray with a dipping sauce on the side, to which condiments such as scallions and wasabi are added.

Hegi soba noodles are served cold in bite-sized portions, arranged in layers on a large tray called a *hegi*. The word is derived from the Japanese word for "peel" or "strip" because the tray is made from slender strips of cedar. *Hegi* soba is meant to be shared and is traditionally eaten on special occasions, such as weddings and births. Today, people enjoy *hegi* soba at any time.

Generally, wasabi is the condiment of choice to serve with soba noodles, but *hegi* soba is typically served with a yellow paste called *karashi* (Japanese mustard). This is because of the scarcity of wild wasabi around Ojiya.

Many restaurants in Ojiya list *hegi* soba on the menu, offering visitors the chance to try this unique local specialty around the city. Many places serve the noodles with both wasabi and *karashi*, a dipping sauce made with dashi, and a variety of side dishes.