

## CONVERSATION WITH SAKE SOMMELIER

## THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE SAKE BOX

*Having been in the restaurant industry for 25 years, and the beverage field for 16 years, Paul Tanguay is a young veteran in the food and wine business, and especially when it comes to sake, he is considered the number one authority in the American market. Winning first place in the North Eastern Sake Tasting Competition and landing on the top ten in the Kikizake Competition in Japan, there is no doubt he knows his stuff. Teaming up with a buddy of his last year, he is now a co-owner of a beverage consulting firm where they handle everything from trade shows, to beverage lists, to conferences, to developing new restaurants, and travels all over the country teaching people about sake. He believes sake still has a long way to go in America by coming out of its box.*

**How did you get into sake?**

I was a wine geek, and basically sake kind of fell on my lap, but I started drinking it, and I really fell in love with the mystique, and the beverage itself. As a sommelier, I thought this was going to be my little niche. So I really focused on learning about sake about 9 years ago. I even financed my own trips to Japan, and I think it was a smart move on my part.

**You teach a lot of people in the wine world about sake. What are the challenges?**

The biggest difference between sake and wine is that it doesn't have the acidity that wine has. Even though you can find sakes that are high in acidity, it will never be as much as wine, so some wine lovers think it's missing something. That's why I tell everyone to taste the sake for sake, and wine for wine because they are completely different beverages.

**How do you keep up with all the sakes out there?**

I'm just really geeky and love to learn. It's really just about learning my stuff. I have also been fortunate enough for the past six years to be invited as a judge for the US National Sake Appraisal where I get to try over 300 different types of sake, every year. And I have

taken notes religiously on the sakes I've judged.

**What do you think are some of the obstacles for sake in America?**

Because of the high awareness of sake, when people are asked to try it, they are reluctant to because they have had sake before. Just not very good ones. I think most of us that fall in love with sake is when we've experienced the ginjo and daiginjo sakes which opens up a whole new world of sake as opposed to the *futsushu* or regular hot sakes they serve in mediocre restaurants. The other challenge is taking sake outside the box. For example if you walk into a Japanese restaurant and the chef prepares a great duck dish with French technique, you would automatically assume you are going to have sake with it because it's a Japanese restaurant. You take people outside that Japanese restaurant and put them in a French restaurant with the same exact duck and they would not even think of having sake, even though sake might be the better pairing, so sake is kind of caught in this experiential box.

I equate sake now to where wine was right after prohibition in the 30s. Back then no one said, hey Let's go to Coney Island and take a bottle of wine with us. Their wine experience was probably limited to Italian or French restaurants back then, and drinking wine at home was kind of an oddity, yet the American public has changed towards wine everywhere. Now wine is a part of our culture. Sake has to come out of the Japanese or Asian box too for that to happen. I think sake even needs a new name. People have such high awareness for sake, but are not very well informed. Especially when you are talking about ginjo and daiginjo that's only been around for the last 30-40 years.

**So you feel people should be more experiential with sake?**

Yes. I think sake can be paired with any types of food. Some people think sake just goes with Japanese or



Mr. Tanguay unwinds at the new taqueria, Mercadito Cantina, that he co-owns. He also serves double duty as a beverage consultant at his company, Tippling Bros.

Asian food, but that's not the case. I recently did a Pizza and sake event in Sacramento. People were so surprised to find out that sake and cheese is actually a great match.

**How is sake being used in your current place?**

Well, Mercadito Cantina is a Taqueria, so we only serve tacos, and with the kind of liquor license we have, we cannot serve spirits and we had to be a little creative. Here, our focus is not to do sake, but to make things that taste like tequila, so we took sake, infused it, and made something called tric-quila. It has actually been written up in a few magazines. We also use wine, port, sherry, beer, vermouth, basically anything that is possible with the kind of license we have. It's a lot of work, but it's also a lot of fun to come up with original drinks.

**Tippling Bros.**

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