

GASTRONOMY EDITION

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soba

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Photocredit:Yabai

a taste little known except for places where it is widely consumed

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Soba is undoubtedly considered one of the main flavors of Japanese cuisine. It is one of the cases whereby the name of the plant becomes the food when it is added in front, or behind the food to express the kind of dish we are facing, such as 'Mori Soba', 'Tempura Soba'. The name of Soba is Buckwheat in English. Although it is mixed with wheat due to its name in English, it has some basic differences. Soba is gluten free, while it is often confused with noodle or pasta when cooked, it is surely a completely different flavor. Soba, which is a product of the Northern Hemisphere, is mainly planted in East Asia and the Far East. It is very rich in terms of nutritional values, minerals and antioxidants. For example, in a 90-gram serving of Soba, there is no sugar or gluten while 10% is water, 12 gr. is protein, 65 gr. is carbohydrates, 10 gr. is fiber while it is a total of only 300 calories. In terms of amino acid balance and protein quality, it is higher than whole wheat products and the GI level (effect of carbohydrates on glucose levels in the blood) is low to medium.

It is estimated that Soba spread to this region from the south-west of China in 6000 BC. It is mostly planted in the Tibetan Plateau. Named as 'kuttu ka atta' in India, Soba is the main element of the Navaratri Festival, one of the most important religious festivals of Hinduism. In Sanskrit; Nav means 9 and ratri means night. Hindus only eat food made from 'Kuttu ka atta' during this 9-night, 10-day festival. This is a respect for both their bodies and the goddess "Durga". Sharad Navratri, which is held every season but the most magnificent being in autumn, will be between 17-27 October this year, let's see if the virus and the authorities will allow it.



Photocredit:DFW Hindu Temple

4000 BC

It is thought that one of the most important elements of Japanese cuisine, Soba, came to the island in 4000 BC. Just like Sake, it can be eaten hot in winter, hot or cold in summer. It is not easy to make a 100% Soba. The quality of the soba and the water you use, the humidity of the air and the skill of the master are very important. If you do not mix flour, it is completely the job of an ingenious to give flexibility in the noodle. Therefore, you cannot come across 100% Soba in Izakaya or especially in large menu restaurants that do not sell Soba only. If wheat flour is mixed between 10% and 40%, the Soba will be much softer, it will take shape comfortably and it will not break in your Hashi (chopsticks). But of course, it then is no longer ideal Soba.

Being a master means going through very difficult stages. The first certificate you can get, by going to courses for a year, watching good teachers and spending the necessary time, only gives you the opportunity to make Soba on your own and your family. If you want to continue, you should show the same effort and take the exam again. If you pass, this second certificate gives you the opportunity to sell the soba you make at home (to the friend, or to the restaurants if you are very good). This second certificate means that you can start working and devoting yourself to have the diploma required to open your own Soba shop. Only Soba selling places have their own flags, just like any other food business, and they are hung in front of their shops.

Even the cap of a Soba master is different; you cannot make a Soba with the cap of a Sushi master. In fact, Soba, a cheap food, is one of the street flavors of Japan and can be easily found in small businesses in train stations, around baseball or football stadiums. A wide variety can be served. It can be eaten at any time and everywhere except for Toshikoshi Soba, the symbol of long life, which is to be eaten on the New Year's Eve. It is famous for its service in a soup with pasta style with soy-based sauce in deep containers called Donburi. If Tempura is placed on it, it becomes Tempura-Soba. If it is eaten cold, its name is Mori Soba or Zaru Soba. You put soy sauce, ginger, wasabi, in a small bowl and dip your Soba into it.



Photocredit:Serious Eats

soba-yu

My favorite ritual starts when my Soba is finished, I put the Soba's cooking broth (Soba-yu) on the remaining pieces in my small ceramic pot, and I drink it warmly. The salt of the soy mixes with the heat of Wasabi and blends with all the beauties left by the Soba to the lean drinking water and turns into a taste that you will never forget and one probably you will always pursue.

