

Mariages Made in Heaven

Japanese *sake* and *shochu* can be enjoyed not only with Japanese food, but also with cuisine from various countries. Here, we introduce ways to pair sake and shochu with food.

Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection (720 ml) and confit of duck foie gras from Landes with country bread, both of which can be enjoyed at the two-star Michelin restaurant Beige Alain Ducasse Tokyo. Foie gras is known for its sweetness in France, and is commonly paired with a sweet wine. The smooth sweetness of Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection pairs extremely well with foie gras. The sweetness of the peaches (fresh, roasted and semi-dried) and the nutty flavor of the almond puree that are incorporated in the dish make this *mariage* all the more impressive. Annual production of Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection is limited to 1,500 bottles. It is served at Ducasse's restaurants in Tokyo, Paris, London and New York.

TADASHI AIZAWA

An Encounter between French Wine and Japanese Sake

Alain Ducasse oversees twenty-seven French restaurants—including three-star restaurants in Monaco, Paris and London—in eight countries around the world. In 2010 the world-famous chef unveiled the sake Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection to the world by joining forces with the Nakamura Brewery Company, a brewer in Kanazawa City in Ishikawa Prefecture with over 180 years of history.

“First, there was a request from the Nakamura Brewery Company to see if we could offer Nichiei, which they were already producing, at our restaurants. Nichiei is a very flavorful type of sake, but its sweetness was somewhat too pronounced for it to be served with French cuisine,” says Fabrice Renaud, director at Alain Ducasse Enterprise, Japan. “Mr. Ducasse made a counter-proposal to the Nakamura Brewery Company, asking if they could create an original Japanese sake that could be appreciated not just in Japan, but at his restaurants around the world.”

Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection was subsequently born after much discussion for around two years between Chief Sommelier Gérard Margeon, who knows Ducasse’s cuisine inside out, and the person in charge of development at the Nakamura Brewery Company. Mikharamai rice, the main ingredient used to make this sake is extremely rare and is grown with a reduced amount of pesticides and chemicals in Ishikawa Prefecture. This rice is fermented with the Nakamura Brewery Company’s proprietary yeast. The resultant creation was Japanese sake with a smooth sweetness and crisp acidity.

“Several of our guests tell us that it is not like any other Japanese sake they’ve tasted until now. With Nichiei Alain Ducasse Selection, one can even enjoy a wonderful *mariage* with sweet-flavored ingredients and sauces,” says Renaud. “To date, Japan is the only place outside of France where Mr. Ducasse has created an original type of alcoholic beverage. This is how much he loves and understands Japanese culture and cuisine.”

The Wabi of Japanese Sake

Dominique Bouchet, formerly owner chef of Dominique Bouchet and formerly chef at a number of famous restaurants including La Tour D’argent in Paris, unexpectedly tasted Japanese sake brewed by Fukumitsuya of Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture (founded in 1625), when he visited Japan in 2005. Having been moved by its flavor, Bouchet requested Fukumitsuya to create an original sake for him.

The person in charge of development at Fukumitsuya carefully hand-picked around ten types of sake—they had been aged for several years in over 100 storage tanks at the brewery—as candidates to match Bouchet’s French cuisine, which is characterized by light flavors that bring out the natural qualities of the ingredients

used. Bouchet selected three types from this group, creating three types of sake: Yuri, Fuku and Sachi. The sake can be tasted at Dominique Bouchet as well as at the adjacent Wa-Bi Salon and directly-managed stores of Fukumitsuya in Japan.

“Yuri has a flowery fragrance and is very compatible with appetizers or fish dishes. Fuku and Sachi are sake that are both extremely full-bodied and go well with meat dishes,” says Sachiko Toshioka, head of development at Fukumitsuya. “There are a lot of people who taste sake for the first time at Bouchet’s restaurants. They are all surprised by how compatible sake and French wine are.”

In July 2008, Fukumitsuya collaborated with Bouchet to launch Wa-bi. Wa-bi is a type of sake that was developed for the general public so that the sake can be enjoyed by more people. It has been available at major supermarkets in France and most Carrefour stores from December 2011.



Wa-Bi available for sale at all 225 Carrefour stores in France starting in December 2011.

Mariage with Japanese sake surprises the world

The French word *mariage*, meaning marriage, has entered the Japanese lexicon when expressing a pairing of wine and food, say of red wine and a meat dish. In recent years, along with the popularization of sake overseas, an unexpected *mariage* of sake and cuisines from various countries outside of Japan are consistently being suggested.

