



## Big in Japan

Nombe embraces the izakaya tradition with great food and fine drinks.

BY JORDAN MACKAY

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN SNYDER

I can't get enough of these little dried minnows—iriko, they're called—served for \$4 a bowl at Nombe, the inspired izakaya in the Mission. They're crunchy, salty, and fishy. I pop them as reflexively as a moviegoer downs hot buttered popcorn and follow them with a swig of beer and a slurp of cool sake. For months I've been doing this on almost a weekly basis.

At first the reason why I returned so frequently to Nombe (2491 MISSION ST. SF, 415-681-7150) eluded me. Sure, the food was adventurously delicious and the sake list was vast. But a lot of places had great food, and until recently I'd been only a casual sake drinker. So what fueled my almost unquenchable desire for Nombe?

Then it struck me: It wasn't just the food, or the drink, but the combination of the two. That may seem obvious, but it had never really occurred to me that San Francisco—and the country in general—has a supremely unsophisticated bar-food culture. And that has dissuaded me, a *nombe* ("hearty drinker") if there ever was one, from dining out more often.

Not only is American bar food—fries, calamari, burgers—stultifyingly homogeneous, it's not even unique to drinking establishments. You can find these standards on every city block. In the end, such dull, heavy food is hardly conducive to extended, late-night drinking sessions.

"In Japan, drinking often happens in large groups over a very long period," says Gil Payne,

one of Nombe's owners. "The food that you find there is meant not only to keep you fortified against alcohol but also to break up the hours with bold, new flavors and textures that taste great with beer, sake, and shochu."

Besides iriko, the menu at Nombe includes fried wings, served with fresh chilies, garlic, lime juice, honey, and fish sauce. Brussels sprouts are flash-fried and seasoned with red chili, ginger, brown sugar, and mint. And for the adventurous, there's Mission motzu, a miraculous preparation of tripe braised in spices and citrus, then grilled to a crisp char and finished with lime and avocados, that even my offal-hating wife adores. How can that not make you thirst for a cold lager and a shimmering cup of sake? Many of these inventive dishes—part Japanese and part Mission Mex—were developed by chef Nick Balla, who left the restaurant at the turn of the year, and they'll be kept on the menu by the new chef, Vincent Schofield.

Drinking at Nombe is equally satisfying. It's here that I was introduced to the junmai dai ginjo from Hakuro Suishu, a formidable blend of concentration and delicacy. Likewise, I've come to appreciate the value of more rustic honjozo sakes—ones spiked with extra alcohol—like *Kasumi Tsuru*, to pair with the boldly flavored food. And finally, Nombe is where I learned about Coedo, a Japanese brewery that makes Beniaka, a fascinating sweet-potato beer, and an addictive Belgian-style one called Shiro.

Payne recently reconstructed the restaurant's interior and extended the bar area. "We want to be a place where people can stop for a quick dish and drink, or eat and drink for hours," he says.

Count me in. Great bar food must be diverse, salty, dynamic in flavor and texture, humble, and affordable. And so sneakily delicious that you hardly notice how good it is...or just how much you're drinking. ■

Up for grabs: At Nombe, a table stacked with salty snacks that help the drinks go down easily offers a little something for everyone.

### Where the menus are designed for drinking.

**Alembic** Pickled quail eggs and jerk-spiced duck hearts lead a daring list of foods that work beautifully with the bar's collection of whiskeys and ryes. 1725 HAIGHT ST. SF, 415-666-0822

**Bar Agricole** Simplicity and clarity are hallmarks of both the cocktails and the food here. Chopped liver is strong and meaty; pickled herring is a blast with the gin-based Monkey's Gland. 355 11TH ST. SF, 415-355-9400

**Broken Record** Bourbon on tap meets beer-friendly, Southern-style dishes featuring pulled pork, fried chicken, and crawfish grits. 1166 GENEVA AVE. SF, 415-963-1713

**Comstock Saloon** The savory food has an antiquarian twist that goes well with whiskey. Try cheddar crackers with pepper jelly alongside a Manhattan. 155 COLUMBUS AVE., SF, 415-617-0071

