

EASTERN INFLUENCE

Japanese whisky-based cocktails are increasingly part of the mainstream mix • BY SALLY KRAL

Although Japan has a rich history of whisky production that dates back over a century, Japanese whisky's popularity in the U.S. is a much more recent phenomenon. "Japan is historically one of the five major whisky-producing regions in the world, but until a few years ago it was still relatively unknown to most people in the U.S.," notes Jonathan Armstrong, West Coast brand ambassador for House of Suntory. "Thankfully, people today are much more interested in trying new, unusual, and high-quality ingredients and this has included Japanese whiskies."

Cody Nason, service and beverage director at Yūgen in Chicago, says that as recently as five years ago, one would be hard-pressed to find more than two or three Japanese whiskies on a backbar, if any. "Now you're seeing entire bars build their programs around them," he says, adding that these whiskies have usually been offered for sipping, but it's becoming much more common to see them in cocktails. "With time comes more exploration, which gives bartenders the knowledge and ability to really bring out the best in an ingredient."

Indeed, as exposure to a product increases, innovation is sure to grow, notes Julius White, general manager and beverage director at Gaijin in Chicago. "As bars diversify their selection to expose their guests to a wider range of flavors and products, Japanese whisky's growth in the market makes it only natural that more bartenders would start to incorporate these products into their next great cocktail," he says.

And once a spirit has earned proper recognition from the bartending community, consumer appreciation quickly follows. "I've been lucky to be surrounded by Japanese whisky for a few years now, and I can definitely see that some guests are finally catching on to it," Nason says. "I've started hearing a lot more people confidently ask for a

Yamazaki or Suntory whisky." Chelsea Napper, Yūgen's bar director, notes her own role in this change in guests. "I'm on a quest to make sure a much larger portion of our customers are requesting Japanese whisky," she says. "I want guests to be more knowledgeable, and that only comes with my continued education in the subject. Japan is producing some of the best whisky in the world and I want people to know that."

Classics And Highballs

Within each style or variety of whisk(e)y there's a range of flavor profiles and production methods to be found, and Japanese whisky is no different. "Possibly my favorite aspect of working with Japanese whiskies is the versatility that exists in the category," White says. "You find products like Mars Iwai Tradition, with deep smoke and pear notes that can lend themselves to stirred, spirit-forward cocktails. Then in the same category, a product like Akashi White Oak, with



Japanese whisky's popularity in the U.S. has recently been booming. The Japanese Sour (left) from New York City venues NR and ROKC has a base of Nikka Coffey Grain whisky, while the Suiseimushi (above) from the Big Apple's Hall and its speakeasy, Odo, features Mars Iwai Tradition.



whisky-based classics when working with Japanese whisky. "I love Mars Iwai for a Japanese Old Fashioned—this whisky is heavy on the malt, which gives the Old Fashioned vanilla and caramel undertones," Yūgen's Napper says. "For a Whisky Sour, maybe the Yamakazi 12-year-old—yes, it's expensive and you're thinking you don't want to put this into a tin and shake it, but the whisky's beautiful caramel and citrus notes lend themselves perfectly."

its delicate nose and dry finish, can easily be used to create lighter-bodied favorites such as a riff on a Whiskey Sour."

The range of whisky brands coming out of Japan offers a lot for bartenders to wax poetic about. "Their uniqueness lies in the elegance of their fruit profiles, the specificity of their oak usage—mizunara oak especially—and the flavors that are thereby imparted, and the creamy texture present in most expressions," says Jordan David Smith, head bartender and spirits director at the New York City restaurant Hall, as well as its speakeasy, Odo. "Similar to working with Scotch, there are mellow, honeyed expressions, there are more peated expressions, there are expressions redolent with Sherry notes, and so on."

Though Japanese whisky has a lot in common with Scotch, it can be used in place of just about any style of whisk(e)y in a cocktail. In fact, many bartenders look to American

At Gadabout in Chicago, beverage director Josh Martinez's Whisky Daisy (\$15) comprises Yamazaki 12-year-old, Yellow Chartreuse liqueur, house-made grenadine, simple syrup, lemon juice, and club soda. "Japanese whisky, much like Scotch, is often made with 100% malted barley, and so while it's a good rule of thumb that Scotch cocktails will work for Japanese whisky, I like to feature it in an American classic that's usually made with Bourbon, like the Whiskey Daisy," Martinez says. "The Daisy is a type of sour with a liqueur added to it, typically Triple Sec. But early recipes included Yellow Chartreuse so that's what I go with."

