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Playing Around With Soba and Dashi

By [MARK BITTMAN](#)



Mark Bittman

This is primitive.

But I have been working on forms of soba, and dashi — the broth that is its basis — for 20 years. Not having any grounding in Japanese food, having visited Japan only once (for all of a week), and growing up at a time when Benihana was that cuisine's most prominent ambassador, it doesn't come naturally.

I'm getting the hang of it though. Dashi is made, usually, with two ingredients: dried bonito flakes or chunks, and kelp, the seaweed that is called konbu in Japanese. Both of those are easy enough to find, at least in Japanese markets. (There's also instant dashi, which is worth as much as powdered chicken stock, which is to say, less than water.) It turns out that there are times you leave out the kelp, and times you leave out the bonito. (If you're a vegetarian, you always leave out the bonito.)

The basis, however, is this: You simmer a piece of kelp in water for a few minutes. You put in a handful of bonito flakes; you let the thing sit, heat off or very low (frankly, I'm not sure which is better, or if there's much difference) for about 10 minutes. Then you strain.

Now you have dashi. To make the dish here, I cooked some kamut spirals until they were not quite done. (Real soba is obviously more traditional, but I was given the spirals, and I couldn't let them go to waste.) I also put in in some wakame seaweed; not much, because it expands by a

factor of about 40, and I don't think I'm exaggerating. I drained them, not too thoroughly, and put them back in the pan with my dashi.

When the texture was about right, I added a bit of soy sauce (I used light — not lite — soy sauce, the kind that's traditional in Kyoto, called usukuchi, but only because I happen to have some), some mirin, which is essentially sweet sake (when you buy it, make sure it's not just corn syrup), and a few drops of vinegar. All of this to taste.

The taste was good. Delicious, in fact. But primitive.

I'm working on it.