



# A Taste of History in the Heart of Tokyo

We take a look at two long-standing soba restaurants that continue to thrive after more than 100 years of business.

by Matthew Heron

TRADITION

**A** quintessential Japanese dish made from buckwheat flour that dates back to the eighth century, soba can be enjoyed either hot or cold, and is known to be good for your health. A source of several nutrients, it is considered a staple soul food in Tokyo. Two of the most traditional and popular soba restaurants in the capital are Kanda Matsuya in Kanda, a vibrant downtown region with many traditional eateries, and Toranomon Osakaya Sunaba in Toranomon, a wealthy business district full of skyscrapers. Both restaurants were founded during the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Kanda Matsuya was first opened in 1884 by the Fukushima family who ran the place



The simplicity and subtleness of *mori* soba, a staple of Toranomon Osakaya Sunaba, is highly recommended. The noodles and dipping sauce are served cold, and separately.

until it was destroyed by the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. The shop was restored soon after and taken over by the Kodaka family. Almost a century on and the restaurant is still going strong with his great-grandson Takayuki Kodaka in charge, who says, “The soba noodles are all handmade without assistance from machines. On a busy day, we make around 800 plates. It is important to strike a good balance between taste and texture with noodles that are fresh and the *tsuyu* (dipping sauce) that is slightly rich in taste and dark in color.”



A seasonal special at Kanda Matsuya is a soba dish of sakura shrimp with spicy radish.

The restaurant is charmingly designed in a Taisho era architectural style with a simple and elegant facade. Once inside, it feels like you have been transported back 100 years. Customers eat and drink on shared tables, creating a special atmosphere. In the corner, there is a glass-fronted booth where you can watch the soba noodles being prepared. There are a variety of dishes to choose from including tempura, duck, and herring. Highly recommended is the *goma* soba, served with a thick, savory sesame *tsuyu* where the flavours blend deliciously in your mouth. “The key to great soba is the source of the buckwheat flour,” opines the owner. “As with rice or vegetables, the land has to be right. We usually get our ingredients from Ibaraki Prefecture,

130 kilometers north of Tokyo, and I am in constant communication with the farmers there to make sure things are going as planned.”

Slightly older than Kanda Matsuya, Toranomon Osakaya Sunaba, is another famous soba eatery in Tokyo with an outstanding reputation. A Registered Tangible Cultural Property of Japan that was founded in 1872, it also had to be rebuilt after the earthquake in 1923. The exterior has remained the same ever since, though the restaurant has moved slightly westwards to accommodate the widen-

ing of the adjacent street. A majestic two-story structure that is castle-like, it stands out in an area full of modern buildings. The first floor is bright, spacious, and modern-looking while the upstairs feels more historical with two tatami rooms that have hosted many distinguished guests down the years.

They serve a Sunaba style soba, one of the three main types of soba served in Tokyo (along with Yabu and Sarashina). The name can be traced back to 1584 when a confectioner opened a soba restaurant in a *sunaba* (sandpit in English) near Osaka Castle. At the family-run shop in Toranomon, sixth generation soba master Takatoshi Inagaki recommends *mori* soba, a cold soba dish with a simple *tsuyu*. “Sunaba soba noodles have a mild taste,” he says. “We use the inner part of the buckwheat which is not as strong. Also,

the soy sauce needs to be aged before being used to make the *tsuyu*, it will be too sharp if you use it immediately after purchase. Waiting for the right amount of time gives it a smoother taste.” According to Inagaki the style of the soba noodles has remained the same since the restaurant first opened 147 years ago. He would like customers to appreciate the surroundings and slowly take in the aroma and arrangement of the dishes before eating.

More than just restaurants, Toranomon Osakaya Sunaba, and Kanda Matsuya are two long-standing establishments with rich histories that are well worth visiting. Just be warned, both places are extremely popular so you may have to wait in line.