

'Sake Samurai' spreads the 'nihonshu' word

Exports of sake have increased steadily for over 10 years and the sake boom combined with the growing popularity of Japanese food in the U.S. has showed no signs of slowing down.

In celebration of Nihonshu-no Hi (Sake Day) on Oct. 1, The Japan Times interviewed Timothy Sullivan, founder of UrbanSake.com, a Web site providing a broad range of English information on sake, and one of just 17 "Sake Samurai" in the world.

Q: Please give us a brief profile of yourself. How did you get into sake and what is the charm of sake for you?

In 2005, I sampled premium sake for the first time at a Japanese Restaurant in New York City and I couldn't believe what I was tasting. The complex, nuanced and delicious flavors simply amazed me. I was hooked, and immediately began researching how water and rice come together to make "nihonshu," known in the U.S. simply as sake. I discovered sake through sake-food pairing. I love the wonderful taste of sake as well as the great flexibility the drink offers. You can drink sake in so many ways — it's wonderful.

I started UrbanSake.com first as a blog to help myself keep track of the sake I was tasting at the many sake events New York has to offer and as a repository for everything I was learning. What began as a labor of love grew over the next few years to become a larger online resource for sake information and education in the U.S.

In October 2007, I was invited to Kyoto by the Japan Sake Brewers Association Junior Council to be named a "Sake Samurai." Receiving the title was a tremendous honor and a life-changing event for me. As part of the tenets of becoming a Sake Samurai, I vowed to "spread the word about Japanese sake around the world with pride and passion." In that spirit, I have become a sake educator, writer and speaker, doing my best to share my passion, respect and enthusiasm for sake with the world.

Q: Do you feel that sake is becoming more popular in the U.S.?

Definitely. I teach sake classes in New York and I have seen a strong interest from students wishing to learn the basics. There has also been a surge of interest in Jap-

anese food in the U.S. and I think sake goes hand in hand with that trend.

Q: Why do you think people in the U.S. have begun to appreciate sake?

I think sake is so popular simply because it tastes good. I think people are also surprised by the outstanding quality you can find. Many people do not know how good premium sake is and it's always a joy for me to help people discover a love for Japanese sake!

Q: How do people in the U.S. enjoy sake?

Most people still only enjoy sake when they are at Japanese restaurants. There are a brave few who try to pair sake with non-Asian flavors. I think this is the new frontier in sake pairing. I often buy sake to enjoy at home. There are more and more people who are discovering this way to enjoy sake, too.

Q: Oct. 1 is "Nihonshu-no Hi," Sake Day in Japan. How is it celebrated in the U.S.?

In major U.S. cities, "Nihonshu-no Hi" is celebrated with many different kinds of sake events. There are sake-pairing dinners, lectures by sake brewers, sake tastings and lots of fun. It's a great day

to discover sake.

Q: Are there any new or interesting sake movements, events or trends?

I have noticed a trend regarding "nama" sake. This type of unpasteurized or "draft" sake is becoming quite popular in the U.S. It is difficult to transport because of its perishable nature, but I think more and more Americans are coming to discover, and love nama sake.

Q: How do you see the future for sake in Japan and the U.S.?

I am optimistic. The quality of available sake has never been higher. The great availability of superior sake is a wonderful sign of the growing interest we have in sake. I think consumption of premium sake will continue to increase. It's an exciting time to be drinking sake!

Q: What do you think is important for sake culture to prosper in Japan and the world?

One word comes to mind: education! I think for sake culture to expand and grow around the world, we need to channel our efforts into sake education. I think that once people understand how sake is made, and all the care, attention and detail that goes into making sake, they will appre-

ciate it all the more. Yes, for me, education is key!

Q: What advice would you give to those who want to learn about sake? Where can beginners start?

For people interested in sake, I always recommend going to any local sake-tasting events you may have in your area. It's a great opportunity to taste some wonderful sake and meet like-minded folks who are into sake, too. If you have the chance to meet sake brewers at a sake dinner or tasting event — don't miss it! I have learned so much from talking directly with the nice people who work right where the sake is made.

Q: How would you recommend enjoying sake and what food does it best complement?

I enjoy sake with many types of food. I would always recommend a lighter and cleaner-style sake with lighter foods such as sushi and sashimi. If you find a more robust "yamahai" sake to your liking, I have found this type pairs well with turkey, which is a food I love. I often drink a luxurious "junmai daiginjo" before dinner and savor its elegant flavors on their own. This way, I can focus on the flavors and nuance of the sake itself.