

# San Francisco Chronicle

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## California's delicious new drink style: alcohol with local ume, the tangy and candy-like Japanese fruit

A wave of artisans is putting its own spin on umeshu, made with alcohol, sugar and ume

[Esther Mobley](#)

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*Sylvan Mishima Brackett makes his own umeshu, a spirit from the ume fruit, to serve at his San Francisco restaurant, Izakaya Rintaro.*

Courtesy Sylvan Mishima Brackett

Raw, the fruit is inedible, like an olive before it's cured. But when made into a beverage, it morphs into a tangy, unctuous burst that recalls the mouth-puckering sweet-and-sourness of favorite childhood candies — Sweet Tarts, fruit leather, lemon drops.

The fruit is called ume (OOO-may), and it comes from the *Prunus mume* tree, a close relative of the apricot. (Contrary to popular belief, ume is not a type of plum.) And although relatively little ume is planted in California, there's a growing number of creative food and beverage makers working with the fruit, turning out spirits, syrups, vinegars and more.

In Japan, ume is traditionally macerated with alcohol and sugar to create a liquor called umeshu, and pickled to create a condiment called umeboshi. Many Japanese home cooks preserve the fruit every spring during a short ripening window, in the same spirit of canning tomatoes or cooking jam in the summertime. Locally, some creators follow Japanese customs, producing traditional-style umeshu; others are diverging, with creations like ume-infused rum or a shrub that blends ume with pineapple guava.

However faithful to tradition, all of these ume products seem to point to an explosion in popularity in the Bay Area. The timing of demand, though, may have a roadblock: Supply may not be able to keep up, as

some California ume farms, including the one that S.F. chef Sylvan Mishima Brackett buys from, are diminishing in size. Still, some say that won't deter overall growth.

"Ume is going to have a big moment soon," says Brackett, who makes umeshu every year for his Mission District restaurant, Izakaya Rintaro. "I think there's a huge interest in it, and a lot more players are going to come on the market."



*Ume is inedible when raw, like an olive before it's cured.*

Courtesy Therese Agnew

Rintaro moves a lot of umeshu. Some years, Brackett buys as many as 1,500 pounds of ume from a farm in Yolo County. He follows a dead-simple recipe inherited from his Japanese mother, who used to make umeshu at home: In a bucket, combine ume with a neutral spirit and sugar, then walk away for about a year. The result is a fragrant, honey-color liquid, which Brackett fashions into Rintaro's spritzy house cocktail — umeshu and fizzy water on the rocks, with a whole salty, pickled umeboshi plopped into the glass.

The umeshu cocktail has become one of Rintaro's signature items, as baked into the restaurant's identity as its pillowy house-made tofu and its creamy carbonara udon. When the pandemic began and Rintaro had to close, Brackett started selling little 12-ounce bottles of his umeshu to go, and it proved enormously popular.

Tasting the Rintaro umeshu was compelling enough to convince Nate Darling, who runs a Berkeley spirits company called Pekut & Carwick, to try making some of his own. It felt like a quintessentially Californian enterprise: capturing the essence of this fresh fruit and trying to preserve those flavors. "I want to showcase the raw agricultural ingredients," Darling says. To that end, he sticks with the simple, traditional method of sugar, neutral alcohol and ume.

Whereas Brackett likes to pick the fruit later in the season, once it has started to turn from green to a pinkish yellow, Darling prefers to get his ume on the less ripe side. Brackett likes the aromas that result from sweeter fruit; Darling seeks the citrusy flavors that emerge earlier in the season.



*Yume Boshi's ume plum syrup and Pekut & Carwick's prunus mume, two products made in Berkeley using ume, a Japanese stone fruit closely related to an apricot.*

Esther Mobley / The Chronicle

That balance of sourness and sweetness is key to ume's allure — and, for those making umeshu and umeshu-like products, deciding when to pick is the key stylistic decision. “Traditionally, umeshu is made with green fruit,” says Ayako Iino, who owns a specialty food company called Yume Boshi in Berkeley.

“But you can also make it riper. Green makes a sharper umeshu. Riper gives a more flowery aromatic.” Iino started her company after working in local restaurants like Chez Panisse and Oliveto. She wanted to ditch the line cook's punishing schedule, but she still wanted to make food. Back in her native Japan, Iino had worked on a semi-self-sufficient farm, where she'd pickled all manner of produce, from daikon to cabbage to ume. When she heard about an ume orchard in Oroville (Butte County), she jumped at the chance to buy fruit.

What started as a few home batches of ume jam and pickles blossomed into a lineup that includes shrubs, vinegars, relishes, syrups and even ume-flecked furikake seasoning. (Iino also makes several products using red shiso leaves.) All of the Yume Boshi creations harness the tantalizing ume matrix of sweet and sour. Several buck the traditional Japanese templates, blending the Japanese fruit with flavorful California produce like mandarinquat.

Though none of the Yume Boshi products contain alcohol, all of the shrubs, syrups and vinegars make great cocktail mixers. That's particularly true of Iino's Ume Plum Syrup, a reduction of ume and sugar, undiluted by water or vinegar. It offers an irresistibly pungent pop of fruity and umami-rich flavor. Iino recommends mixing 1 part syrup with 3 parts Tequila and a squeeze of lemon. I like it with sparkling rosé and a grapefruit wedge.