At New York City restaurants NR and ROKC, owner and beverage director Shigefumi Kabashima offers a Japanese spin on several American whiskey classics using Nikka Coffey Grain whisky: The Boulevardier (\$13) features the whisky with dehydrated burdock-infused Cocchi Dopo



Japanese whiskies are increasingly being mixed into cocktails like the Kung Fu Pandan (pictured) from San Francisco's Pacific Cocktail Haven. The drink mixes Suntory Toki with Enter Sake Sookuu sake, house-made salted pandan syrup, and lemon juice.

PHOTO BY (TOP) JORDAN DAVID SMITH

Teatro Vermouth amaro, Dolin Blanc vermouth, and Bittermens Xocolatl Mole bitters; the Japanese Old Fashioned (\$13) includes Japanese black honey and house-made aromatic bitters; and the Japanese Sour (\$13) blends the whisky with Japanese black honey, yuzu and lemon juices, and egg white. “Our Coffey range has been well received in the U.S., particularly for cocktail-making,” notes Naoki Tomoyoshi, Nikka’s international business development representative. “The whisky is distilled in a coffey still, creating a mellow mouthfeel and rich body that makes it a perfect canvas for cocktails.”

In 2016, Suntory launched its Toki whisky, a blended expression crafted specifically for cocktails. “Before we introduced Toki, Japanese whiskies were primarily enjoyed neat or on the rocks, but people are becoming more and more likely to try Japanese whisky for the first time in a classic cocktail or a Highball,” Suntory’s Armstrong says. “There’s also been a shift away from the focus on traditional ‘boozy, brown, stirred’ drinks, as a lot of cocktail bars and bartenders have become more comfortable



The Boulevardier cocktail (pictured) from New York City restaurants NR and ROKC blends Nikka Coffey Grain whisky with amaro, vermouth, and bitters.

exploring citrusy and refreshing flavor profiles for whisky drinks and taking advantage of seasonal ingredients.” At Sushi Garage in Miami, the Toki Can (\$9) is one such refreshing drink featuring Toki, Chambord raspberry liqueur, simple syrup, cranberry juice, and fresh muddled blackberries and mint.

“Due to its light body, with subtle stone fruit and vanilla notes, Suntory Toki is the bottle I reach for most often,” Gaijin’s White says. “It gives me so much flexibility as a base to create from.” He adds that Gaijin’s top-selling cocktail is the Toki Highball (\$10), a mix of Suntory Toki and high-pressure club soda that comes from the Suntory Highball machine, which sits as a centerpiece at the bar. The Seattle bar Rob Roy also offers a Toki Highball, though with a slight twist: In addition to the whisky and club soda, the bar’s version includes a few dashes of its “super juice,” a blend of equal parts Angostura and Peychaud’s bitters, absinthe (brand varies), and Luxardo Maraschino liqueur. The drink is currently being offered as a cocktail kit of 4-6 servings for \$62 on Rob Roy’s takeout menu.

Creative Originals

While the Japanese Whisky Highball has only grown in popularity in recent years, Japanese whisky is also becoming the star in more complex and creative cocktails, notes Yügen’s Napper. “It’s exciting to have an entire new realm of spirits to explore for cocktail creation,” she says. Her A5 Wagyu (\$17) features A5 wagyu beef fat-washed Mars Iwai 45 whisky, Apologue Celery Root herbal liqueur, house-made mitsuba tomato water, house-made shishito pepper syrup, and The Japanese Bitters Umami bitters. “I love being able to give our bar director Chelsea three or so ingredients of any kind and know that she can make a beautiful cocktail with a Japanese whisky base—I mean, beef fat, tomato, and herbs are not necessarily the easiest things to use to make a delicious cocktail, but with the sweet and savory smokiness of the whisky, it works perfectly in her A5 Wagyu cocktail,” Nason says.