“Cuisine from Spain, Italy and Southern France in the Mediterranean pairs well with sake as it uses simple flavoring by bringing out the actual flavors of the ingredients and utilizes items like salt, olive oil and tomatoes to enhance flavors,” says Makiko Tejima of Saishokukenbi, a company that specializes in food-related services, such as marketing and event coordination. “Regarding tomatoes, their common thread with kelp *dashi* stock which is one of the basic *dashi* of Japanese cuisine is that they contain glutamic acid, which is an *umami* component, and this is one of the reasons why they are compatible with sake.”

Tejima has held numerous events in Japan and abroad on the *mariage* of sake and western cuisine with the cooperation of others, such as sake brewers and chefs who specialize in western cuisine.

Spanish food critics, chefs and sommeliers were apparently struck with awe by how compatible sake is with produce from Spain and Spanish cuisine, when they were invited to an event sponsored by the sake manufacturers’ cooperative from Ehime Prefecture that Tejima



Urakasumi, a *junmai daiginjo* sake produced by sake brewer Urakasumi Saura (see page 6) in Shiogama City, Miyagi Prefecture, and cheese. According to Tejima, Mimolette cheese is compatible with aged sake. Also, *junmai daiginjo* pairs well with risotto that contains Parmesan cheese, and *junmaishu* works well with pasta mixed with gorgonzola cheese.

produced in Barcelona in Catalonia, Spain, in October of last year.

One of the invited guests, who is the head sommelier at Ell Bulli, a three-star restaurant in Catalonia that was known to be the most difficult restaurant in the world to get a reservation, even said, “I did not think that sake went this well with cheese. If cheese can be enjoyed with sake, I think cheese manufacturers would also be extremely happy.” In addition, the invited guests commented on the *mariage* of sake (*junmai daiginjo*: top-quality sake with highly polished rice) and Iberian ham as being “unbelievable,” garnering acclaim from the locals.

Sake can be enjoyed with other foods besides Spanish cuisine. For example, take raw oysters that are eaten all over the world. The standard *mariage* is said to be raw oysters and Chablis, but the compatibility between raw oysters and sake is also outstanding. *Junmai daiginjo*, which has a subtle fragrance and a clean taste, goes especially well with raw oysters.

“Sake cleanses the fishy smell of oysters,” says Tejima. “Also, sake is able to bring out the milky *umami* in oysters.”



Kijoshu, produced by sake brewer Asabiraki in Morioka City, Iwate Prefecture, and ice cream. Kijoshu, which is brewed by using not only water but also sake, is a sweet type of sake. According to Tejima, pouring aged Kijoshu on ice cream creates a flavor similar to that of a rum-soaked raisin.

A Michelin-Starred Yakitori Restaurant

Yakitori is a dish of bite-sized pieces of various parts of chicken grilled on skewers and is enjoyed with either a sweet sauce or salt. It is popular in Japan for being compatible with beer or sake. There are numerous restaurants in the area surrounding Gotanda Station in Tokyo, and one of these is Yoshichou that has had a one-star Michelin title since 2009. Yoshichou is a small, second-floor restaurant with twenty-two seats.

“We opened in 2006, and gradually increased the number of customers by word of mouth. The number of Japanese and foreign customers then increased tremendously when we won Michelin recognition,” says owner Kenji Yoshimoto. “Everyone says our yakitori has a perfect flavor.”

Yoshichou uses a type of chicken called the Aomori Shamrock from Aomori Prefecture in the Tohoku region. Natural salt is used as a seasoning, and the chicken is grilled over charcoal to fully draw out the flavor of the chicken.

The store is laid out so that all the customers can be seen from where the yakitori is grilled. Yoshimoto says by watching the customers, the dishes are changed in a subtle way to suit each customer. For example, someone who is having one drink after another will start to want dishes with strong flavors, so the dishes are served with a little more salt than usual.

Yoshichou not only serves chicken, but is also known for sake, shochu and wine that Yoshimoto has personally selected to match the restaurant’s dishes. In particular, most of the approximately twenty types of sake that are always available at the restaurant are brands that cannot be found elsewhere. None of them get in the way of the solid flavors of yakitori and actually serve to bring out the delicious flavors of yakitori. If a customer



Drinks from left, Tomino Houzan shochu from Kagoshima Prefecture, Shiragiku sake from Kochi Prefecture, Sookuu sake from Kyoto Prefecture. Food from left, *negima* (chicken and green onion skewers), *tsukune* (skewered ground chicken balls), *sasami* (tenderloin; served only lightly grilled)

TADASHI AIZAWA

does not know what sake to drink, ask Yoshimoto and he will select the best sake for the customer.

“Foreign customers also select sake without hesitation. They probably think that there is no way sake would be incompatible with yakitori since it is part of Japanese culture,” says Yoshimoto. “At times, they say, ‘why not open a restaurant in my country?’”