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The Gin Game

Fresh flavors, modern styles and barrel aging are bringing new life to the botanical spirit





Several Kumi cocktails use Japanese libations such as sake and plum wine.

Kumi Adds Spice to Vegas Strip

Mandalay Bay's new restaurant offers Japanese food with a Korean twist

Restaurants often strive to be many things to different customers—especially in the tourist mecca of Las Vegas. They might be breakfast refuges by day, sushi havens at lunch and swank dining spots and clubs at night. Kumi, the second restaurant opened by chef Akira Back this past July, is no exception.

Back's first location, opened in 2008, is the more-formal Yellowtail Japanese restaurant at the Bellagio Hotel. Kumi, located in the Mandalay Bay Hotel, is a much higher-energy dining and drinking venue with a greater focus on small plates and less-traditional Japanese food.

SAKE AT KUMI

Kumi's Asian-inspired cocktails—many of which are made with sake—share space on the list with sake by the carafe priced \$30 to \$70. Two dozen sakes, ranging in price from \$55 to \$750, are also available by the bottle. They run the gamut from creamy, unfiltered versions—such as Murai Family "Nebuta Warrior" for \$72—to Shimizu no Mai "Pure Night," a Jumai Daiginjo for \$255.

The wine list at Kumi focuses on sparkling wines, cool-climate whites and pinot noirs, priced from \$41 to \$650. In the Las Vegas celebratory tradition, classic Champagnes—from Billecart Salmon to Dom Pérignon—are available by the bottle and some of them by the glass, ranging in price from \$13 to \$35. These bubbles also work well with many of Kumi's rolls and sashimi offerings.

Several of the cocktails are Tiki-inspired and meant for sharing, such as oversize the Mount Fuji Bowl (\$55), made with Grey Goose vodka, Bacardi rum, pineapple and lemon juice. Some also make use of other traditional Japanese products, such as plum wine. For instance, the Cherry Blossom (\$18) is made with Tyku Black, Hakutsuru plum wine, Luxardo maraschino liqueur and lemon. Wine and sake account for 10% percent of Kumi's total food and beverage sales, spirits 15% and beer 5%.

A MENU WITH DIFFERENT ASIAN ACCENTS

Chef Back was born in Korea, raised in Aspen, CO, and worked for many years in Japan. He also has burgeoning *Iron Chef* credentials, having once battled Bobby Flay on Food Network's *Iron Chef America*.

Dishes at Kumi run spicy and are meant for sharing. Patrons can mix rolls and sashimi up with salads and bigger plates of protein.



Kumi's dining room, sushi bar and rotunda offer guests multiple experiences.

Back weaves some of the traditionally sweet, garlic- and spice-heavy flavors into Kumi's menu; Korean hot pepper paste appears in several of the dishes. Menu items boast other Korean flavors, such as the Jidori Chicken (\$28) with spicy Kimchee Green Beans and garlic maple soy.

The restaurant's interior, which seats close to 400, boasts warm-wood accents and a long sushi bar. Curved black booths line the venue's perimeter, and DJs pump out music front and center several nights a week.

Restaurant executives say that the venue's customer base varies depending on the night of the week and who is playing at the hotel's array of trendy clubs, such as Mix and Light.

"Our guests can have multiple experiences," notes Michael Monrreal, mixologist for the Light Group, Kumi's parent company, which runs eight restaurants in Las Vegas and a handful in other locations. Those experiences include a quick sushi stop, a casual meal or fine dining, all with a high-energy lounge feeling, he adds. ♦



At left, Kumi's signature 007 Octopussy roll. Directly below, the Green Geisha cocktail, and below left, Kumi chef Akira Back.

