

Art of soba-making

[Soba, from Page E1]

more than 20 years and describes himself as a soba evangelist. Call it "intro to soba"; all you basically need is stone-milled buckwheat flour, a plastic bag, a rolling pin and a sharp chef's knife.

According to the lore of Japanese cooks, it takes three years to perfect the subtle art of turning just buckwheat flour, wheat flour and water into elegant skeins of noodles: one year to learn to mix the dough, the second to learn to roll, the third to learn to cut the slender noodles by hand. Because buckwheat flour doesn't have any gluten (the matrix of proteins that holds dough together), mixing and kneading soba dough to its precise consistency and smoothness requires experience.

But, Inouye says, there's a big difference between making two servings and making 12 servings, and using his technique, even the uninitiated can make two servings of fresh soba that will be better-tasting than dried, packaged noodles. "Everybody can make fine soba at home," he says.

Inouye opened his school, located near the Tsukiji fish market on the third floor of an office building on a quiet street — practically in the shadow of Honganji Temple — in October 2002. After leaving a career as a graphic designer, he hoped to teach aspiring professionals so "they can open [soba] restaurants around the world."

"The main reason is I love soba," says Inouye, who is 56 with salt-and-pepper hair and a gentle face. His students (whom he occasionally commends by saying, "You're a good soba-tician.") are a mix of mostly home cooks and some potential soba masters enrolled in one-day, weekend or four- to six-week courses.

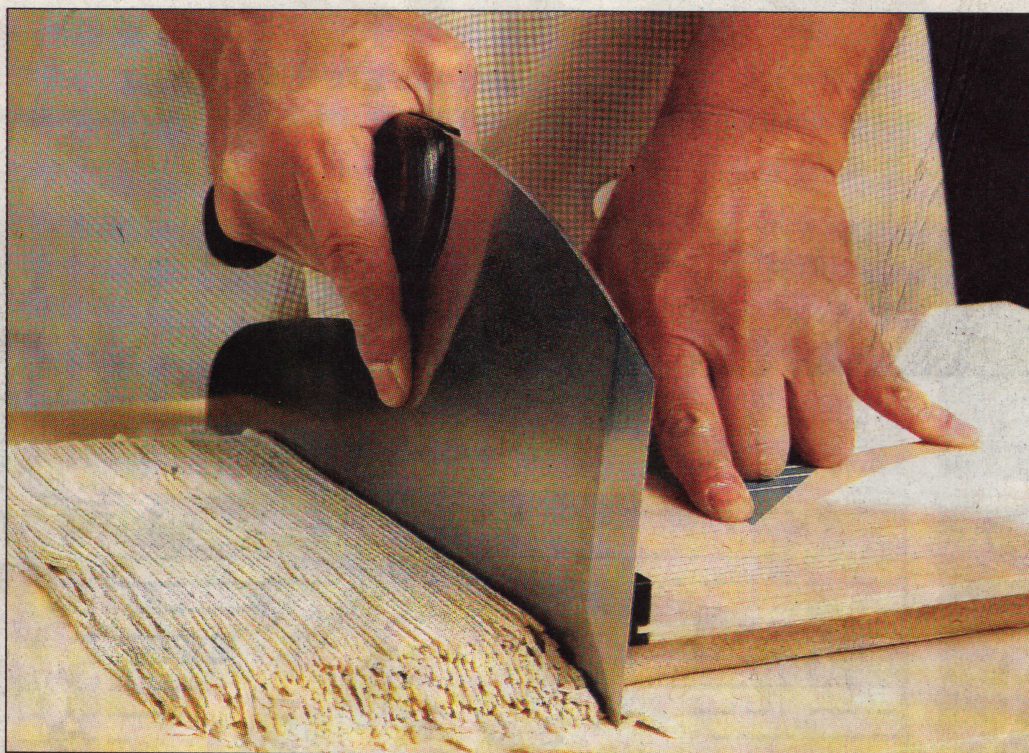
Soba is venerated for its simplicity but is more than the sum of its parts, he says. And each aspect of the process of making soba affects the outcome. The movements of a soba master are exacting.

To make soba the traditional way, Inouye starts with freshly milled flour from newly harvested buckwheat that has been cultivated in cold, arid regions of Japan such as Hokkaido, Aomori, Yamagata or Fukushima. A small mill stands near the entrance of the classroom, its two granite wheels grinding a kernel of buckwheat at a time; it produces only enough flour to make soba for the school's restaurant service, Inouye says.

For New Year's Eve, he'll make 300 servings of soba to give to customers. "Actually, this is not a remarkable amount for a soba maker," he says. "Some people make over a thousand servings for the day."

He mixes the dough (using a *ni-hachi*, or 2-to-8, ratio of wheat flour to buckwheat flour) in a black lacquer bowl bigger than a baby's tub, swirling the mixture first with his fingertips and then his palms to incorporate all of the water into the flour. "It's most critical so every particle of flour meets the water," he says.

