

Hegi Soba

Hegi soba is Tokamachi's regional version of soba buckwheat noodles. This variation on the traditional Japanese dish is deeply connected to the local textile industry. The noodles are gathered in neat bundles that resemble looped skeins of thread and are served in a shallow wooden tray called a *hegi*, which weavers once used to store thread, buttons, and other small objects. Also, the soba dough includes an ingredient called *funori*. Weavers once applied this glue-like seaweed to delicate threads to strengthen them, and the *funori* in *hegi* soba performs the same function.

Buckwheat flour lacks gluten, so soba noodles usually incorporate some wheat flour as a binder to help them hold together when boiled. Tokamachi is not a wheat-producing region, however, so soba makers in the area historically substituted ground vegetables like burdock root. In the early nineteenth century, a local chef decided to try *funori* instead and found the resulting noodles had a pale green color and pleasantly slippery texture. In 1933, construction on a nearby hydroelectric power plant brought in workers and engineers from around the country. Many tried *hegi* soba while in the area, and they later spread word of it around the country.

To eat *hegi* soba, pick up a full skein of noodles and dip it in the cup of *mentsuyu* sauce. Taste this first bunch of noodles without any condiments to judge the base flavor. Then try the rest with spicy *karashi* mustard and sliced green onion. The onion can be added to the sauce, but the mustard should be applied directly to the next skein of noodles before picking them up.