



Why You Should Always Have Soba Noodles in Your Pantry

By Mary Margaret Chappell
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In Brief

- Soba noodles are thin Japanese noodles made from buckwheat, sometimes blended with wheat.
- 100% buckwheat (“juwari”) soba is naturally gluten-free; check labels if avoiding gluten.
- Cook quickly (2–3 minutes), don’t salt the water, and rinse in cold water to prevent sticking.
- Enjoy hot in broth or cold in bowl-style meals.

If the pasta selection in your pantry doesn’t already include a package or two of soba noodles, it’s time to add some to your stash. Hot or cold, lightly dressed or swimming in a savory broth or sauce, the thin, tan strands are a great option for fast weeknight meals. (Most types of soba cook in under 3 minutes!) Read on to learn everything you need to know about the beloved Japanese noodles, including the secret to perfectly cooked noodles every time.

What Are Soba Noodles?

Soba are a type of Japanese noodles that are made with [buckwheat](#) flour. (“Soba” means buckwheat in Japanese.) That whole grain base gives the noodles a tan color, nutty flavor, and tender, springy consistency—along with fiber and nutrients.

Is Soba Gluten-Free?

While buckwheat flour is naturally gluten-free, most soba noodles include some wheat flour for binding and texture. Noodles made with 100% buckwheat (called juwari soba) are naturally gluten-free, but they’re often processed in facilities that also handle wheat. If you have celiac disease or severe sensitivities, choose packages that are labeled as gluten-free.

How Is Soba Made?

Look closely at soba noodles and you’ll see that the edges are square, not round like spaghetti. That’s because soba noodles are made by cutting a thin sheet of dough into narrow strands rather than extruding the dough through a press the way most dried Italian pastas are made. Fresh and artisanal soba noodles are cut by hand; [specialized machines](#) do the work for the mass-produced dried noodles that are more widely available.

Japanese Soba Noodle Traditions

Squiggly ramen noodles may be the most popular Japanese noodle in the world, but soba holds a special place in Japan’s culinary heritage. Soba noodles trace their origins back to medieval Zen Buddhist temples where they were served as a simple, nourishing meal to monks and pilgrims. By the 18th century, soba dishes had become a mainstay of street food vendors and late-night restaurants because they were cheap, filling, and easy to prepare. These were the forerunners to the thousands of soba restaurants that remain popular in Japan today, some of which have been in the same family for generations.

Soba noodles are also part of Japan’s New Year traditions. On New Year’s Eve it is customary to eat toshikoshi soba, a soba noodle soup that’s believed to bring luck, prosperity, and longevity in the coming year.

Soba Noodle Selection

(continued)

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With their darker color and spaghetti-style packaging, soba noodles are easy to spot among the ramens, udon, egg noodles, and rice vermicelli in the Asian noodle aisle. But what's not always clear is how much buckwheat they actually contain. Since buckwheat is a naturally gluten-free whole grain that provides fiber, protein, and a nutty depth of flavor, it's worth paying attention to the label when choosing a package. A few brands, including Eden Foods, label the [percentage of buckwheat flour in their products](#). Japanese soba noodle brands sometimes label their products juwari (100% buckwheat) or nihachi (80% buckwheat to 20% wheat flour). Otherwise, scan the ingredient list: If buckwheat flour is listed first, the noodles likely contain 50% or more.

One thing to note is that the higher the buckwheat content, the stronger the taste and the softer the noodle when cooked. So if 100% buckwheat varieties aren't for you, don't give up on the noodles altogether. Instead, try a brand with a lower buckwheat content for a milder flavor and firmer bite.

How to Cook Soba Noodles

There are three important steps for perfectly cooked soba noodles.

1. Follow the recommended cooking time. Soba noodles cook very quickly (2½ to 3 minutes) and will break easily and turn mushy if overcooked.
2. Do not salt the cooking water. Salting can further soften the noodles and isn't necessary when they are served with a flavorful sauce.
3. Rinse drained, cooked noodles in cold water before using. Rinsing prevents the strands from clumping and halts the cooking so they stay firm and bouncy.

Ways to Use Soba Noodles

In Japan, soba noodles are served simply—hot in a seasoned broth (dashi) with toppings, or cold with a savory dipping sauce so that their rich, nutty flavor has a chance to shine. But soba noodles' hot-or-cold capacity makes them extremely versatile: Try subbing soba for other Asian-style noodles and spaghetti. They're especially good with pesto and hearty cold-weather sauces. You can also use soba noodles in place of brown

rice as [a base for stir-fries](#) or bowls. Or give them a whirl in one of these recipes!

- [Vegan Soba Noodle Salad](#)
- [Tropical Soba Noodle Bowls](#)
- [Spicy Cold Noodle Salad with Soy-Lime Dressing](#)
- [Spicy Soba Bowls with Bok Choy](#)
- [Vegan Miso Soup with Noodles and Tofu](#)
- [Dan Dan Mian Noodle](#)