Just like the Sake and beer, it is nice to eat the local soba of the place you go. Of course, the famous cities and regions are many. The much sought flavors are found in the old capital Kyoto's green tea (matcha) Soba, the hot-served Soba of Nagano, where the 1998 Winter Olympics were held, and Yamagata's Ita Soba. Although not 100%, the ranking of the Soba in Okinawa is something else. So much so that the record of making Soba with as many as 324 people was broken in Okinawa in 2017 while Osaka's record of 302 people was buried in history, not to come out again.



Photocredit:Taro's Table

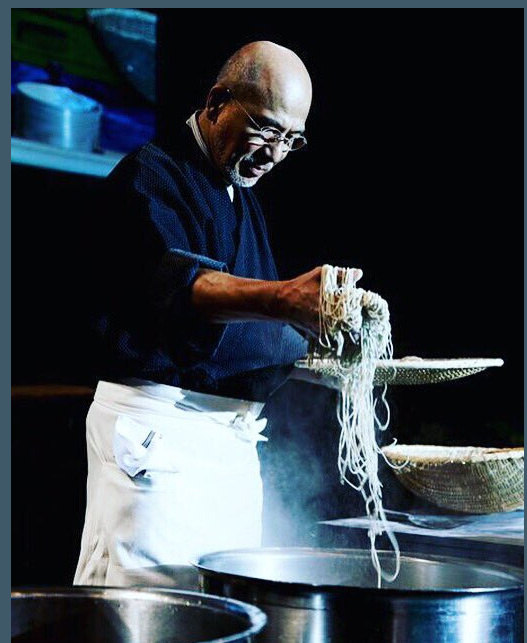


Photocredit:Japan Center

I love the magical island Hokkaido where I ate my best Ramen and Soba. I drank the most beautiful milk and tomato juice in an Onsen (Japanese Bath) bar in Hokkaido. The Soba I had in Rakuichi's restaurant is one of the flavors that will not be forgotten in my palate memory. While I was waiting for half an hour to get seated, I did not know that I would encounter such great tastes in this small restaurant of 12 people, where Tatsuru Rai, a dedicated man to Soba, operated with his wife and daughter. I am passionately waiting to be able to go again. If you are on your way to Tokyo, my advice is as follows; Awajicho in Kanda, Tsuta in Toshima-ku (especially you should try Shoyu Soba), Honmura An in Roppongi, (go late, then enjoy Roppongi), Tanako in Shinagawa, Nagasaka Sarasina in Azabu Juban.

In 2012, we brought the Soba Master Hideyuki Kurihara to Istanbul, where he made Soba for us one evening at our own Tokyo Restaurant. We also held a workshop on how to make the Soba at the Maslak Culinary Arts Academy for students and the members for the Association des Gourmets. I witnessed how much Mr. Kurihara was fussing for the water he would put in the Soba and I was once more fascinated by him. We bought all the water brands available on the market. Kurihara San tasted all of them and made great Soba trials with 4-5 water brands left as a result of pre-selection, and finally decided on one.

Tatsuru Rai, owner and chef of Raku-Ichi, one of Hokkaido's godless shrines, is preparing Soba with great discipline and care.



Photocredit:Tatsuru Rai

IZAKAYA



My favorite restaurants in Japan are Izakaya, which we can call Japanese taverns. In small portions, you can drink and eat overnight. It is not customary to order all the dishes you will eat in the evening at once, the menu is always on the table. Especially if you start with beer and continue with Sake or Shochu, the closing time comes in the blink of an eye.

Most businesses close early, usually asking for your last orders at 22:00 or 22:30. I like to start such evenings with Sashimi and end with Soba. If I don't have an early job the next day and if I believe I can find open places at night, such as in Shibuya, Shinjuku, Roppongi, I can end with Soba in another place.

I sincerely wish that our kitchen, enriched with the heritage of the cultures it contains, shows a little more attention to 'Buckwheat'.