

# All About Sake

**W**ant to learn how sake isn't really wine but more resembles beer?  
Go to sake school.

Want to learn that sake is often served chilled and not always warm as you often see in sushi bars?

Toshio Ueno is vice president, executive instructor and master sake sommelier of the Los Angeles-based education and training center specializing in teaching restaurateurs, alcohol distributors and enthusiasts all about sake and other Japanese liquors.

“The world of sake is a joyful exploration into



*Sake School of America, a Los Angeles-based education and training center specializing in teaching restaurateurs, alcohol distributors and enthusiasts everything there is to know about sake.*

Sake School of America will educate you.

You know sake and sushi go together, but how about with oysters, various cheeses, salad, even chocolate?

Sake School of America instructs people on the finer points of this most Japanese of alcoholic beverages – and here's a bonus tidbit: *sake* simply means “alcoholic beverage.” Its legal name is *seishu*.

Japanese culture, cuisine and the brewing art,” he says, “and it is our mission to spread this wonder of Japan to the people of the world.”

Actually, the school was borne out of sushi and sound business practices. Noritoshi Kanai, the late chairman of Mutual Trading Company, a Japanese food and drink importer and distributor credited with introducing sushi bars in the U.S., noticed that as sushi proliferated in the U.S., the increasingly non-Japanese people pre-

## Education

paring the raw fish didn't know how to properly do it. And he feared that diners would suffer illness.

"Noritoshi wanted to start educating sushi chefs in the safe handling of seafood so people wouldn't get sick," Ueno says in an interview at the Mutual Trading conference room in L.A.'s Little Tokyo. "So he started a sushi school. He wanted to promote Japanese food culture, yet it was also for food safety and to elevate quality assurance at Japanese restaurants."

Ueno started working at MTC in 2002 as a sales rep and he clearly saw how areas without large Japanese populations didn't have distributors that understood sake. Kanai also noticed.

"We decided to start the school to educate, especially distributor reps much like us," Ueno says. "I couldn't go around to all the restaurant and retail shop accounts on my own, so we were given the task of educating sales reps and servers who can learn themselves and then relay the same information to others."

The sake school opened in 2010. Since Ueno's parents were grape farmers and he had already worked with wine, he was a logical choice to head the school. But first, he had to learn all about it, too. Fortunately, there are two major schools in the world: the Sake Service Institute in Japan and the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) in London. When Ueno completed his training, he became the first in the world to hold master of sake, master sake sommelier and WSET sake educator designations.

The school utilizes SSI and WSET's textbooks and offers classes in Los Angeles, Secaucus, N.J., Orlando, Fla., and Charlotte, N.C. All classes include lectures and exams. The costs range from \$265 for a one-day WSET Level 1 class to \$1,050 for a two-day SSI Sake Sommelier class.

Students learn the history, technique, process, production, regulation and language of sake (it's mostly Chinese) without ever visiting a brewery (they watch a video).

An interesting story: Sake originally was always a cloudy beverage, but that changed by accident in the 1600s when a very angry and unhappy worker attempted to sabotage a sake fermentation vat by adding ashes.

Instead, it clarified the liquid into the sake that we know of today. As a result, Ueno says, the

family became so rich that they were able to start its own bank, Sanwa, one of the financial giants in Japan.

Most people assume sake is rice wine, but Ueno says it more closely resembles beer because of the fermentation process. Whereas grapes have natural sugar that ferments into alcohol, rice is a starch that has to be converted into sugar using a fungus called *koji* (in Latin, *aspergillus oryzae*) that produces an enzyme that will break the starch into sugar before it can be fermented. Ueno calls this "multiple fermentation." Beer uses malt instead of *koji* to break down the starch in barley, but the process is similar.

Many popular types of sake now in U.S. have fruity and flowery aromas and tastes, the results of new yeast and rice strains. Ueno says heating the sake will affect that. "So drink it chilled," he adds. But there are traditional sake with earthy flavor character with high Umami that are enjoyed warmed, since warming sake will open up the flavor and Umami.

Sake contains succinic acid so it goes well with fish that also have succinic acid: oysters, lobster, crab and shrimp. And since it contains lactic acid, it mixes well with bleu, manchego, Gruyere, Havarti and Romano cheeses. Ueno recommends warm sake with seafood soups such as clam chowder.

Finally, sake doesn't have sulfites as wine does, so it's an alcoholic alternative for people who are allergic to sulfites. It's intel like that from Ueno and Sake School of America that will leave you drunk with knowledge.

"One would think that most class enrollees are fans of Japanese food," Ueno says. "However, in reality many are fans of wine who want to further their studies of fermented liquors." — **By Lee Barnathan, California Business Journal**

**Copyright © 2018 California Business Journal. All Rights Reserved.**

*Sake School of America*

*431 Crocker St.*

*Los Angeles, CA 90013-2114*

*TEL: (213)-830-9557*

*Web: [www.sakeschoolofamerica.com](http://www.sakeschoolofamerica.com)*

*e-mail: [info@sakeschoolofamerica.com](mailto:info@sakeschoolofamerica.com)*