

Sushi Wines



It finally feels like spring has sprung in the Nation's capital. Even the cherry blossoms agree. And their arrival has signaled something much more significant for me; it heralds the start of "sushi season."

Now I know that you can eat sushi any time of year – and trust me, I do – but somehow, with the cherry blossoms still clinging to the trees, the ama-ebi (sweet shrimp) tastes just a tad sweeter.

The only news that's better than the arrival of sushi season is the plethora of wines that you can enjoy with the assortment of fresh fish and vegetable dishes. There was a time in the not-to-distant past when Japanese beer and sake were considered the only acceptable adult beverages to enjoy with traditional servings of maki (rice rolls containing various combinations of fish, vegetables and seaweed) and nigiri (sliced pieces of fish served on a small pad of rice). But all of that has changed, thanks in part to open-minded sushi restaurateurs who have included thoughtful wine selections in their establishments.

Here are a few of my favorite wines to pair up with traditional and popular sushi dishes.

The most popular maki roll, by far and away, is the California Roll, featuring avocado, crab and cucumber, and it is the perfect foil for sparkling wines. I really like sparkling wines - particularly on the drier side – with California rolls. The **Non-vintage Bichot Cremant de Bourgogne** from Burgundy, France has super-fine, precise bubbles that deliver flavors of crisp apples and citrus notes while the bountiful acidity provides a palate-cleansing finish. The richness of the avocado acts as a nice counter-balance. **\$19**

If you like octopus, clam or sweet shrimp, then a crisp Sauvignon Blanc would be a good choice. I like the **2012 Matanzas Creek Sauvignon Blanc** from Sonoma County, California. The combination of fresh tropical fruits and zesty citrus offer an appealing contrast to the more grassy versions of sauvignon blanc. Hints of wet stone on the medium, bone-dry finish enhances the seafood character of the shellfish. **\$16**

Yellowtail has firm meat that requires a slightly more robust wine. The **2012 Forrest The Doctors' Riesling** from the Marlborough of New Zealand . This Riesling exhibits ripe apple and green melon fruit on both the nose and the palate. Additional notes of nectarine and mineral coat the tongue on the lush finish. The hint of residual sugar sets off the sweetness of the sushi rice nicely. **\$19**

I love salmon served nigiri style with a slight sear – called uburi – which melts the fat just a bit. So I like a wine that can stand up to the richness of the fish without masking it, like the **2012 Kim Crawford Unoaked Chardonnay** from Marlborough, New Zealand. I find that the oak treatment that most chardonnay's receive has a tendency to mask the delicate flavors of sushi. This bottling is produced "naked" – a colloquialism that denotes an absence of oak in both fermentation and aging. This crisp, fresh white offers flavors of green apples, peaches and citrus notes. Hints of lychee nuts add an unexpected richness on the clean finish. **\$12**

I think that both Tuna and Eel dishes pair exceptionally well with Pinot Noir wines. The **2011 Elk Cove Pinot Noir** from the Willamette Valley of Oregon is beautifully balanced with flavors red plum, black cherries and cinnamon on a frame of fine-yet-firm tannins that complement the rich meatiness of the tuna and stand up to the natural fat in the eel. A delicate note of umami lingers on the palate and won't get lost if you sparingly use soy sauce. **\$27**