**Hegi Soba Noodles**

A variety of soba (buckwheat noodles) from Niigata Prefecture, known as *hegi soba*, is made with seaweed as a binding agent and served coiled into bite-sized portions on a tray called a *hegi*. The seaweed binding agent makes these noodles smoother and more elastic than regular soba. The taste, texture, and presentation of *hegi soba* have made it a popular dish among residents and visitors alike.

*A Brief History*

Soba noodles can be made from buckwheat flour alone, but often incorporate a binding agent, most commonly wheat flour. The binding agent used in *hegi soba* is a variety of red seaweed (*funori*). Due to its sticky properties, the seaweed has historically been utilized as a thickening agent in cooking and as an adhesive paste in crafts, textiles, and hairstyling products. For example, the same red seaweed has long been used in Niigata to smooth and strengthen spun thread. *Hegi soba* was supposedly developed in the Chuetsu region of Niigata Prefecture, which includes Nagaoka, when a soba shop owner recognized the potential of using *funori* as a binding agent for noodles. Careful research and experimenting with ingredient ratios eventually led to the creation of what is now known as *hegi soba*.

*How to Enjoy Hegi Soba*

*Hegi soba* is always served cold, looped in small portions that resemble skeins of thread. Such presentation is considered both attractive and practical. Cold soba noodles tend to tangle and stick together, making it difficult to pick up the desired quantity. Serving *hegi soba* arranged in coils makes it possible to get the perfect amount for each mouthful.

The *hegi soba* noodles are sometimes topped with nori seaweed strips, but are otherwise served bare, with no additions or seasoning. Instead, the meal comes with a cup of cold *tsuyu*, savory dipping sauce made from dashi broth and soy sauce. To eat *hegi soba*, pick up a loop of noodles with chopsticks and dip them in the *tsuyu* before eating.

Various condiments can be added to the *tsuyu* to alter and enhance the flavor of the meal. Common choices include chopped spring onions, wasabi, *shichimi* spice, and ground sesame seeds. Try *hegi soba* with the plain *tsuyu* first and then experiment by adding small quantities of toppings at a time to see how the flavors change. At some point, waitstaff may place a pot of hot *soba-yu* (water that was used to boil the noodles) on the table. After eating all the noodles, pour the *soba-yu* into the remaining *tsuyu* to make a warm, soup-like beverage to finish the meal.