Food

Making soba noodles the easy way

On New Year's Eve in Japan, soba is eaten as a symbol of longevity. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By **Betty Hallock**

DECEMBER 30, 2009

Reporting from Tokyo and Los Angeles -- At Akila Inouye's Tsukiji Soba Academy in Tokyo, a specially made wooden cabinet has 108 small cubbyholes, each containing a scroll of thick brown or green paper printed with a question. "How to finish the soba dough so that the surface is completely smooth?" "What is the ideal shape of soba cutting knives?" "How difficult is it to mill buckwheat flour oneself?"

The soba instructor's cabinet of questions is emblematic of the nuances of soba-making. Soba, revered in Japan -- especially on New Year's Eve, when it's eaten as a symbol of longevity -- is one notoriously tricky noodle. It's difficult to make well, so that it's supple, lustrous and slurpable, resilient and slightly chewy, with the fresh, earthy flavor of buckwheat.

But there is hope for beginners, an opportunity for the would-be casual soba maker (who isn't steeped in the

ways of *michi*, or strict adherence to tradition) to mix, roll and cut the noodles entirely by hand. It's an easy method prescribed by Inouye, who has studied the intricacies of soba-making for 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, and 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 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.

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

This article is related to: Lifestyle and Leisure, Cooking, Dining and Drinking, Japan, New Year's Day, Restaurants