

## Sake Wisdom at Nombe

Is the popularity of sake growing in the U.S.? To what do you attribute this surge of interest?

Sake has been steadily growing in popularity in the U.S. (primarily on the coasts) over the past decade. Though Honolulu, Portland, Seattle and New York are all strong in terms of establishments featuring Japanese cuisine, food and sake, San Francisco can boast of having the first sake-only liquor store (True Sake), and to have annual sake-focused events like Sake Day (every October 1<sup>st</sup>) and Joy of Sake.

Do you feel sake competes with wine too much? Is it really the better alternative with Japanese food?

I wouldn't view it as a competition as much as a potentially complimentary relationship. I don't think sake should be limited to Japanese cuisine, as it is such a versatile beverage that it can be substituted for beer, wine, or cocktail pairings with any style of cuisine. However, given the primacy of rice in Japanese food, history and culture, the melding of sake and Japanese food is sublime, and when, perfectly paired and balanced, can truly convey the meaning of "umami" to the diner.

When did you first develop your interest in sake? When did you shift from enthusiast to serious student of sake?

I developed my initial interest in Japanese food and sake while attending Georgetown. It was the late '80s, and the sushi craze had started taking off in many East coast cities. Given that I was studying International Affairs and Japanese Studies, I decided to spend my junior year abroad in Japan.

While I enjoyed sake quite a lot during that year, my introduction to the vastness and beauty of the sake world came from my father-in-law. He served Kubota Manjyu, a superb Junmai Daiginjo that is very popular in Japan and in the West, at a luncheon introducing me to his family in Yokohama in '98. The ritual of pouring sake for your guest/neighbor/friend before pouring your own, the clink of the small glasses as you kenpai, the satisfaction of the silky texture and feel with the aroma of citrus and herb....I was hooked.

After a less formal session at their home with another of his favorite sakes (Suigei, "the drunken whale"), I again was struck by the concept of sake as a daily table wine for Japanese, in the same way that wine is used in many European cultures. The next day, I proceeded to buy a book by John Gauntner, "The Sake Handbook." John is the undisputed authority of sake in the English language, and enjoys a great deal of respect from and popularity with the sake brewers of Japan for his tireless efforts to inform and educate people about sake.

After opening Sozai with Mari-san, I decided to take John's first level sake professional course. It is accredited with the Japan Sake Brewer's Association, and recognized as a premier sake education course in the industry. I furthered my education by taking his second level course in Tokyo in February of this year.

This past Monday, John and twenty students in his current level one class were my guests at Nombe. One circle completed. Another already begun.

What is your vision for your role as Sake Sommelier at Nombe?

I see my role as a Sherpa for finding your way through the sake world and a humble guide to the best pairings for the various dishes we offer. That role includes making sure that our servers and bartenders can capably help their diners make selections whenever I might not be able to speak with our diners personally.

Are there "summer sakes"? What is the harvest cycle?

There are some summer namazakes that have become increasingly popular in recent years. These are typically the result of sakes made toward the end of the brewing season, which runs from October to April. Many sake brewers also help with the rice harvest in their localities, so they help tend the rice fields between April and August. The regular season for namazake is from late January to March, but some brewers who can mimic winter conditions inside their breweries all year long make and release namazake all year long as well.

Is there a basic etiquette for sake tasting?

As I mentioned above, pouring for others before you indulge yourself is sacrosanct. From a tasting perspective, you should treat sake akin to wine: roll your glass to admire the legs, sip (or, in this case, slur on the lower part of the palate) while exhaling through your nose so that you can enjoy the secondary aromatics (kaori). Then, proceed to casually enjoy with food and in the company of friends.

Is sake ever used in cocktails?

In recent years it has become trendy, both at Japanese establishments and at bars with only beer and wine licenses, to use sake in cocktails, while others have used shochu (or Korean soju) for cocktails. I prefer sake on its own, so I would typically not mix sake in cocktails.

Can sake be paired with other foods besides Japanese cuisine?

Absolutely, and I offer my services to any chef who would like to experiment with food and sake pairings as an alternative to food and wine pairings.

What are a few basic sake-and-food pairings, for those who would like to experiment at home?

Try a pork chop or grilled pork loin with a Yamahai-sake. These sakes are brewed longer with more active bacterial cultures, leading to a more acidic and dry beverage that goes very well with pork. For fish, try a Namazake. These are fresh, unpasteurized brews that have a slight lilt of sweetness but finish smoothly and dry, which I find make an excellent meld with fish on the palate.

Can you offer some tips for sake enjoyment and education?

I would truly recommend John's book as well as Beau Timken's book as some good starting points for people wetting their curiosity about sake. I would also encourage people to visit my blog for stories of my adventures in the sake world.  
Are there any good sake breweries in the Bay Area?

Who is your favorite rock star sake mentor????

Without a doubt it would be Masao Aisawa, the President of Take no Tsuyu Brewery in Tsuruoka, Yamagata-ken.

### **Upcoming Events @ Nombe**

What are the dates for Nombe's sake tasting evenings in July and August? Are they on set evenings every month (i.e. second or third Thursday of every month)?

July 22<sup>nd</sup> – Take no Tsuyu Shuzo Grand Tasting and Pairing

August 18<sup>th</sup> – Masumi Shuzo Grand Tasting and Summer Namazake Pairing