He starts kneading, pressing



Photographs by KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times
TRADITIONAL: Akila Inouye wields a *soba-kiri* to slice the soba dough into thin noodles, above. In his easy method, a chef's knife or sharp Japanese vegetable knife can be used.



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times
INOUE: "Everybody can make fine soba at home."

firmly on the dough with the heels of his hands, making sure the water is absorbed deep into the dough and the final disk of dough feels "smooth as a baby's cheek."

Using a set of four long rolling pins called *menbo* (his are made of lacquered wood and acrylic) he begins rolling the dough on a cypress board dusted with *uchiko*, a type of buckwheat flour. The *menbo* are of varying lengths and diameters and are used in turn at different stages of the rolling process. His hands are curled into fists, the heels of his hands placed on top of the *menbo*, moving it back and forth as a look of deep concentration settles on his face, his body swaying and feet moving in a complex shuffle and sweat forming on his brow. Soba dough makes you work for it.

He produces a thin, wide sheet of dough, nearly the size of a bath towel and no thicker than a quarter, folds it into eight layers and starts cutting with a tall, thin-bladed steel cleaver called *soba-kiri*. Keeping the cleaver as upright as possible, he cuts quickly, guided by a board. After each cut, he angles the *soba-kiri* almost imperceptibly to move the guide across the dough. The knife hits his cutting mat rhythmically; "it should be the sound of horses trotting," he says. And what he ends up with is more than 2,000 identical, perfectly julienned strands of delicate soba — the final product of a technique that has been honed over decades.

latimes.com

/food

Make your own

Go online for step-by-step photos showing how to make soba noodles.

Now, soba the easy way: During a recent visit to L.A., Inouye also demonstrated his method for those who want to try their hand at soba. The key is to make a small quantity so that no special equipment (or years of refined technique) is needed.

Inouye mixes all-purpose and buckwheat flour — still using the 2-to-8 ratio — along with some water in a plastic bag. He likes using a plastic bag because it's convenient and helps keep in moisture (you could instead use a bowl). Twisting the bag closed, he starts squeezing it to combine the flour and water thoroughly. He removes it from the bag and begins kneading.

The type of buckwheat flour you use is paramount to the success of your soba (which in Japanese means both "buckwheat" and "buckwheat noodles"). The way the buckwheat is harvested, threshed, dried and milled all play a part in determining whether the flour can be used for soba. You can't use Bob's Red Mill buckwheat flour, for example (we tried and ended up with a wet, sandy mixture instead of smooth dough). But stone-milled buckwheat flour from Cold Mountain worked well and is available at select Japanese markets.

He continues to knead, using the heel of his hand and his palm to fold the dough onto itself, rolling it forward. "Little by little the dough is getting smoother." He pushes the dough down into the thinnest possible disk,

using his palm and putting all of his weight on it.

With a rolling pin, he rolls the dough into an oval and then a rectangle while dusting *uchiko* flour onto his board (*uchiko* is difficult to find, so Inouye recommends substituting cornstarch). He folds the dough, rolled to about one-sixteenth-inch thick, into quarters and cuts the noodles with a sharp Japanese vegetable knife (we tried it with a sharp chef's knife, which works well too; a heavy cleaver had too thick a blade). Using a slight rocking, or "pitching," motion, he quickly cuts exquisitely thin, even slices (skill comes with practice).

The soba is boiled for just a minute to 90 seconds. Save the cooking liquid, or *sobayu*, to add hot to the *tsuyu* dipping sauce to drink as a soup at the end of the meal. After the soba is boiled, it is shocked in an ice bath to stop the cooking and then dipped into another ice bath to remove all of the surface starch and complete the cooling (soba cooking is a series of hot and cold baths).

Soba connoisseurs eat their noodles unadorned, presented on a *zaru*, or flat wooden strainer, with a *dashi*- and soy-based dipping sauce on the side and condiments such as sliced green onions, grated daikon, wasabi and *togarashi*. A creamier dipping sauce is made with ground walnuts and *tsuyu*.

It's worth going to the trouble of making soba to get fresh, elastic, toothsome noodles that sing with the flavor of buckwheat. Most dried, packaged soba is made with as much as 70% wheat flour. Buckwheat flour should be the first ingredient listed (and when it is, it can be expensive). It may take a little practice, but all soba masters have to start somewhere.

"The first time I tried to make soba, they were not noodles," Inouye says. "But the second time, great results. I thought, maybe I'm a great soba maker."

betty.hallock@latimes.com

Soba

Total time: 25 minutes

Servings: 2

Note: Adapted from a recipe by Akila Inouye. Use Cold Mountain buckwheat flour, available at select Mitsuwa and Nijiya markets and at Granada Market in West L.A. This recipe requires a kitchen scale. Serve the noodles with dipping sauce and condiments such as sliced green onions, finely grated daikon and shichimi pepper on the side. Reserve some of the cooking liquid (*sobayu*); this can be used to add to the dipping sauce, in amount desired, for a soup.

