



Yuchi Hashiba, 6th generation owner of Izumibashi brewery.



Izumibashi Tonbo Sparkling was paired with an array of seafood-based appetisers. (Right) The Junmai Yamahai Shinriki, paired with simmered duck with soy sauce and ginger. — Photos: RAYMOND OOI/The Star



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# Sake for food's sake

Kampachi once again proves that sake and Japanese food go perfectly together.

JAPANESE sake was made to go with food. So when the food is good, then it stands to reason that the sake needs to be good too.

Fortunately, at Kampachi, they take their food AND their sake seriously as well. The Kampai! Sake Dinner series is a regular event held by the Japanese restaurant chain to not only showcase their food and their range of premium sakes, but also to highlight just how well sake and food go together.

The latest dinner in the series was held at the Kampachi outlet at Plaza 33, Petaling Jaya, and hosted by Yuchi Hashiba, the master brewer and 6th generation owner of Izumibashi brewery, who paired his unique sakes with a special Autumn menu by Kampachi's chef Yusuke Ishigami.

Founded in 1857, Izumibashi Brewery is located in the Kanagawa prefecture. The brewery not only specialises in producing high-quality sakes during the winter season, but in the summer, also cultivates its own rice through sustainable and organic farming.

"We do everything ourselves, from the growing of the rice, to the bottling of the sake," said Yuchi.

According to him, the red dragonfly that is the brewery's logo symbolises their commitment towards sustainable farming.

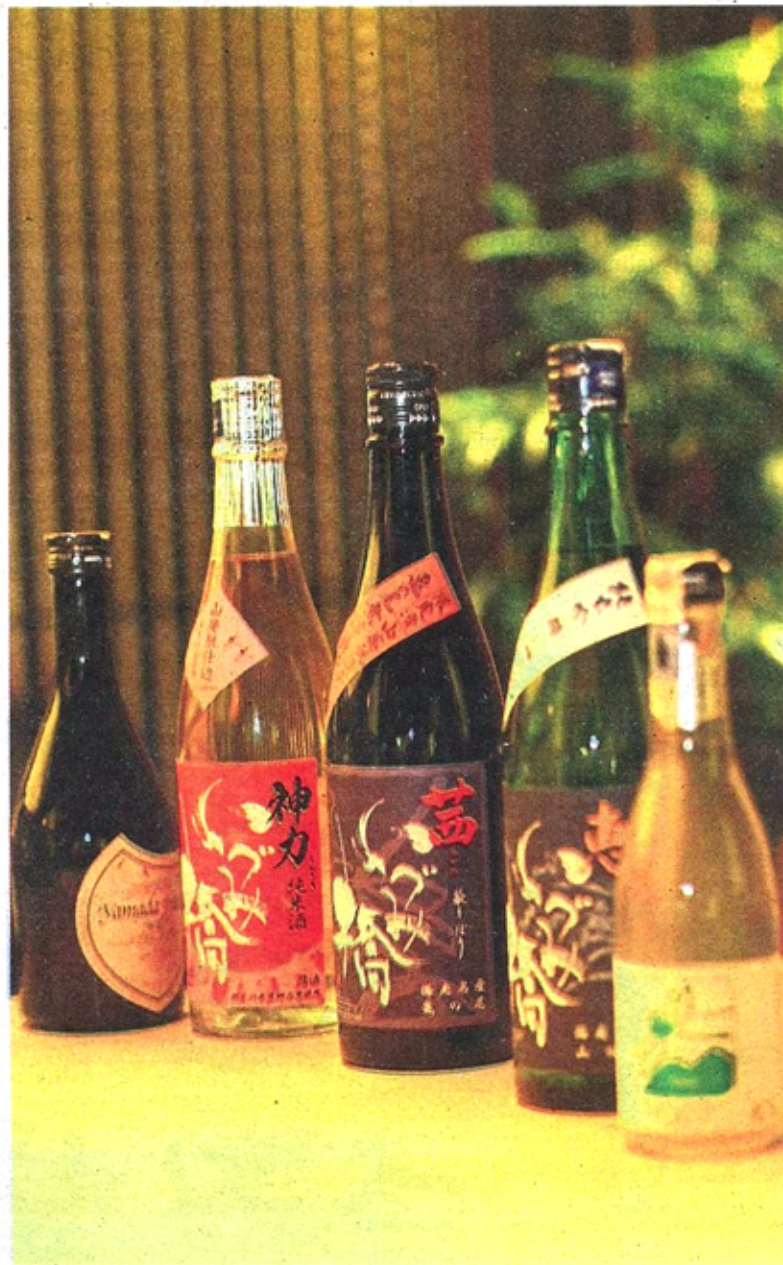
"If we use chemicals in the farming, we will be killing the dragonflies in our fields," he explained.

