

Wines from Spain with Japanese Cuisine...?

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The country of Spain is a study in diversity: a colorful tapestry of cultures, peoples, and cuisines. Just as diverse, are the wines made there, from the geography, topography, microclimates, and soils from which the vines spring, to the people that craft them. The words "Spanish wine" seem almost inadequate to describe the vast array of tastes and textures and styles. It would be comparable to saying American wine. Would you compare a wine from the North Fork of Long Island with those from Napa Valley, Oregon, or Washington, except perhaps that they are made from the same grapes? So it is with Priorat, Rioja, Toro, or Bierzo, their unique qualities compounded by the use of indigenous varietals. Instead we must ask *which* Spanish wine, just as we might ask which type of Spanish cuisine. What all of the wines do have in common is a natural symbiosis with food, a synchronicity that is rarely witnessed in the old or new world. The wines are usually balanced and food-friendly, and therefore superb accompaniments for the meal. They serve as the perfect condiments for the food, enhancing the flavors, without overpowering.

When we discuss Japanese cuisine, we must first realize that we are embarking down a similar path. Which Japanese cuisine type, and which specific plates? Japan too is a large and diverse country, with literally dozens of cuisine types, and hundreds of food options. When asked to pair wines from Spain with the foods of Japan, it appears then to be a daunting task. Or is it...?

Spanish wines tend to be balanced and food-friendly. Japanese food generally leans toward subtlety and delicacy, even in the most robust of dishes, mirroring the demeanor of the majority of the populace. Obvious matches (or not?) could be expounded upon, such as a dry and elegant Fino Sherry with sashimi, particularly *hamachi* (yellowtail), or *kanpachi* (younger more sought after yellowtail), or *aji* (horse mackerel) or a refreshing, delightful Manzanilla Sherry with *uni* (sea urchin) sushi (yes, these are all amazing, if obvious, combinations.) A crisp bright Albarino from Rias Baixas would seem to be a no brainer with *tako* (octopus), or *ika* (squid) whether sushi style or grilled. An unoaked Verdejo from Rueda would match particularly well with *sake kama* (salmon collar).

But thus far this is merely a discussion of the Japanese food that we Americans have embraced, available at any decent Sushi joint. Just as we asked *which* Spanish wine, we must ask, *which* Japanese food are we discussing? The food of Japan is indeed as diverse as are the wines from Spain.

If you were to depart upon an exploration of Kaiseki, a series of many very small and delicate plates, one more exotic than the next, which could perhaps be likened to the Spanish concept of Tapas, with each course to be paired with an array of lovely wine options. Suggest a glass of Fino, followed by an Albarino, followed by a red of good balance of fruit and acid, such as a Bierzo (from the grape Mencia), followed by a big red from Toro (Tempranillo), or even a wine from Montsant (Garnacha, Carinena). This will provide many options for the many flavors and textures one might experience in such an amazing array of food. But it doesn't have to be that complicated...

Yakitori, the grilled, skewered food that is basically Japanese street food, and represents a staple to most from that country, can be robust and exciting, if simple and straightforward. The great country wines of Spain, from the grapes Garnacha, Monastrell, or Tempranillo, which is certainly one of the most food-friendly of all grapes, would be perfect with such favorites as the duck, the *tsukune*, (chicken meat balls), or the gizzards, all of which are usually dipped in the soy-based *tare* prior to grilling, making them even friendlier for consumption with bolder reds such as a wine from Costers del Segre. These restaurants, or street stands as they often are, also are usually quite adept at such great dishes as octopus salad, which would be amazing with a white wine from Alella, or *kushiage*, which can be fried anything on a skewer, like Tempura but with bread crumbs, and would taste great with a Txakoli.

How do you match to *nabemono*, the regional, hearty winter stew in which you basically boil your own meat, fish, and vegetables (a Japanese tradition not unlike fondue)? If it is *dote nabe*, or oyster stew, a balanced, easy drinking Navarre Rose would be perfect of course, but if you prefer *Sukiyaki* or *Shabu Shabu*, you will undoubtedly prefer a red from Jumilla. Then again, if you add scallions, grated radish, and red pepper to your own private dish of *ponzu-tare* (a citrus-flavored soy-based dip) the match will require lower alcohol, aromatics, and maybe even a touch of residual sugar, so you may need to seek out a white from Ribeira Sacra.

No day in Japan could pass without a stop at a noodle stand, but which type of *oden* would you be enjoying? Perhaps you prefer *soba* or *udon* noodles? Sprinkle in *shichimi*, spicy red pepper and a half dozen other spices, popular also at the *yakitori-ya*, or add some of the traditional hot mustard, and you will have to have a low alcohol alternative, perhaps a nice Godello. A trip to Kyoto would offer the visitor the ultimate *tofu* experience, but would we find a wine in Spain delicate enough not to overpower, yet rich enough to match the texture of the finest *tofu* you will ever taste? Cava is the answer, but one that is pink and Pinot Noir based.

The most amazing street food, prepared as you watch, and craved by one and all in Japan, is *takoyaki*, delicious octopus puffs, with dried bonito flakes waving from atop their mayo-like perch, crying out for a crisp, clean Fino Sherry.

Sure, there are ribs and barbeques and steaks, and you will need them when you are thirsting for one of the great wines of the Priorat, or a wine from the nearby Conca de Barbera, or even one of the new blockbusters from just up the Mediterranean coast in the Emporda-Costa Brava.

What about Ribera del Duero? It would be great with any of the meats, including the great Kobe beef, a very popular delicacy, but why not take advantage of the balance of fruit and acidity of these high altitude Tempranillos and match it with a classic Japanese dish, grilled *unagi* (eel)? A great red wine from Rioja might be the perfect match for the extremely popular pork dish *tonkatsu*, especially if served as *katsudon*, over rice with egg. A rich yet balanced Bierzo could be the ideal condiment for miso black cod.

The Japanese palate is indeed diverse, from the delicious custard-like *chawan mushi* to the Osaka favorite "anything you want to cook" pancakes, *okonomiyaki* (heard of *tepanyaki*?) to *yuba* (2000 year old health food) and the sauces and marinades and preparations only broaden the horizon. Pickling [everything] is a staple (*oshinko*), and bean pastes, *miso*, seaweed, *soy*, *shoyu*, tea, *yuzu*, *ponzu*, *wasabi*, *shichimi*, *sesame*, *gari*, and *daikon* adorn and thus alter the tastes of the staple proteins, and a multitude of types of fish [much of which most of us can barely imagine].

There are now 60 Denominaciones de Origen in Spain, and over 600 different indigenous varietals (of which 20 make up 80% of the production.) With the extensive variety of wines, and their natural symbiosis to food, Spain may indeed be the only wine producing country boasting enough different styles of wine to actually match up to the delicacy, elegance, and diversity of Japanese cuisine.