



Sakae-Ann, Kyoto

SOBA NEAR SHIJO

by Scott Victor



There's no shortage of great restaurants to enjoy soba in Kansai, but I promise you will find few places as passionate about it as Sakae-Ann, just north of Shijo-dori in Kyoto. Owner Honjo-san clearly has a love for soba, and oh, how he serves it! We tasted it four different ways during our visit, and each was a unique pleasure.

Before we began munching on buckwheat we were treated to a specialty of the house, Kyogamo duck. The breed resides in the waters around Uji, the famous green tea town just outside of Kyoto city, but originally came from the UK. It is known for its singular flavor experience, and according to Honjo-san, is a healthy alternative to other breeds because its fat melts at lower temperatures. Here, it is served in a number of ways including grilled, smoked, skewered and raw. We went for the house specialty, steamed Kyogamo loin

(¥880): five thick, tender and succulent pieces served with negi on the side.

Our first soba dish was cold okra soba (¥800), which came with a liberal spreading of the mashed root vegetable, all topped with a raw egg. Though I initially looked at this colorful plate as questionably edible, my opinion quickly changed once I dug in. The green okra was sweet, the soba was cold, and the egg yolk complemented both perfectly.

Just as we were finishing the last few noodles on our plates, we were treated to some soba salad rolls (¥700). These consisted of four large egg wrap "spring rolls" filled with soba, ham, lettuce, shiso leaf, and a touch of mayonnaise. They were delicate and refreshing and easy to eat with chopsticks or hands.

Agedashi soba (¥800) and plain zaru soba (¥680) completed our meal. There was nothing plain about the zaru soba, though, when it was served ice cold and with one of the most delicious soba tsuyu (soba sauce) I've ever tasted. This was soba consumption at its best. The agedashi soba, plated with four pieces of tempura tofu and served with ground daikon, was ordered as a hot dish, but to our surprise was brought out cold. When asked why we didn't get it hot,

Honjo-san begged us to try it cold first, explaining that the full flavor and character of soba is best expressed icy. Of course, he wasn't wrong.

There's much more to Sakae-Ann's menu, including salads, tempura dishes, kushiyaki, and desserts. But by this point, we had been over-fed by our host. All of the dishes at Sakae-Ann were affordable but big enough to go around, so we'd recommend it for a casual evening out or for small parties. And though we didn't imbibe much, they serve draft beer, wine, and a nice selection of nihonshu. Find your way there if you're in Kyoto and craving buckwheat, and make sure you bring someone to share with—and a healthy appetite. And don't forget to tell Honjo-san that we sent you.



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Open lunch 11am-3pm; dinner 5-11pm. Satake Bldg 2F, Sagaru Nishi-gawa, Nishiki Kouji, Takakura-dori, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto City. Tel: 075-213-0707.