

WHAT IS SOBA?

The Japanese word “soba” refers both to the buckwheat plant as well as the noodles made from buckwheat flour.

It is believed that buckwheat first originated in the Yunnan region of China. It was traditionally cultivated in countries stretching from North and East Asia through to Europe and has been grown in Japan for over 1000 years. In Japan today, buckwheat is still served in noodle form and consumed as a popular staple. For many Japanese food connoisseurs, soba is regarded as one of the country’s ultimate culinary pleasures. For soba masters skilled in the art of noodle making, it epitomises the best of Japan’s artisanal food traditions.

In Japan, soba is grown in the country’s cooler regions, often in areas used for the cultivation of apple crops. Soba has a short growing season and depending on the plant variety is harvested either in late summer or autumn. It is then milled and ground into fine buckwheat flour by professional soba chefs who add water and some wheat flour for binding purposes, then pound and knead the dough repeatedly before rolling it out and deftly hand-slicing the flattened dough into long, thin noodles.

Soba is typically served in a hot aromatic broth topped with chicken, tempura prawns or a selection of vegetables or served cold on an elegant bamboo tray with a delicate dipping sauce. The tasty broth or dipping sauce that accompanies soba noodles can vary significantly between regions as well as individual soba restaurants. The recipes and cooking techniques for making the stock for the broth and dipping sauce are often passed down through generations and closely guarded. It’s the subtle balance of the three components – noodle, stock and condiments – that creates the perfect bowl of soba.

Soba is one of the world’s most nutritious foods and an abundant source of protein. Containing a well-balanced combination of essential amino acids, it has a higher protein make-up than any of the grains (apart from legumes) and is also rich in vitamins (particularly the B vitamins). It also includes the flavonoid rutin known for its effectiveness in reducing

the cholesterol count in blood, as well as large quantities of lysine (important for the absorption of calcium and for the production of antibodies and collagen) and arginine (important for tissue and muscle repair). It is also rich in dietary minerals, including magnesium. Soba is additionally low in fat and high in dietary fibre. The exceptional nutritional profile of soba distinguishes it from wheat-based noodles common in Japan (such as *udon* and *rāmen*) and accounts for soba’s popularity among those who appreciate its delicate fragrance and flavour and beneficial health effects.

Soba’s long and slender shape has come to symbolise stability and longevity. It is traditional in Japan to eat soba (*toshi-koshi soba*) on New Year’s Eve to acknowledge the passing of the old year and to welcome in the new.

SOBA IN TASMANIA

Soba has been grown commercially in Tasmania since 1988 after it was first introduced from Japan as part of the Tasmanian soba project. Premium buckwheat seeds from Japan were imported in 1985 for a series of comprehensive trials run under the auspices of the Tasmanian State Department of Primary Industries.

Tasmania is well suited for the production of buckwheat due to its cool climate and the significant variation in temperature between day and night-time conditions. Tasmania’s latitude (40 degrees South) is also equivalent to the cooler parts of Japan where soba is grown – from central Honshū to the northern island of Hokkaidō (40 degrees North). Tasmania’s clean and pollution-free environment also provides an attractive location for growing a specialist, high-quality product. Soba in Tasmania is produced without the use of pesticides, insecticides and fungicides and is free of post-harvest chemical treatments.

Many farms growing soba are located in Tasmania’s north and central-northern regions. The soba seeds are planted in early summer and harvested between late March and early April. The soba plant grows to around 100-120 cm in height and is characterised by delicate white flowers which blossom

in late summer. In the breeze, the blossoms can make a soba field look like a sea of white-crested waves.

Once harvested, the crop is sun-dried and then assessed by the Department of Primary Industries. Only those seeds which meet strict quality standards are certified as “Tasmania Soba (Tasmanian Buckwheat)”, equivalent in quality to first-grade buckwheat produced in Japan. The majority of the crop is then transported to Japan under temperature-controlled conditions to ensure there is no product damage. It is then either milled into buckwheat flour or de-hulled and packaged into kernel form (groats) and delivered to leading soba restaurants across Japan in time for Japan’s summer season.

