

MARKET WATCH



KATANA

How could Katana, just one restaurant in a city packed with Asian-influenced eateries, elevate itself above the competition? Its endearing hook is a saké sommelier. This tapas-style Japanese restaurant boasts saké sommelier and general manager Tom Cardenas, who was awarded the title by the Saké Service Institute of Japan after taking a written test. He invested eight months of research into creating his 47-bottle saké list, which is divided into the categories kunshu (fragrant), sohshu (light and smooth), junshu (rich), jukushu (aged) and sonota no saké (other types). Executive chef Hiroshi Sima's robata-yaki, open-flame charcoal grill plates (\$2 to \$18), which are small portions of grilled meat served with dipping sauces, and sushi specialties (\$4 to 20) can be enjoyed with a range of sakés, from the Shirataki "Junmai" Nigata (\$18 a 300-ml. bottle) to the Minowamon "Junmai" Daiginjyo Fukushima (\$138 a 750-ml. bottle). "The kunshu and sohshu varieties of saké pair well with sushi," Cardenas explains, "and the rich flavors of the junshu variety go well with barbecue flavors."

Katana even lists five proprietary sakés, including the Koshu "Junmai" Fukushima (\$95 a 750-ml. bottle) and the Gensai "Daiginjyo" Fukushima (\$165 a 750-ml. bottle), prepared by the Suehiro Brewery in Japan. By the glass, Cardenas serves five chilled sakés (\$7 to \$15), Ozeki hot saké (\$5 for a small; \$7 for a large) and Choya Plum Wine (\$9). "Saké is so easy to consume that groups frequently come in and share bottles by dividing them into flights," Cardenas says. Occasionally, he will even share his personal stash with visiting saké enthusiasts. Endearing indeed.

BALBOA RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

There's a lot of competition on Sunset Strip, an endless street of trendy bars and restaurants. But nestled inside The Grafton boutique hotel is Balboa Restaurant & Lounge, a contemporary steak and lobster "joint" that opened in July 2001. The space, which is decorated with herringbone ebony hardwood flooring in the lounge, offers entrees ranging from the bone-in Kansas City filets (\$34) to the Colorado lamb rack (\$29). "Balboa takes the normal American steakhouse, which has been done over and over, and does it for our younger generation," says partner Lee Maen. "This is not your father's steakhouse." What Balboa strives to do, says Maen, is take the very best cuisine of traditional steakhouses and dress it up with a progressive décor and energetic service.

Alcoholic beverages account for 25 percent of Balboa's sales, with beer, wine and spirits accounting for a 10, 40 and 50 ratio. "We serve cocktails at Balboa," explains Maen, who says their signature drink is the Melon Infusion (\$9), which is Stolichnaya Vanil infused with chunks of honeydew, cantaloupe and watermelon, "but it's not a Martini bar." Instead, Maen created a 200-bottle wine list divided into taste profiles, such as light-bodied whites (2000 Havens Albariño for \$45 a 750-ml. bottle) and full-bodied reds (1996 Opus One for \$605 a Magnum). There are also 15 half bottles, ranging from the 2001 Murphy-Goode Fumé Blanc for \$18 to the 1997 Stag's Leap "Fay" Cabernet Sauvignon for \$88, and 14 wines by the glass, from the 2000 Moulin Galhaud Grenache Noir for \$7 to the 1998 Newton Claret for \$15.

For customers who have imbibed to the point of excess, The Grafton even offers discounted room rates, depending upon availability.

