



Saké beyond Sushi

A chef and saké sommelier break boundaries with an East meets West pairing menu.

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PHOTOS BY JON VAN GORDER

Saké is increasingly popular in the United States, but for most Americans it is rarely experienced outside of a Japanese restaurant. Despite common misconceptions, saké is an exceptionally versatile drink that pairs well with an array of cuisines—far beyond traditional pairings like sushi. Everyday Western staples like cheese, charcuterie, oysters and pasta are perfect candidates. And with saké, even perpetual wine conundrums—cooked green vegetables, salads with vinaigrette or chocolate—can be paired with relative ease.

To showcase just how effortlessly saké can translate from east to west, *Wine Enthusiast* sought advice from a Manhattan restaurateur with his feet planted in both worlds. Jack Lamb is the owner of three jewelbox-sized restaurants in Manhattan's East Village: Jewel Bako, an authentic yet modern Michelin-starred Japanese restaurant; Degustation, a French and Spanish influenced tapas bar; and Jack's Luxury Oyster Bar (known locally as "JLOB"), Lamb's rendition of an oyster bar done *haute cuisine*. Together with JLOB's new chef, Nicholas Licata, and Jewel Bako's veteran saké sommelier, Junko Igarashi, Lamb arranged for an innovative menu to demonstrate saké's pairing versatility.

In planning his menu, Chef Licata initially envisioned lighter flavors like raw seafood because he didn't want to overwhelm saké's seemingly delicate profile. As he experimented with saké, however, he noticed that "saké takes a unique place between wine and liquor," explaining that it's mellow, but exhibits a density and asserts an interesting play on texture.

For the Japanese-born Igarashi, who is not only a saké expert but also a budding wine scholar, nothing on Chef Licata's menu posed a challenge. "Saké has a lot more flexibility than wine," she says. Beyond more delicate fare like sushi or sashimi, she explains that Japanese food has a lot of bold, earthy flavors rich in soy sauce and vinegar and saké has been crafted to match all of those dimensions.

Although food pairing guidelines for wine are fairly established, there are few concrete rules to pairing saké. In determining pairings for Chef Licata's menu, Igarashi focused on highlighting key elements from each dish while complementing or contrasting textures. "It's much more about identifying your personal preferences from the variety of styles of saké available," she says, "and just having fun as you experiment."

To maximize saké's complexity, Igarashi recommends experimenting with temperature as well. "Saké can be served on the rocks, chilled, at room temperature, lukewarm or hot, and everything in between," she



says. “With a single bottle of saké, you can enjoy countless tastes and textures just by adjusting serving temperature to match the season, or the temperature or texture of the food it’s served with.”

Here are Chef Licata’s recipes and Igarashi’s recommendations for the spectrum of possible saké to accompany them.

LOBSTER POT PIE

With his deconstructed lobster pot pie, Chef Licata gave a nod to hearty American cooking with rich lobster, mushrooms and vegetables in a dark velouté, capped with golden brown puff pastry.

- Four 1¼ - 1½ pound lobsters
- ¾ cup frozen green peas
- 20 pearl onions, peeled
- ¼ cup kosher salt
- 12 cremini or shittake mushrooms, quartered
- 1 cup lobster velouté (recipe follows)
- 1 box store bought puff pastry, defrosted
- 2 tablespoons butter
- Lemon Juice, to taste
- Kosher salt and black pepper, to taste
- Small handful of micro herbs or baby greens, for garnish

- FOR THE LOBSTER VELOUTÉ:
- 1 onion, peeled and quartered
 - 1 fennel bulb, quartered
 - ¼ cup tomato paste
 - Reserved lobster carcasses, including heads and shells
 - 1 bay leaf
 - 2 whole cloves garlic
 - 3 sprigs fresh thyme
 - 3 tablespoons butter
 - 3 tablespoons flour
 - ½ cup heavy cream

- TO PREPARE THE LOBSTER:
- Fill a pot with enough water to cover lobsters by at least 6 inches. Bring water to boil, insert lobsters and boil for 3 minutes. Remove lobsters with a slotted spoon or strainer and plunge into a bowl of ice water to stop cooking.
 - After lobsters have chilled, carefully remove the tails, claws and knuckle meat. Reserve all shells including the heads.



Jack Lamb, Nicholas Licata, Junko Igarashi

- TO MAKE THE LOBSTER VELOUTÉ:
- In a large stock pot over medium heat, sweat onion and fennel until soft. Add tomato paste and turn up the heat to medium high to allow tomato paste to caramelize just slightly. Add reserved lobster carcasses (including head and shells), bay leaf, garlic and fresh thyme. Add 3 quarts of water and bring to a simmer. Reduce liquid by half.
 - Remove from heat and strain mixture through a fine mesh strainer or a strainer basket lined with dampened cheesecloth. Add the strained liquid back into a clean sauce pan, heat to a simmer and reduce again by one-third. You should have 1 quart of lobster stock.

