

Snow Tools

This fierce-looking saw is a big part of Tokamachi's cultural heritage. Any idea what it's for? It's not for felling trees or slicing giant tuna. It's a snow saw!

Tokamachi gets a lot of damp snow, with an average depth of 2 meters each year. Sometimes storms will even drop 50 centimeters or more in a single night. Wet snow is quite heavy and, when compressed by its own weight, a cubic meter can weigh up to 500 kilograms!

At that weight, snow can easily collapse a building or crush someone if it falls at a bad time, so removing it from roofs and other high places is crucial. The looser snow on top can be pushed off with a shovel, but the compacted snow underneath gets hard as ice. This is where snow saws come in. Residents use them to slice off manageable chunks of the hardened snow for removal.

Snow saws have been used by people in Tokamachi for centuries. They're part of the local wisdom that has been passed down by previous generations and still a big part of living in snow country.

Hegi Soba

Have you heard of *hegi* soba? It's a variation of the cold buckwheat noodles that fans of Japanese food may already know. In Tokamachi and the surrounding areas, it's the local specialty!

In other parts of Japan, cooks make soba noodles by mixing wheat flour with buckwheat flour. Wheat gluten acts as a binder that holds the noodles together. Tokamachi doesn't grow much wheat, so a creative chef in the early 1800s tried something else: *funori* seaweed.

Funori is used in traditional weaving to smooth and strengthen the threads. Before there were mechanized looms, nearly every household in Tokamachi did their own weaving, so *funori* was readily available. *Hegi* soba's name and the way it is served are weaving-related, too: the noodles are arranged like looped skeins of thread and served in a weaver's box called a *hegi*.

How to eat it:

1. Pick up a full skein of noodles.
2. Try it in the dipping sauce before adding any condiments.
3. Next, put the onions in the sauce and apply spicy *karashi* mustard directly to the next skein of noodles.
4. Eat until full!

Tsukena and Niina

Wintertime visitors to Tokamachi have a chance to try some of snow country's most

unique homestyle cooking! *Tsukena* is a typical dish that shows how people preserved autumn foods all winter long.

Many households in Tokamachi grow *nozawana*, a leafy green in the turnip family. *Tsukena* is made by salt-pickling *nozawana*, which pulls out moisture and delays the growth of bacteria that cause spoilage. During the winter months, these salty leaf-pickles are served as a side dish with meals or as a snack. As spring approaches, the *tsukena* begins to ferment and produce lactic acid, but this isn't spoilage. The *nozawana* is transforming into a new incarnation called *niina*! Salt is rinsed from the *niina* and it's added to simmered dishes—keeping greens on the table until the fresh ones arrive.

Nowadays, people associate salty foods with health problems like high blood pressure. Even so, studies suggest that pickled vegetables may have helped people survive in snow country. In winter, salt helps to raise the body temperature, and the sugars and lactic acid in *niina* have been shown to boost the immune system.

Be sure to try some *tsukena* or *niina* on your next visit. It's simple, homey fare that satisfies after a day of playing in the snow!

Matsuo Shrine

On May 8 each year, Matsuo Shrine hosts a coming-of-age ceremony for young boys. It's called the "Nanatsu Mairi" and has been celebrated in Tokamachi for hundreds of years.

Local boys who turned seven the previous year trek from the village of Inubushi, at the foot of Mt. Matsuo, up to the shrine on its summit. That's a challenging climb of 360 meters over some 3 kilometers, much of which may still be covered in snow. Fortunately, the entire community comes out to help them. After prayers and a ceremony at the shrine, everyone climbs down the mountain again, and the boys' extended families hold celebrations in their honor.

Nanatsu Mairi is a great chance to witness snow-country culture, but even on other days, it's worth the hike up the mountain. Matsuo Shrine is one of the oldest thatched-roofed wooden structures in Niigata Prefecture and a national Important Cultural Property.

Chinkoro

How cute are these good-luck charms? Known as *chinkoro*, these rice-flour figurines are traditionally sold at Suwacho's midwinter Sekki-ichi Market. They're crafted in the image of zodiac animals, flowers, and other lucky or wintery things.

The exact origin of *chinkoro* is lost to history, but they've been part of the midwinter market for at least 140 years. They're one of many handcrafted items residents sold for extra income during the snowy months and became particularly popular as children's souvenirs. As the rice flour dries out, the *chinkoro* develop cracks. The more cracks you

have, the better your luck is supposed to be in the coming year!

Residents begin queuing in the morning to buy their favorite *chinkoro*, so visitors should start their shopping early!