

Your guide from the grape to the glass

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SCOTT GREENBERG *Vine Guy*

Rites of spring: Sushi and good wine

For many residents of our area, the start of spring means it's cherry blossom time. For me, it means the start of sushi season.

I know you can eat sushi any time of year — and trust me, I do. But somehow, with the cherry blossoms still clinging to the trees, the ama-ebi (sweet shrimp) tastes just a tad sweeter.

And with the arrival of sushi season comes a plethora of wines that you can enjoy with the assortment of fresh fish and vegetable dishes.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past when Japanese beer and sake were considered the only acceptable adult beverages to enjoy with traditional servings of maki (rice rolls containing various combinations of fish, vegetables and seaweed) and nigiri (sliced pieces of fish served on a small pad of rice). But all of that has changed, thanks in part to open-minded sushi restaurateurs who have included thoughtful wine selections in their establishments.

Here are a few of my favorite wines to pair with traditional sushi dishes. Retail prices are approximate.

CALIFORNIA ROLL

The popular maki roll featuring avocado, imitation or genuine crab and cucumber

Bellavista Non-Vintage Cuvée Brut Franciacorta, Italy (\$27 - available at Circle Wine and Liquor in the District and Total Wine and More in McLean)

I really like sparkling wines with sushi dishes, particularly if the bottlings are on the drier side. The tiny, precise bubbles in this Italian offering deliver notes of crisp apples and pears while the bountiful acidity provides a palate-cleansing finish. The richness of the avocado acts as a nice counterbalance

2004 Scarpantoni Unoaked Chardonnay, McLaren Vale, Australia (\$15 - available at MacArthur Beverages in D.C.)

I find that the oak treatment that most domestic chardonnays receive has a tendency to mask the delicate flavors of sushi. This bottling is produced "naked" — an Australian colloquialism that denotes an absence of oak in both fermentation and aging.

This crisp, fresh white offers flavors of green apples, peaches and citrus notes. Hints of lychee nuts add an unexpected richness on the clean finish.



SWEET SHRIMP, OCTOPUS, CLAM

Typically served nigiri style

2006 Veramonte Sauvignon Blanc Reserva, Casablanca Valley, Chile (\$10 - available at Circle Wine and Liquor in D.C.)

I think the crisp, bright flavors of grapefruit and green melon pair well with most shellfish offered on a sushi menu and the abundant acidity in this bargain Chilean import cuts through the richness of the fish.

2005 Mount Riley Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$16 - available at Schneider's of Capitol Hill)

The combination of fresh tropical fruits and zesty citrus offers an appealing contrast to traditional sauvignon blancs. Hints of wet stone on the medium, bone-dry finish enhances the seafood character of the shellfish.

YELLOW TAIL

A type of amberjack, usually served nigiri style

2004 Fritz Haag Brauneberger Juffer Riesling Spatlese, Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, Germany (\$22 - available at Calvert Woodley in D.C.)

Yellowtail has firm meat that requires a slightly sturdier wine. This riesling exhibits ripe apple and melon fruit on both the nose and the palate. Additional notes of nectarine and mineral/slate coat the tongue on the lush finish. The hint of residual sugar sets off the sweetness of the sushi rice nicely.

2005 Gainey Vineyards Riesling, Santa Ynez Valley, Calif. (\$16 - available at The Vineyard in McLean)

The brioche nose leads to flavors of peaches, green melon

and citrus fruits — on a pleasantly sweet frame — in the mouth. This well-balanced wine has enough acidity to complement the fish and provide a refreshing finish.

SALMON AND TUNA

Served as maki or nigiri

2004 Wild Horse Pinot Noir, Central Coast, Calif. (\$26 - available at Total Wine and More in McLean and The Wine Specialist in D.C.)

The bright acidity in this domestic pinot cuts through the natural fat in the salmon while the pretty flavors of cherry cola, strawberry and cinnamon won't overpower the fish. It would also pair well with grilled salmon.

2003 Vincent Girardin Gevrey-Chambertin Pinot Noir, Burgundy, France (\$50 - available at Schneider's of Capitol Hill)

This pinot's firm tannins stand up beautifully to the rich

meatiness of the tuna. Delicate flavors of red plum, black cherries and violets linger on the palate, highlight the combination of fish and rice and won't get lost if you sparingly use soy sauce.

SPICY TUNA MAKI ROLL AND EEL NIGIRI

2004 Dry Creek Vineyard Merlot, Sonoma, Calif. (\$17 - available at Total Wine and More in McLean)

The spicy notes of red plum and the ripe flavors of black cherry and rich cassis make this a good choice to pair with either the flavorful tuna roll or the sweet eel.



Do you have a favorite royalty of wine? E-mail me at scott@vineguy.com.