In a separate pan melt 3 tablespoons butter over medium heat. When the butter begins to froth, whisk in 3 tablespoons flour and cook until a sandy texture forms, roughly 3 to 4 minutes. Whisk roux into lobster stock and cook over medium heat for 10 minutes. Add heavy cream and cook over medium low for 10 more minutes. Chill and reserve.

- TO PREPARE THE PASTRY:
- Let puff pastry defrost at room temperature approximately 2 to 3 hours until flexible but still firm. Cut four rectangles approximately 1 x 4 inches in size. Sprinkle cut pastry lightly with sea salt and place on a sheet pan lined with parchment paper, 2 inches apart. Bake at 375°F for 20 to 25 minutes, until browned and cooked all the way through.

- To finish, bring 2 quarts of water to a boil. Add ¼ cup of salt, followed by peeled pearl onions and frozen peas. Cook 3 minutes then remove from heat. Plunge onions and peas in a bowl of ice water to stop cooking.
- Heat 2 tablespoons of butter in a small sauce pan on medium heat. Add mushrooms, adjusting the heat to brown evenly. When mushrooms are brown, add pearl onions and continue to brown. Add 1 cup of velouté and heat thoroughly. Add peas and reserved lobster meat. Season with kosher salt, pepper, and lemon juice to taste. Spoon equal portions of vegetables onto a plate, top with velouté, equal portions of lobster meat and puff pastry. Garnish with micro herbs or baby greens if desired. Serves 4.

- SAKÉ RECOMMENDATIONS:
- Assessing heartier elements in the lobster pot pie, Igarashi approached pairings from two directions —matching the texture for harmony or highlighting it through contrast. From the deeper, richer side of the saké spectrum she chose Rihaku Shuzo’s Dreamy Clouds Tokubetsu Junmai, a *nigori*, or cloudy saké, that was fluffy and rich with saké lees, and Yumegokoro Sake Brewing Corporation’s Naraman Junmai Muroka Bin Hiire, a saké with a round, lactic palate accented with melon and a briney, astringent finish. Then, as a demonstration of opposites, she chose the remarkably adaptable Ginga Shizuku Divine Drop-lets, a seemingly delicate *junmai daiginjo* from Takasago Shuzo. Clean and bright, its subtle fruit palate drew attention to the sweet morsels of lobster, then intensified in heft to complement more savory flavors like butter sautéed mushrooms and peas.

- SOURDOUGH PANZANELLA WITH CURED VEGETABLES
- In homage to his Italian-American roots, Chef Licata prepared a panzanella salad using thick sourdough croutons infused with a tomato vinaigrette and served alongside curls of cured fennel, celery and carrots.

- FOR THE SALAD:
- 1 loaf sourdough bread, trimmed into 4 pieces, roughly 5 inches long and 2 inches tall
 - 1 cup carrot, peeled and shaved lengthwise
 - 1 cup fennel, sliced lengthwise in thin strands
 - 1 cup celery, peeled and shaved lengthwise



Sourdough Panzanella



- 2 cups tomato vinaigrette (recipe follows)
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt
- 1½ teaspoons sugar, more or less to taste
- Small handful of fennel fronds, micro herbs or baby greens, for garnish

- FOR THE TOMATO VINAIGRETTE:
- 2 cups olive oil
 - 4 tablespoons tomato paste
 - ⅔ cup Sherry vinegar
 - 1 teaspoon thyme leaves, stripped from stems
 - 2 tablespoons shallot, finely minced

- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt

- TO MAKE THE SALAD:
- Heat oven to 200°F. Slice each brick of bread into approximately 8 equally sized pieces. Place sliced bread on a sheet pan and dry over low heat for 3 hours.
 - Combine shaved celery, fennel and carrots in a bowl with salt and sugar. Toss gently until the mixture is coated evenly. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 4 hours. Drain off any liquid that collects in the bottom of the bowl.

- TO MAKE THE VINAIGRETTE:
- Using a whisk, combine all ingredients except oil in a small bowl. While whisking, slowly drizzle in oil until mixture emulsifies and thickens.
 - To finish, place 4 equal portions of cured vegetables on each serving plate, arranging them in a loose bundle. Assemble bread cubes into 4 equal stacks, standing bread cubes on end (like dominoes). Handling only one stack of bread cubes at a time, gently place each stack of bread cubes in the bowl of vinaigrette, allowing tomato vinaigrette to infuse only the bottom surface of the bread cubes. Layer each stack of bread cubes on



serving plates along side the cured vegetables. Garnish with fennel fronds, micro herbs or baby greens if desired. *Serves 4.*

SAKÉ RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the panzanella, Igarashi suggested more rustic styles of saké. First, a higher acid *yamahai* saké influenced by wild yeasts and bacteria like the Kagatobi Cho Karakuchi Junmai from Fukumitsuya Sake Brewery. Then, a *honjozo*, a light, fragrant saké with added distilled alcohol, like Eiko Fuji Brewing Company’s Honkara. Both saké withstood the acidity in the vinaigrette and softened the dish’s green, vegetal flavors. To complement the sweetness in the carrots and tomato vinaigrette, she recommended the round, subtly fruity Shimehariusuru Jun Junmai Ginjo from Miyao Shuzo.

