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## SushiSamba's Paul Tanguay: Sake's rising popularity offers myriad opportunities on beverage menus

Stephen Beaumont

A trained sommelier, Paul Tanguay began developing his passion for sake about seven years ago when he joined SushiSamba, a Japanese, Brazilian and Peruvian fusion concept that has locations in Chicago, Miami, New York, and Tel Aviv, Israel. Since then, he has toured innumerable kura, or sake breweries, served as a judge at tasting events in the United States and Japan, and started work on a book about sake that he has described as "user-friendly and fun."

People have been saying for years that sake is "the next big thing" Is it really?

It's hard for me to say because I work at SushiSamba, where our Japanese customers arrive already thinking about sake, but I think that interest among the general public is there. Every sake importer has been seeing growth of 15 to 20 percent every year for the past decade or so.

How does American sake compare to Japanese sake?

There really is not a lot of good American sake I think it mainly has to do with the rice.

You obviously need to be concerned with sake because of the restaurants you represent, but should beverage directors at non Japanese restaurants worry about sake?

The average place, probably not. But anyone who is interested in maintaining a strong beverage program should be looking at sake. If you sell great wines, why not sell great sake?

How do you manage staff education?

I do weekly staff education on all beverages, but especially sake. [My staff] are my soldiers, since there's no way I can be everywhere at once.

Some sake purists look with disdain at "saketinis" and other sake-based cocktails. How do you feel about them?

If a cocktail brings sake awareness to people, then I don't see anything wrong with it, so long as people don't go using expensive sakes for them. I used to do sake cocktails, and still will on special occasions, but on my list I've gone to shochu-based cocktails exclusively.

Why shochu, a clear Japanese distillate?

Shochu is a great vodka alternative. A lot of it is still pot-distilled, so you get a bit more flavor and roughness than you do with vodka, plus it's a lower proof [about 25 percent alcohol on average], so a couple of cocktails won't hit you over the head the way vodka cocktails will.

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