

Sake: the ultimate wine with asian food

By Annette Hanami

Sake isn't really wine, it's a brewed beverage, said Henry Sidel, uber premium sake importer and educator, "you have to take off your wine hat." Sidel, President of Joto Sake based in NYC, was in the Bay Area to give a couple of sake presentations at the Culinary Institute of America's annual Worlds of Flavor event this past weekend. This aficionado is so meticulous about quality that he only represents eight artisanal producers, who together represent 16 generations and over 1,500 years of production of this ancient Japanese beverage. Sidel gave us a casual sake 101 presentation at seafood-oriented Skool Restaurant in the design district where we tasted through his portfolio of sakes over some very umami dishes.



Skool Restaurant's Hokkaido Scallop, Roasted Golden Beets, Micro Greens, Kiwi Yogurt Vinaigrette and Vanilla Oil



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There are three types of pure rice sakes based on how much the rice grain is milled down, or polished, to the starch core. There is Junmai which is polished to 70% or less; Junmai Ginjo which is polished to 60% or less; and the highest quality Junmai Daiginjo which is milled to 50% or less. The outer grain consists of fats and proteins which contribute to rougher flavors in the sake while the starches lead to a lighter and fruitier sake.

Quality starts with the rice, with some varieties being sweeter than others. High quality rices include fragrant yamada nishiki, deep tamazakae and one that was on the verge of extinction, watari bune. Farming practices can influence the quality of rice, with low yields producing rice with more starch and less protein.

Sakes are full-bodied and relatively neutral compared to wine, with low-medium acidity. Most sakes have some residual sugar with the range of sweetness measured on a scale generally between -4 (sweeter) to +10, though you won't always find this information on the label. The drier sakes we had that evening were in the +4 category. Alcohol levels average 15-16%, though some can be higher. Sake ends fermentation up to about 20% then is diluted down with water to 15-16% unless it is a Genshu, a sake which is left at its original strength.

According to Sidel, most sakes are aged for about six months in enamel-lined (neutral) vats. Those that are aged longer, like the Yuki No Bosha Junmai Ginjo we had, a Genshu, are done so to mellow the wines, not for flavor.

The finer sakes like Junmai Daiginjo and Junmai Ginjo should be served chilled, though Sidel says that they can be served at any range of temperatures according to the consumer's preference, the food, season or occasion. What is for sure, he said, poor quality sake is always served warm. If you do heat up your sake, Sidel recommends heating it gently or else the alcohol will confront you first.



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And what about food and sake pairing? Sidel would have opinions about this since his CIA presentations included "Sake and Japanese Flavor Affinities: A Pairing Workshop" and "A Nose for Flavor: Japanese Herbs, Spices, Aromatics...and Sake." When he started to list all the foods that go well with sake, "anything with soy sauce," smoked trout pate, grilled sanma (mackerel), yakitori (teriyaki-glazed chicken), pickled vegetables, sushi, etc., it was apparent that sake goes with anything that has a lot of umami – the taste of savoriness. Umami is often found in foods that have a lot of salt such as cured foods (olives, salumis, jamon, anchovies) or briny seafood and broths. Umami is found in fermented foods such as soy sauce, oyster sauce and thai fish sauce, and foods that are concentrated by drying or stewing. These foods are high in amino acids and so is sake.

It can be difficult to pair grape wines with umami foods especially in their purer forms such as soy or thai fish sauces – they interact with tannins to leave a metallic finish on the palate. With delicate dishes like sushi or sashimi, I also find the high acidity of white wines to be distracting whereas sake's smooth body and subdued aromas compliment the texture of the fish while allowing the gentle ocean scent to come through. Sidel recommends the finer Ginjos and Daiginjos to go with sushi and sashimi.

At Skool Restaurant, every dish we had from Japanese chef Toshihiro Nagano was packed with umami such as scallops with roasted beets, kiwi yogurt vinaigrette and vanilla oil, sea urchin flan topped with salmon roe and fleur de sel, and flatbread topped with cured mackerel, caramelized onion, goat cheese, sun-dried tomato and dollops of ume-olive tapenade (ume is salty pickled plum).

These were some of my favorites sakes that night:

Shichi Hon Yari "Shizuku" Junmai Daiginjo (\$79.99 for 500 ml). Whether you're a seasoned sake drinker or not, one can taste the quality immediately on this one. Very delicate, refined nose, slightly smoky, earthy and nutty, but the depth of flavor and length on the palate screams quality. Dry-ish, about +4 on the sake meter. After I tasted it, I learned that the producer, Tomita Brewery, is one of the oldest and smallest breweries in Japan dating back to 1540's. The rice used is local Tamazakae. The Shizuku refers to the portion of sake used for the bottling, which is only the purest free-run or "drip" vs. pressed sake.

Watari Bune Junmai Daiginjo (\$109.99). Watari Bune is named after the rice which was revived after being nearly extinct for 60 years. It took the producer three years to cultivate the rice before having enough to produce a batch of sake. Full-bodied and dryish, with ripe honeydew melon on the palate. Nice finesse.

Yuki No Bousha Limited Release Junmai Ginjo (\$35.99). This was very fruity and more aromatic on the nose, more wine-like than the others. This is a *genshu*, not diluted with water. It is also *jukusei*, aged for more than 12 months.

