

Nice *Rice*

RENOWNED JAPANESE CHEF KAZ OKUCHI REFLECTS ON 20 YEARS OF SUCCESS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by Kelly Magyarics, DWS



Chef Kaz Okuchi owns KAZ Sushi Bistro in Washington, D.C.

Okuchi recommends pairing saké with all types of cuisine.



When Kaz Okuchi opened his Washington, D.C. restaurant 20 years ago, he could have never pictured what the current culinary landscape would look like. The city's dining scene today, he says, "is more innovative and exciting, and we have incredible . . . industry professionals pushing the envelope."

Born and raised in Nagoya, Japan, Okuchi studied fine art in Oklahoma before returning to his home country to attend the Tsuji Culinary Institute in Osaka. Once he completed his formal training in sushi and fugu preparation, he came back to the United States to work at Sushi-Ko, D.C.'s oldest sushi bar. In 1999, he opened KAZ Sushi Bistro, where he executes what he calls "freestyle Japanese cuisine" to showcase fresh and unusual seafood sourced directly from Japan.

Back then, there wasn't much saké to be found in the city; what little you could find was usually best enjoyed hot to mask the oxidation it underwent during shipment. As time passed, quality saké became more readily available, yet misconceptions about the rice-based beverage persisted. Okuchi has been on a mission, especially as of late, to change the way his guests view it.

The chef believes that rice can reflect terroir as much as grapes do, but the differences are subtle enough on the nose and palate to ensure that personal preferences, more than hard and fast rules, can play a role in saké pairings. The key, he says, is to think outside the bento box. "Many people may think saké is good only with Japanese food, but [it] can match with so many other cuisines, like Spanish tapas or French dishes," he points out. "Full-bodied sakés go well with mildly spicy foods or deep-fried ones."

One of his favorites is Daishichi Kimoto Honjozo, a versatile beverage that can be enjoyed warm, cold, or at room temperature. He describes it as "soft yet full-flavored, dry, and very food friendly." Though it's becoming increasingly common to list the bottling date on the label, most sakés should be consumed within a year. All the better to crack open a bottle right now to sip next to KAZ's signature dishes: sea bass Napoleon, smoked ankimo (monkfish liver) with tosazu gelée, and bird's nest, which tops black squid with sea urchin, shiso, and a quail egg.

Okuchi is still having fun after all these years. "I am happy to see and be a part of so much love and attention given to food these days," he says—especially when it's paired with saké. ■■

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KAZ Sushi Bistro's signature sea bass Napoleon.