

## The Threads of *Hegi* Soba

*Hegi* soba, a variation of Japan's traditional buckwheat noodles, is a prime example of how food reflects culture. It is deeply connected to the history of Niigata Prefecture and was born from agricultural conditions and local weaving traditions.

Buckwheat noodles are usually made with wheat flour as a binder. However, Niigata's climate is not suited to the production of wheat. In the early nineteenth century, residents discovered a readily available and rather unusual replacement: *funori* seaweed. Weavers in the region had long applied *funori* to their thread as "sizing," an adhesive that strengthens thread fibers to prevent them from breaking during the weaving process. When *funori* is used in the creation of soba noodles, it imparts a faint green tinge and a pleasantly slippery texture.

The presentation of *hegi* soba also derives from local textile culture. The noodles are served in a *hegi*, a flat, wooden tray of the sort used to store buttons or bits of thread. In addition, the bite-sized portions of *hegi* soba are arranged in rows of the same figure-eight loops Tokamachi's weavers used for skeins of thread.

When eaten, *hegi* soba is dipped in a rich, soy-based sauce called *mentsuyu*. In other parts of Japan, wasabi and sliced green onion are usually added to the dipping sauce, but in Tokamachi, spicy *karashi* mustard is often used instead.