But before beginning the dinner, Yuchi had a special treat for us – a new, unaged *shinshu* (new sake) that was just made a week before his trip to Malaysia.

Regular sake is usually aged for at least six months before it is bottled, but breweries tend to release a limited amount of *shinshu* so that sake lovers can have a taste of what's to come in the actual bottlings.

"The first sake is very important because it determines what is to come for the rest of the year," said Yuchi.

For the dinner proper, five sakes from Izumibashi were paired with a six-course *kaiseki* (traditional



The range of sakes featured at the Kampai! dinner (from left): Yamada Juro, Junmai Yamahai Shinriki, Junmai Ginjo Megumi Blue Label, Junmai Akane, Kamenoo Yamahai, and Tonbo Sparkling.

multi-course Japanese dinner) menu. First up, was the Izumibashi Tonbo Sparkling, a sparkling cloudy sake that undergoes a secondary fermentation within the bottle, a process that is similar to that of Champagne.

It was paired with an array of appetisers comprising sake lees, cream cheese, and salmon rilletes; cucumber and seared scallop dip with white miso; and sake lees boiled potato tossed with fermented squid.

The Tonbo Sparkling was a refreshing and lively tippie, and the bubbles from the sake carry a fragrant rice aroma that really gets your taste buds tingling. I'd imagine that a sake like this would pair well with any sort of food, but it goes exceptionally well with the seafood-based appetisers, especially the more refreshing notes of the cucumber and seared scallop.

Next, was the *suimono*, or soup dish – a turnip consommé and prawn dumpling, paired with Izumibashi Junmai Ginjo Megumi Blue Label.

"The Blue Label was made especially to go with food," said Yuchi, adding that the sake is made from the most superior rice for sake – the Yamadanishiki rice strain.

The sake itself is clean and bright, with a very dry finish that somehow makes you want more. Together with the soup, the dryness of the sake made the savouriness of the prawn and turnip sweeter somehow.

The next sake, however, was very different from the Blue Label. The Izumibashi Junmai Akane Kamenoo Yamahai, or just 'Akane', is brewed using one of the oldest rice strains in Japan, Kamenoo-O, which gives this sake a very distinctive characteristic.

"This is a sweet but also very creamy sake. We grow our own Kamenoo-O rice, but it is very hard to grow – we can't grow it on a

large scale," said Juichi.

The sake was paired with a red snapper carpaccio served with vinegared jelly, and the sweetness of the sake complemented the raw fish perfectly, giving it a creamier texture and more tantalisingly sweet aftertaste.

After that, it was on to the *nimono* (cooked foods) course – simmered duck with soy sauce and ginger. For this dish, we got perhaps my favourite sake of the night – Izumibashi Junmai Yamahai Shinriki.

"Yamahai" refers to a labour-intensive sake-making process that is meant to produce richer, and more pronounced *umami* (savoury) flavours. The result is a robust, almost masculine sake with a streak of acidity that makes for a pleasantly rich umami palate that is slightly sharp on the tongue but with a drier finish.

For me, the complexity of this sake (as well as the higher acidity) helped to cut through the fat of the duck meat, giving a great contrast of sweet and savoury flavours.

After following the duck with a rice and salmon dish, dessert was served. We were poured the Yamada Juro plum liqueur, a sake-based liqueur infused with Japanese ume plums, and it was paired with a simple air-flown Japanese apple.

"Just an apple?", you say? Well, this was an apple that was already deliciously sweet on its own, but when paired with the Yamada Juro, you got a combination of fruity nectar-sweetness with a savoury plum sourness that made sure the meal ended on a sweetly subtle note.

It also drove home the fact that while sake complements food, when the pairing is done well, there is a subtle and elegant balance that ensures you won't be forgetting either the food, or the drink in a hurry.