

Sushi Wines



With the departure of cherry blossoms and the arrival of pollen and tourists, my thoughts turn to one of my favorite cuisines; sushi.

I know that you can eat sushi any time of year, but somehow, the warming springtime weather just seems to make the ama-ebi (sweet shrimp) taste just a tad sweeter and the spicy tuna rolls just a little bit zestier.

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when Japanese beer and sake were considered the only acceptable adult beverages to enjoy with traditional servings of maki rolls and nigiri. But all of that has changed, thanks in large part to Daisuke Utagawa, owner and creative director of Sushi Ko located in Chevy Chase, MD.

A native of Tokyo, Utagawa first came to Washington, DC with his father in 1969 where he attended school in Bethesda, Maryland. Utagawa returned to Japan in 1972 to finishing his education, and began an apprenticeship in 1980 where he learned the art of traditional Japanese culinary technique from a master chef. In 1983, Utagawa returned to DC and started working as a sushi chef at the original Sushi Ko – which he later purchased in 1988 - on Wisconsin Avenue in Northwest Washington, DC, across from Plain Old Pearson wine shop.

A few of the wine shop employees would occasionally hang out at the restaurant, trying different wines with assorted sushi dishes, exposing Daisuke (pronounce “dice kay”) to a variety of pairings. But when he sampled Burgundy wines with traditional sushi dishes, Utagawa knew he had found something special. A trip to France, and a meeting with ex-pat and grand dame of Burgundy, Becky Wasserman, confirmed his suspicions. Wasserman offered to host a wine dinner for local winemakers who were extremely skeptical about dining with a Japanese chef with unorthodox theories about pairing food and wine. But by the end of the night, Daisuke made converts out of everyone at the table.

Today, one can routinely find Burgundy wines on wine lists at many fine dining sushi restaurants. And when you do, you’ll have Daisuke Utagawa to thank for it.

I really like sparkling wines with sushi dishes, particularly Rosé. The **Non-vintage Louis Bouillot Crémant de Bourgogne "Perle d'Aurore" Brut Rosé** from Burgundy is a crémant made from 80% Pinot Noir and 20% Gamay Noir grapes and offers scents of raspberry, violet and toasted bread. Flavors of strawberry and cherry fruit feel creamy in the mouth but are beautifully balanced by crisp acidity. The bright little bubbles provide a palate-cleansing finish that goes nicely with the rich texture of avocado found in some sushi rolls. **\$15**

White Burgundy wines are made from Chardonnay grapes, like the ones found in the **2014 Bichot Saint Veran**. Parcels of grapes from selected vineyards are vinified without the use of any oak barrels. It exhibits aromas of lemon-lime fruit, hints of vanilla, and slatey minerality on the nose. Pretty flavors of green apples and citrus in the mouth and on the crisp finish make this an ideal pairing with sweet shrimp. **\$18**

Alex Gambal grew up in the Washington, DC area before deciding to pull up stakes and making his way to Burgundy to try his hand at making wine over a decade ago. His **2013 Alex Gambal Bourgogne Pinot Noir Cuvee les Deux Papis** is proof of his success. It features a nose of raspberry, strawberry and hints of smoked meats that float out of the glass on the delicate bouquet. The wine possesses a very elegant mouthfeel, featuring flavors of red berry, strawberry and cranberry. A hint of graphite adds just the right note on the stylish finish. **\$30**

Wines made from another local ex-pat, Blair Pethel, are proof that red Burgundy wines, made exclusively from Pinot Noir, are ideal for many traditional sushi dishes. For example, the substantial weight of the **2012 Domaine Dublere Beaune 1er Cru Les Blanches Fleurs** is a great choice for pairing with toro (tuna) and sake (salmon). It has a wonderful nose of strawberry, black plums and graphite. Concentrated flavors of black cherry, wild strawberry, spice and violets are in perfect balance with the firm tannins and abundant acidity. **\$50**