5.6 ounces (160 grams) stone-milled buckwheat flour for soba

1.4 ounces (40 grams) all-purpose flour

2.8 ounces (80 grams) cold water

Cornstarch for dusting

1. Place the buckwheat and all-purpose flours in a gallon-size resealable plastic bag, along with the cold water. Seal the bag closed and work the water into the flours, massaging the mixture with both hands, until well combined. Continue to work the dough until it forms a single mass. (Press and rub the sides of the bag against the dough to pick up as much as you can of any dough that's sticking to the bag.)

2. Remove the dough from the bag to a cutting board. Working quickly and using the heels of your hands, continue to knead firmly until a smooth dough forms. (If the dough feels dry, lightly wet the tips of your fingers with more cold water, brushing them against the surface of the dough and continue kneading until smooth). The final dough will be soft, smooth and not sticky. This will take about 4 to 5 minutes.

Form the dough into a smooth ball.

3. Cover the dough loosely with plastic wrap while you sprinkle cornstarch on a large cutting board. Place the ball on the board and lightly sprinkle cornstarch over the top. Using your palm and the heel of your hand, flatten the ball into a disk about one-half inch thick.

4. Use a rolling pin to roll the disk into a rectangle (about 20 by 12 inches) one-eighth-inch thick. Generously sprinkle cornstarch over half of the dough and fold the other half of the dough over, like a book (the cornstarch will keep the dough from sticking together as it is cut). Generously dust another crosswise half of the dough with cornstarch and fold again.

5. Starting along the short, folded side of the dough, slice it into very thin (about one-sixteenth-inch) noodles. Keep the noodles loosely covered with plastic wrap while you boil the water for cooking.

6. To cook the noodles: Bring a large pot of water (at least 2 gallons) to a boil over high heat. Gently drop the soba into the boiling water. Keep the water boiling vigorously to prevent the noodles from sticking together. Cook the noodles to al dente, about 90 seconds (timing will vary depending on the thickness of the noodles). **7. Immediately remove** the noodles to a strainer set in a bowl of ice water to stop the cooking. Prepare a second bowl of ice water and transfer to the second bowl to remove any surface starch and cool completely. Drain the noodles. Serve with soba-*tsuyu* dipping sauce or walnut dipping sauce (see accompanying recipes) on the side, along with condiments.

Each serving: 328 calories; 12 grams protein; 69 grams carbohydrates; 8 grams fiber; 3 grams fat; 0 saturated fat; 0 mg. cholesterol; 2 grams sugar; 9 mg. sodium.

Soba-tsuyu (dipping sauce for cold soba noodles)

Total time: 25 minutes, plus cooling time

Servings: This makes about 6½ cups of dipping sauce.

Note: Adapted from Akila Inouye. Mirin (look for mirin made with just rice, rice spirit and malt) and dried bonito flakes are available at Asian markets.

Hongaeshi (dipping sauce base)

⅓ cup sugar

¼ cup plus a scant 3 tablespoons mirin

2 cups plus a scant 2 tablespoons soy sauce

Place the sugar and mirin into a pot over medium heat and dissolve the sugar completely. Add the soy sauce and heat until a thermometer inserted reaches 158 degrees, then remove from heat. Cover the pot with a clean cloth (instead of a hard lid). Set aside and cool to room temperature. Store the liquid, covered, in the refrigerator. You can keep the base for a couple of

months. This makes about 2½ cups of hongaeshi.

Soba-tsuyu

2½ cups water

4 loosely packed cups (35 grams) dried bonito flakes

¾ cup hongaeshi dipping sauce base

Dash of mirin (optional)

Dash of sake (optional)

1. Boil the water and add the dried bonito flakes. Lower the heat to a simmer and continue cooking for a minute. Strain the dashi liquid in a fine strainer.

2. Add the hongaeshi to the dashi and then heat it to 158 degrees. Add a dash of mirin and sake, if using. Cool the pot in an ice bath. This will keep in the refrigerator for 3 days. Serve on the side with soba.

Each one-half cup: 18 calories; 1 gram protein; 3 grams carbohydrates; 0 fiber; 0 fat; 0 cholesterol; 2 grams sugar; 704 mg. sodium.

Walnut dipping sauce

Total time: 3 minutes

Servings: This makes about 1½ cups dipping sauce.

Note: Adapted from Akila Inouye

¾ cup walnuts

1 tablespoon sugar

Scant 1 cup soba-*tsuyu* dipping sauce

Blend the walnuts, sugar and

soba-*tsuyu* in a blender until the walnuts are coarsely pureed. You can adjust the ingredients to your taste. Serve on the side with soba.

Each one-third cup: 88 calories; 2 grams protein; 5 grams carbohydrates; 1 gram fiber; 7 grams fat; 1 gram saturated fat; 0 cholesterol; 3 grams sugar; 352 mg. sodium.