

## FOOD

# A Perfect Pairing

*Fresh sushi and old whiskey: A Japanese tradition tweaks taste buds in Palm Springs.*

BY LIZBETH SCORDO  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA CORSON



The Yamazaki Single Malt Whisky, aged 25 years, goes for \$500 an ounce at Sandfish. Opposite: Nikka Coffey Malt Whisky offers a clean finish for a variety of sashimi.

■ Sidle up to a sushi bar and your most critical decision will inevitably center around the star attraction: fish. Aficionados know how to pepper the knife-wielding chefs with questions about the day's can't-miss cuts — the sea bream flown in that morning, the marvelous mackerel that always satisfies, or scallops so delicate they start to melt the moment they hit your tongue.

What to *drink* usually requires less thought. It's going to be sake, of course, or maybe a Japanese beer. Because that's what everybody pairs with sushi, right? Not so fast.

There's another pairing that the Japanese have been enjoying for decades: sushi and whiskey. Restaurateur and master sushi chef Engin Onural became enamored of Japanese whiskies during a trip to the island nation a few years back, and he created his latest gastronomic venture around the combo.

"They're two items that you wouldn't think could be so harmonious," says Onural, who opened Sandfish Sushi & Whiskey in Palm Springs last year. "I fell in love with Japanese history, the culture, cuisine, and then the whiskey. I've been happily surprised that so many people appreciate it."

Where should you begin when it comes to the wide world of whiskey and its culinary partner? We asked a few experts for tips.

**Learn what you like.** Your goal is to choose a whiskey to complement your meal, but you also want a drink you'll enjoy, so sample a few to discover the whiskies that wow you. "It's all about what flavor profiles you want to experience," Onural says. "When you get to know the notes of certain whiskies you like, you can figure out what you think would pair well with them." Meantime, if you know you like a particular mainstream scotch or bourbon, or even another spirit, like a smoky mezcal, tell your bartender or server, who can recommend a pairing for your food.

**Go Japanese.** "What's really cool about Japanese whiskey is the wide variety of flavor," says Mackenzie Simmons, bar manager at Sandfish, which stocks more than 20 Japanese versions. "You can find something that's sweeter or smokier, so you can find something for everyone." While scotch-makers influenced some of the first Japanese whiskies, the latter varieties have a distinctive style that makes them a solid sushi-pairing choice. "Japanese whiskies tend to be more delicate than, say, a big, peaty Islay Scotch, the emphasis being on harmony and balance with a silky mouthfeel," says Brian Murphy, CEO of The WhiskyX, an annual whiskey, food, and music festival that takes place in multiple cities around the country. "It's that balance that enables the flavors in Japanese whiskies to complement equally delicate flavors in sushi rather than overpower them."



Chef Engin Onural (opposite) pairs sashimi and sushi with a variety of Japanese and American whiskies.

## A Pairing Primer

If you're eating:  
**Bluefin tuna sashimi**

Pair it with:  
**Hibiki Japanese Harmony**

"It's a whisky with a clean finish, so it's good with a clean and crisp piece of sashimi," Onural says.

If you're eating:  
**Toro**

Pair it with:  
**Hakushu 12-year Single Malt**

Those smoky undertones stand up to the fattiness of the tuna belly.

If you're eating:

**A sushi roll**  
Pair it with:  
**An Old Fashioned**

"There are so many layers to a roll," the chef explains, "and so many layers to an Old Fashioned — sugar, bitters, orange peel, and orange oil. It all blends well."

If you're eating:

**A cooked dish**  
Pair it with:  
**Kavalan Single Malt Whisky**

Kavalan is a mellow sipper that won't mess with the bold flavors of hot food, which may include competing components and flavorful sauces.

**Stick with simple.** If you're going with a high-end whiskey (more on the highest of high-end in a minute), you'll want to savor every sip, so opt for simply sliced sashimi or nigiri with a spot of wasabi or dip of soy sauce. Onural recommends ordering the whiskey neat with a large ice rock on the side. First, taste it neat a couple of times, then add a few drops of the melted ice to it and taste it again. "The water helps the oils in the whiskey to rise to the surface and keeps the flavor on your palate longer," he explains. Finally, add the cube. "It's amazing how much water will change the flavor of whiskey."

**Get age-appropriate.** The longer a whiskey ages in the barrel, the more complex (and often expensive) it becomes. "When whiskey sits in the barrel for longer, the wood will add those spices, the notes, things like cinnamon and tobacco," says Simmons, pointing out that while wine changes and matures in the bottle, whiskey ages in the barrel. That's why you'll see them labeled "12 year" or "18 year" rather than with a vintage like "2015"; the production year doesn't matter, but the number of years in the barrel does. Those aged for shorter periods are often mild and mellow and, thus, usually better for whiskey newbies. Simmons recommends Japan's Suntory Toki (known as a "no age statement" spirit) as a good starter. "It's extremely light-bodied, so it's a great go-to for someone who may not be a whiskey drinker."

**Splurge on a single pour of this.** With Japanese whiskies gaining popularity around the world, we're experiencing a bona fide shortage, which makes certain cult favorites not only harder to find but also breathtakingly pricey. One of the rarest and increasingly coveted is a 25-year single malt produced by the legendary Yamazaki Distillery, Japan's first commercial whisky distillery, established almost a century ago. Sandfish used to sell 1 ounce for \$300 but recently upped it to a don't-spill-a-single-drop \$500. "I got lucky, and we joke that I got it almost by accident," Onural says. "Even my vendors say I'll never get it again in my lifetime. It's become an internal joke." Even if the price isn't...