Japanese whiskies are a natural fit with other Japanese and Asian ingredients. At Pacific Cocktail Haven in San Francisco, owner Kevin Diedrich’s Kung Fu Pandan (\$14 on regular menu; \$36 for large format to-go option with three servings) comprises Suntory Toki, Enter Sake Sookuu sake, house-made salted pandan syrup, and lemon juice. At Gaijin, White’s 1919 cocktail (\$16) mixes Akashi White Oak whisky, Kamoizumi Red Maple 2-year-old Nama-zume sake, house-made ginger and Okinawa Kukoto brown sugar syrup, and Angostura bitters.

“I love trading out rum for Japanese whiskies in my tiki cocktails,” Napper says. “Some of those intense caramel and molasses notes in rum we can totally find in some Japanese whiskies.” Her Persimmon cocktail (\$17) is one such tiki-inspired concoction, blending Mars Iwai 45, Apologue Persimmon liqueur, house-made orgeat syrup, Don Ciccio & Figli Ambrosia liqueur, Togo-Su Persimmon vinegar, and Owl & Whale Persimmon bitters.

Similarly tiki-esque, Smith’s Suiseimushi (\$14) at both Hall and Odo comprises Mars Iwai Tradition, Lustao Fino Sherry, Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao, Small Hand Foods Orgeat syrup, and lemon and pineapple juices. “I like working with softer, fruitier, and lighter expressions of Japanese whisky and I’ll typically emphasize those elements accord-

ingly, especially tropical fruit notes like pineapple and floral notes like honeysuckle,” Smith notes. “Suntory’s Hibiki Harmony is the one I’ve used the most; I find it has a great balance of minerality, citrus notes, and a light touch of oak.” His Kai-sen Yama-sen (\$14) features this whisky along with green tea-infused Zuisen Seiryu awamori—a rice-based spirit—lime juice, and honey syrup. “The sheer number of bars—not to mention the fact that they run the stylistic, atmospheric, and



As Japanese whisky cements itself in the U.S. bar scene, bartenders are featuring their favorites. The Toki Highball (top left) from Gaijin in Chicago and the Toki Can (above) from Miami’s Sushi Garage both feature Suntory Toki. The A5 Wagyu (left) from Chicago’s Yügen uses Mars Iwai 45.

Japanese Whisky-based Cocktail Recipes

JAPANESE SOUR By Shigefumi Kabashima

Ingredients:
1½ ounces Nikka Coffey Grain whisky;
½ ounce Japanese black honey;
½ ounce yuzu juice;
½ ounce lemon juice;
½ ounce egg white;
Lemon peel.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine whisky, honey, juices, and egg white. Shake and strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with a lemon peel.

KUNG FU PANDAN By Kevin Dietrich

Ingredients:
1½ ounces Suntory Toki whisky;
¾ ounce Enter Sake Sookuu sake;
¾ ounce salted pandan syrup¹;
¾ ounce lemon juice;
Pandan leaf;
Ground dried candy cap mushroom.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine whisky, sake, cordial, and juice. Shake and double strain into a Nick and Nora glass. Garnish with a pandan leaf and candy cap powder.

SUISEIMUSHI By Jordan David Smith

Ingredients:
1¾ ounces Mars Iwai Tradition whisky;
½ ounce Lustau Fino Sherry;
½ ounce Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao;
½ ounce Small Hand Foods Orgeat syrup;
1 ounce lemon juice;
½ ounce pineapple juice;
Dehydrated orange wheel;
Dehydrated pineapple wedge.

Recipe:
In an ice-filled cocktail shaker, combine whisky, Sherry, Curaçao, syrup, and juices. Shake well and strain into a Collins glass filled with crushed ice. Garnish with a dehydrated orange wheel and a dehydrated pineapple wedge.

¹ Heat 1 cup superfine sugar and 1 cup water until sugar dissolves. Roughly cut 5 fresh pandan leaves to fit into the pot. Take off heat and let steep for 30 minutes. Strain out pandan leaves, then add 1 tablespoon kosher salt.

PHOTO BY ZENITH RICHARDS

PHOTO (BOTTOM LEFT) MADISON OLSZEWSKI