*Ume-flavored rum from Mosswood Spirits in Berkeley.*

Courtesy Therese Agnew

A similar type of ume syrup forms the backbone of an intriguing rum bottled by Berkeley's Mosswood Spirits. Co-owner Jake Chevedden starts by macerating whole ume in an unaged light rum, the same base for Mosswood's Day Rum. After a couple months, he takes the ume off the rum, pours sugar over the ume and waits until they liquify. Once a syrup is rendered, Chevedden combines it with the ume-kissed rum and adds a touch of salt. The result is a savory, nutty take on umeshu with fruit flavors that are bright, crunchy and even a little vegetal — like a rhubarb stalk or an underripe white peach.

Making ume into a tasty drink is easy, these creators agree. What's difficult is finding the trees. Only a handful of farms in Northern California grow *Prunus mume*, and often they don't grow much of it. Sometimes it's planted as an ornamental — the pink and white flowers are beautiful when in bloom — and sometimes as a wind break for more popular crops like strawberries, according to Chevedden.

The acreage may even be decreasing. After selling to new owners, Brackett's source in Yolo County recently ripped out many of its ume trees and replanted wheat. Only a few ume trees remain. "Sourcing is a very hard part," said Iino. Even if she can find a farm that's growing ume, there's no guarantee it will be one of the varieties she likes. "Sometimes it's not my kind of ume plant, or not enough acidity — it doesn't do what I need."

That dearth of acreage may limit the growth of California umeshu efforts, at least for now. But the region's ume enthusiasts don't see that deterring the category's growing popularity.

"It's a very special fruit that you don't eat raw because it's super acidic and it's not good for you healthwise," Iino says. "Then, by preserving it, it transforms into deliciousness."

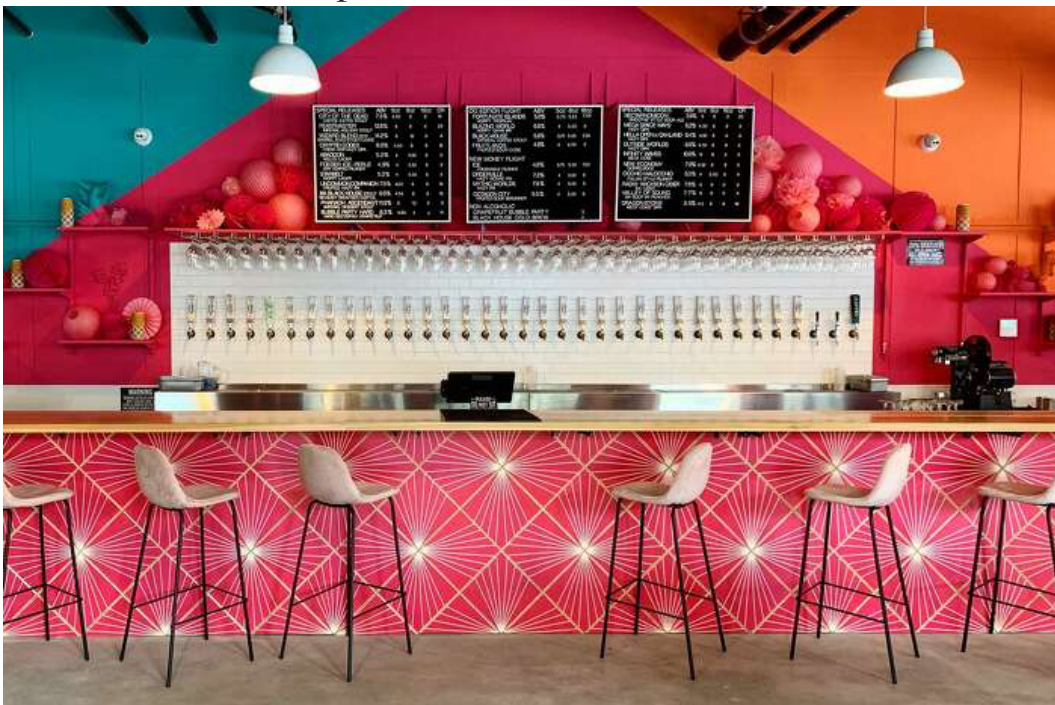


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## More Information

### Bay Area ume products to try:

Mosswood Ume Plum Flavored Rum (\$40). The current release is mostly sold out, though Copper Spoon in Oakland still has some.

Yume Boshi Ume Plum Syrup (\$22/13 oz). Other products include Ume Plum Vinegars, Umeboshi, Ume Plum Jam and various ume-based shrubs. Available at [yumboshiplum.com](http://yumboshiplum.com)

Rintaro Umeshu (\$22 for a half carafe or \$35 for a full carafe). Available at Izakaya Rintaro, 82 14th St., San Francisco.

Pekut & Carwick Prunus Mume (\$32.25/375 ml). Available at [pekutandcarwick.com](http://pekutandcarwick.com)

St. George Spirits Baller Single Malt Whiskey (\$70/750ml). This whiskey was aged in barrels that had previously held umeshu. Available at various Bay Area stores including Gemini Bottle Co. and Healthy Spirits.



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Wine critic Esther Mobley joined The Chronicle in 2015 to cover California wine, beer and spirits. Previously she was an assistant editor at Wine Spectator magazine in New York, and has worked harvests at wineries in Napa Valley and Argentina. She studied English literature at Smith College.