**CRUDO OF SCALLOP
WITH HONEYDEW, CUCUMBERS
AND PUFFED RICE IN A MEYER
LEMON VINAIGRETTE**

Chef Licata presents a raw crudo of scallops in a Meyer lemon vinaigrette, sprinkled with sweet honeydew melon and earthy grains of puffed wild rice.

- 1 seedless Japanese or English cucumber, cut into at least 40 paper-thin slices**
- 2-3 large or 4 medium-sized diver scallops, cut into at least 20 ¼-inch slices**
- ½ teaspoon sea salt**
- ½ cup Meyer lemon vinaigrette (recipe follows)**
- ¼ cup honeydew, chopped into small dice**
- 4 tablespoons puffed wild rice (recipe follows)**

FOR THE PUFFED RICE:

- 3 cups grapeseed oil**
- ½ cup wild rice, uncooked**
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt**

FOR THE MEYER LEMON VINAIGRETTE:

- Zest from one Meyer lemon**
- 4 tablespoons Meyer lemon juice (about 2 lemons)**
- 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard**
- 2 teaspoons honey**
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt**



Crudo of Scallop

- Pinch of cayenne pepper**
- ¾ cup grapeseed oil**

TO MAKE THE PUFFED RICE:

In a medium sauce pan heat oil to 325°F. To test the heat, drop 1 or 2 kernels of rice into the oil. The rice should puff up and float to the surface after 2 or 3 seconds. Carefully pour rice into the hot oil. The rice

should immediately begin to sizzle, puff and float to the surface.

Immediately remove puffed rice with a dry, slotted spoon and place onto paper towels to drain. Season with salt.

To make the Meyer lemon vinaigrette: Using a whisk, combine all ingredients except oil in a small bowl. While whisking, slowly drizzle oil into bowl until mixture emul-

Saké Pairing Primer

To start, try pairing saké at home with foods readily available in your pantry or local markets.



CHEESE

For creamy, delicate cheeses with fruity, floral notes like a Reblochon, or even a nutty goat Chèvre, try a soft, floral *junmai ginjo* saké with a round, lactic feel on the palate.

Try Marumoto Brewery, Chikurin Karoyaka Junmai Ginjo (Okayama); \$36/720 ml. Imported by Joto Saké.



LIVER PÂTÉ

Kimoto saké, which, like *yamahai* saké, is often earthy and full of *umami* and brine notes, can complement the rich, gamey elements of chicken liver pâté or even foie gras. **Try Hinomaru Jozo, Manabito Kimoto Junmai Ginjo (Akita); \$45/720 ml. Imported by Winebow.**



OYSTERS

A dry, savory saké with a creamy, rice-laden palate and saline astringency is perfect with delicate oysters, drawing out their soft, milky sweetness. **Try Sakata Shuzo, Jokigen Euphoria Junmai Ginjo (Yamagata); \$28/720 ml. Imported by Banzai Beverage Corporation.**



DESSERTS

Dark chocolate, vanilla ice cream or even a stinky blue cheese can be paired perfectly with a Sherry-like *koshu*, or aged saké, with its rich, nutty aromas and bold, creamy palate. **Try Ichishima Shuzo, Ginjo Koshu (Niigata); \$60/720 ml. Imported by Winebow.**

sifies and thickens.

To finish, place approximately 10 slices of cucumber on the bottom of each serving plate, slightly overlapping each slice. Gently place 5 slices of scallop atop cucumbers on each plate. Season with sea salt and drizzle vinaigrette using a spoon. Garnish each plate with 1 tablespoon each of honeydew melon and puffed rice. *Serves 4.*

SAKÉ RECOMMENDATIONS:

To preserve the pristine nature of the scallop crudo, Igarashi suggested saké with a clean, refreshing profile and a delicate texture like the *méthode champenoise* Mizbasho Pure Sparkling Saké from Nagai Shuzo. To emphasize the dish’s sweet honeydew notes, she recommended

two *junmai daiginjo*—delicate, ultrapremium saké made from finely milled rice grains. Wonderfully fruity and floral on the nose, the Hoyo Kura no Hana from Uchigasaki Shuzoten shined a spotlight on the melon and Meyer lemon flavors. The refreshing Dassai 39 from Asahi Shuzo opened with a subtle, almost ethereal fruit character, but developed an earthiness in the mouth that further enhanced the nutty, puffed rice garnish.

For a glossary of commonly used saké terminology, as well as purchasing information for all the saké mentioned in this article, visit winemag.com/sake101