

Delectable Delights: Sake and tapas pair up for easy holiday entertaining

An Unlikely Pair

Written by Holly Herrick
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Photo by Stewart Young

Festive pomegranate and red grapefruit guacamole paired with kaika sake.

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Tapas, Spain's celebrated small plates, and sake, the celebrated Japanese libation, may initially seem like unusual bedfellows. But, upon closer examination, they most definitely are not.

Though physically thousands of miles apart from their points of origin, both tapas and sake have evolved into popular international players and, perhaps more importantly, were born and enjoyed over the centuries for the same reason – as symbols of (and companions to) reveling with friends. Tapas versatility and easy prep combined with the growing availability of premium sake render both naturals for a fresh, fun approach to holiday

entertaining in the tradition-rich land of the Lowcountry.

“Tapas – which are not just Spanish anymore – are such a great holiday kind of thing,” says Chai Eang, general manager of Chai’s Lounge & Tapas. “It’s such an informal way to enjoy dinner and it’s got so much more variety – passing around assorted plates – as opposed to sitting down to the usual courses. It’s an informal meal which I think people are tending to appreciate and enjoy a lot more these days.”

Pairing tapas with sake, as opposed to the usual wine or sangria alternatives, keeps a meal interesting and sophisticated, especially for the uninitiated. “Tasting sake is very much like tasting wine,” says China native and sake aficionado Tony Chu, owner of Red Orchids Bistro. “When I taste sake, I always follow a kind of ritual. First I look for the clarity and color, then I taste it for balance, which is followed by a fruity front, body, and acidity towards the end. Then I swirl the glass to get the bouquet.”

Potluck Tapas

Unlike so many onerous holiday entertaining alternatives, putting together a tapas party is a snap, especially if you get your friends in on the act. “It’s a lot of fun,” says Landen Ganstrom, executive chef at tapas stronghold 11 Center Street Wine & Gourmet in Folly Beach. “Everyone gets involved and they just feel like they are part of the meal.”

James “Doc” Trez, chef and owner of Amuse restaurant, suggests going “low maintenance” by using a core centerpiece of readily available classic tapas staples such as Marcona almonds, olives, Serrano ham, charcuteries, and manchego cheese. “If the host or hostess wants to round it out with something a little bit more intricate, that’s fine, too. Guests can either bring their own dishes, potluck style, or help the host put together the rest of the dishes once they arrive.”

Whichever tapas preparation route you choose to take, I suggest you know thy kitchen-self. If you’re like me and your skin starts itching once someone steps into your workspace, it might be better to solely oversee the preparation and service of the tapas. Or, prepare the core deli items, and let your friends bring their own tapas to share. If you want to get involved in the “friends factor,” follow the tips offered below each of the accompanying recipes. Your friends will enjoy taking part in the action, and your work load will be significantly lightened so you’ll have a good time, too. And that is what the holidays are all about.



Photo by Stewart Young

For Sake's Sake

Sake is a premium Japanese beverage made from rice, rice koji (the mold used to convert the starch in rice into fermentable sugars) and water using fermentation and filtration processes. Its long history dates back to the third century, and it is still regularly consumed in Japan and Asian cultures as an integral part of celebrations and rituals.

“Sake is a social bond in Asia,” explains Red Orchids’ Tony Chu. “You drink it before doing business and when having a great time with the family or friends. It helps break down barriers. That’s what sake’s all about.”

Premium sake (grades are dependent on factors such as how deeply the rice grains are polished, purity, and whether or not alcohol has been added) is meant to be sipped and savored like wine – not tossed down in a shot glass. It should be served in a wine glass and served cool, at about 55-62 degrees. “It is best to serve it chilled and let it come to room temperature,” Chu says.

Chu recommends having several sake selections available to pair with tapas. Specifically, he recommends Otokoyama, Junmai “Hawk in the Heavens,” Tuntaka Kuni, and Nanbu Bijin. Some of these sakes can be purchased at local retail shops like Total Wine and The Wine Shoppe. You’ll find a wider sake selection at the following web sites: www.00sake.com, www.sherry-lehmann.com, and www.sake.nu.

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Chu says this dish is a spot-on match for a premier, polished sake like Kaika.

SUGGESTED SAKE PAIRING:

away!

FRIENDS FACTOR: Pre-party, prep the guacamole and seed the pomegranate. Assign a couple of friends to compiling the guacamole in the chips and garnishing them with the pomegranates. Serve

immediately at room temperature.

Top with a 1/2-inch-long segment of grapefruit and a drizzle of about 8 pomegranate arils. Serve

Compile just before serving. Place 1 rounded teaspoon of the guacamole in the tortilla chip.

Smash coarsely with a fork until just blended. Taste to verify seasoning.

Juice. Add the garlic, green onions, flesh scooped from the avocado halves, and salt and pepper.

and squeeze the juice from the other quarter of the pomegranate into the bowl with the grapefruit

seed sacs ("arils") away from their casings. Set the separated fruit aside (discarding skin and casings)

ing juice (about 1/4 cup) into a medium-sized bowl. Seed 1/4 of the pomegranate by gently pulling the

edges of the segments. Set the fresh segments aside on a shallow plate. Squeeze any of the remain-

you get to the fruit. Cut and scoop the sections of fruit out with a sharp paring knife along both

Trim the ends off of the grapefruit and carve off the peel (with the white pith) in sections until



Festive Pomegranate and Red Grapefruit Guacamole

MAKES 20-25 TAPAS

- 1 fresh, red grapefruit, peeled and sectioned*
- 1/2 medium pomegranate*
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed*
- 3 green onions, trimmed and cut into 1/8-inch length*
- 1 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil*
- 1 medium, just-ripe Hass avocado, peeled and halved*
- Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste*
- 20-30 tortilla "scoops"*

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