Some of the Tasmanian soba yield is sent direct to the few specialist soba noodle restaurants in Melbourne, Sydney and Singapore which use their own stone-mills to make fresh flour daily for their soba. It is also available at Tasmania’s Callington Mill in Oatlands in the form of stone-milled buckwheat flour or kernels.



A plate of cold seirō-soba noodles with a tempura side

THE ORIGINAL VISION

Growing high-quality soba in the southern hemisphere was the initiative of Rick Shiratori of Shiratori Flour Mills in Japan. His dream was to grow soba in Tasmania in Japan’s off-season and make premium new-season soba available to Japanese consumers in spring-summer, when they traditionally enjoy eating soba as cold

noodles when its delicate fragrance, taste and texture are best appreciated.

Rick first visited Tasmania in 1985 to introduce the concept and commence discussions with the Department of Primary Industries. Trials subsequently began and the first crop was officially celebrated in Hobart in April 1988 and formally launched in Tokyo in June. Tasmanian soba was widely featured in the Japanese media and lauded as a pioneer product of the new “off-season” market. Thanks to the development of the Tasmanian soba industry, Japanese soba-lovers are now able to enjoy premium new-season soba in summer-time.

Tasmania has subsequently become the world’s most stable and reliable source of high-quality buckwheat. The Tasmanian soba project has also helped build awareness across Japan for Tasmania as an attractive source of fresh, high-quality speciality produce.

Rick Shiratori, Heazlewood Seeds and Tasmanian buckwheat growers continue to meet regularly and consult with technical experts about crop quality, seed selection and optimal sowing and harvesting conditions to ensure Tasmanian soba continues to maintain its premium status.



KEY SOBA CONTACTS

Shimbashi Soba & Sake Bar – Melbourne

This restaurant serves soba noodles made daily from freshly ground Tasmanian buckwheat flour. The main branch is in the CBD (17 Liverpool Street, tel: 03-9654 6727), with a new branch in Fitzroy (131 Smith Street, tel: 03-9973 9486).

Shimbashi Soba Restaurant – Sydney

Soba noodles made daily from freshly ground Tasmanian buckwheat flour are also available at this Sydney restaurant located in Neutral Bay (246 Military Road, tel: 02-9904 3011). www.jugemushimbashi.com.au

Shimbashi Soba – Singapore

Part of the Japanese restaurant group RE&S, this restaurant serves soba noodles made from freshly ground Tasmanian buckwheat at the following branches: Shimbashi Soba at Paragon (290 Orchard Road, tel: +65-6735 9882) and Shimbashi Soba at Great World City (Great World City Basement 1, 1 Kim Seng Promenade). www.sobaworld.com.sg

Callington Mill – Oatlands, Tasmania

In a restored windmill originally built in 1837, Callington Mill uses traditional windmilling practices to produce fresh Tasmanian buckwheat flour for epicureans and the health-conscious. (1 Mill Lane, Oatlands, tel: 03-6254 1212, www.callingtonmill.com.au)

Heazlewood Seeds – Whitemore, Tasmania

A specialist seed agency, Heazlewood Seeds is the Tasmanian agent for Shiratori Flour Mills and cleans, dries and packages Tasmanian buckwheat for export to Japan. (Contact: Brenton Heazlewood, email: brenton@heazlewoodseeds.com.au, www.heazlewoodseeds.com.au)

Shiratori Flour Mills – Chiba Prefecture, Japan

The company behind the Tasmanian soba project, Shiratori Flour Mills exclusively imports the soba crop for processing and delivery to soba restaurateurs across Japan. (Contact: Rick Shiratori, email: riichiro.shiratori@shiratori-seifun.co.jp)

Further Reading: “Soba So Good” by Yoshinori Shibazaki, published by Soba World Pte Ltd, Singapore, 2003.

Photos: Courtesy of Rick Shiratori (Tasmanian soba field) and Shimbashi Soba Singapore (plate of seirō-soba noodles).

About Tasmanian Soba



Tasmanian soba field in blossom