



A bowl of Kitakata ramen with a variety of toppings
Photo: mikeko/PIXTA

Kitakata Ramen

Hot Noodles for a Cold Winter's Morning



The "City of Storehouses" covered in snow
Photo: takahiro/PIXTA

Fukushima Prefecture's Kitakata ramen is a local cuisine so loved that it is eaten for breakfast as well as lunch and dinner, and may be best enjoyed in the cold of winter.

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RAMEN is one of Japan's national dishes. There are many ramen varieties all across Japan that can only be eaten locally. Situated in the northwest of Fukushima Prefecture is Kitakata City, famous for Kitakata ramen, which people often say is one of the three best types of ramen¹ in Japan.

The broad, slightly curly noodles are a distinguishing feature of this variety of ramen. The noodles are made by mixing in more water than usual and letting the dough rest thoroughly, giving the noodles a chewy body. The soup is a soy-sauce based broth that is

typically made from pork bones and *niboshi* (dried sardines). This combination of noodles and soup produces an exquisite flavor.

Kusuyama Keiichi, chairman of the Kitakata Tourist Product Association, says that “locals have their own favorite Kitakata ramen shops out of the many shops in the city which they visit frequently.”

It is said that Kitakata ramen began in a food stall about 100 years ago, and after that, shops specializing in the ramen increased. About 50 years ago, the name “Kitakata ramen” became well-known nationwide. The fermented food production industry for soy sauce, miso and sake prospered in Kitakata for centuries and many storehouses for the produce were built in the city. Kitakata became known as the “City of Storehouses” among people who were touched by the local scenery of storehouses. Visitors to Kitakata spread the word, saying “the storehouse scenery is great, but what’s more, the ramen is delicious!” and the city became popular. The popularity of Kitakata ramen grew during a time without social media simply because so many people were impressed with the taste of the ramen.

One way that local people enjoy this variety of ramen is as *asara* (morning ramen). While most ramen shops and other restaurants in Japan usually open just before lunchtime, many Kitakata ramen shops open in the morning. There are various opinions as to why. Some say it was because workers finishing a nightshift at one of the factories in the city ate ramen as breakfast, while others say it became a favorite for casual breakfasts for workers finishing their early morning farm work. Still others say that in the past many people arriving in Kitakata early in the morning by night train warmed themselves up with ramen. Regardless of the reason, many people still come for morning ramen just as in the past, some driving through the middle of the night from far away.

You can enjoy morning ramen throughout the year, but “slurping down the hot ramen on a winter’s morning is especially good,” says Hanami Sakae, an official of the Kitakata City Tourism Promotion Section. “I often head to a ramen shop after shoveling snow in the morning. If a shop becomes popular, a line will form in the morning, even in winter.”

The Aizu region, where Kitakata is located, sees heavy snowfall of over one meter on average, and in a normal year, the area is blanketed in snow from the end of December through the end of February. The sheer pleasure of eating hot Kitakata ramen in the shivering cold of winter explains why this variety of ramen is so loved in this part of Japan. **■**



A simple bowl of Kitakata ramen
Photo: Courtesy of Kitakata Tourist Product Association



Kitakata ramen topped with spinach
Photo: paylessimages2/PIXTA



Kitakata ramen topped with *chashu* (braised pork)
Photo: paylessimages2/PIXTA

ⁱ The Japanese mass media often state that Sapporo ramen from Sapporo, Hokkaido, Hakata ramen from Fukuoka, Fukuoka Prefecture, and Kitakata ramen are the three best types of ramen in Japan.