Characteristics and Production Methods of the Main Varieties of Honkaku Shochu and Awamori
Kome (Rice) Shochu

*Kome* Shochu is produced all over Japan, with one of the oldest production areas being the Kuma region (Kumagun and Hitoyoshi City, Kumamoto Prefecture), with the geographical indication of “Kuma Shochu” protected by the World Trade Organization’s TRIPS Agreement on intellectual property (see page 19). In this region, the Kuma River flows through a plateau surrounded by mountains, and rice has been grown there since the Kamakura period in the 13th century. It remains unclear when *kome* Shochu production actually started in this region, but there are still nearly 30 distilleries along the river.

To produce *kome* Shochu, rice *koji* is used in the first *shikomi* process, and steamed rice and water are added for fermentation in the second *shikomi*. Yellow *koji* fungus, generally used to make Sake, was mainly employed in the development of *koji* for *kome* Shochu up to the early 20th century. However, white *koji* fungus is widely used these days, and black and yellow *koji* fungi have also become popular among those seeking richer and more distinctive aromas and tastes. Usually, *kome* Shochu is stored and matured for about six months after distillation and before shipment. During this period the taste loses some of its tanginess and the aroma settles.

*Kome* Shochu, made from a Japanese staple food, has an alluring aroma that enhances the taste of food. There are a number of *kome* Shochu varieties, including one with a richer flavor produced through atmospheric distillation, one with a subtle aroma and light taste generated through vacuum distillation, and one with a distinctive flavor produced through maturation in earthen urns or barrels. The richer type is usually enjoyed with hot water and the more subtle and lighter types on the rocks. Generally, *kome* Shochu contains about 25% alcohol. The stronger type is more commonly enjoyed in the Kuma region, where they have a custom to heat straight *kome* Shochu in a container called a “gara,” and drink it from a small cup called a “choku.”
Awamori

Awamori is produced in Okinawa Prefecture and uses rice (Thai rice, etc.) only as the main ingredient. It is labeled as “Ryukyu Awamori,” and this geographical indication is protected by the World Trade Organization’s TRIPS agreement on intellectual property. As for the production method, black koji fungus is sprinkled over steamed rice to cultivate the koji first, and then one part koji and 1.5 parts water are added to a fermentation tank, along with yeast. This initial part of the process is particular to the making of Awamori, as it uses only black koji fungus and just one shikomi stage, in which the full amount of rice as a main ingredient is used to make the koji. After the moromi mush is formed, the enzymes contained in the koji break down the rice starches into sugar and the yeast goes through the fermentation process to produce alcohol. Following about two weeks of fermentation, the alcohol level of the mush becomes approximately 18%, after which it is transferred to pot stills for distillation. For Awamori, it is common to use a special distillation apparatus that circulates the moromi and is shaped somewhat like a horse. This helps develop Awamori’s rich and deep flavor.

Awamori’s rich flavor is also brought about by the single shikomi method. Its aroma, distinctive to the atmospheric distillation method, reminds one of fruits like apples and bananas. It also has an aroma similar to that of matsutake mushrooms due to the oily properties contained in the spirit. Vintage Awamori that has been allowed to mature for three years or more is called Kusu, and it has a sweet and mellow vanilla-like aroma that is brought about through the slow chemical reaction of its oily properties. Generally, the most popular way to drink Awamori is on the rocks or with water, while Kusu is best tasted straight.

Kusu, even with an alcohol level of over 40%, tastes mellow without a strong alcohol flavor and smells sweet. In order to enjoy Kusu this way while still maintaining the quality, a chronological/transfer ageing method called shitsugi is employed, which involves several urns filled with Awamori made in different years. For example, if five urns are used, when a drink is ladled out from the first urn containing the oldest Awamori, the same amount is then replaced from the second urn. This in turn is refilled from the third urn and so on, with the last urn filled with newly made Awamori. If you add newly made Awamori to the oldest, however, the quality and distinctiveness of Kusu will be lost. Also, if Awamori is left untouched in an urn, the actual volume will decrease due to evaporation and the level of alcohol will go down by approximately 1% year on year. Although the shitsugi process may seem like a slow and laid-back approach, it is an excellent method for maintaining the uniqueness of Kusu, and it basically assures that each drink retains a similar level of quality and alcohol content. Using this method, vintage Kusu that is aged over 100 years can be produced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newly made</th>
<th>5th-oldest</th>
<th>4th-oldest</th>
<th>3rd-oldest</th>
<th>2nd-oldest</th>
<th>Oldest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Awamori's rich flavor is also brought about by the single shikomi method.
Mugi (Barley) Shochu

There are two large islands in Kyushu: Iki and Tsushima, which appear in Gishiwajinden, a Chinese text written during the third century, as part of a primary transportation route between Japan and the Asian continent. While Tsushima has steep mountains and deep forests, Iki is quite flat and has the second-largest plain in Nagasaki Prefecture. Therefore, Iki is ideal for growing grains and fruit, and is also known for its quality beef and fresh seafood from the Genkai-nada Sea. In addition, it was here on Iki where mugi Shochu originated.

Iki’s mugi Shochu is made with rice koji and steamed barley, which is different from the mugi Shochu produced in other areas. This is because the ratio of rice koji to steamed barley is 1:2, which has remained consistent since the Meiji era more than a century ago. In terms of production, the first shikomi process is conducted with rice koji, cultivated from white koji fungus, with the steamed barley added for fermentation at the second and third shikomi stages. Traditionally, it is produced by the atmospheric distillation method, but some mugi Shochu is made by the vacuum distillation method. Each distillery on the island has its own individual way of making its Shochu, such as the use of urns for shikomi, or oak barrels for storage.

Traditionally mugi Shochu on Iki has a kind of roasted barley aroma, more like that of chocolate-covered barley. Due to the atmospheric distillation method, starches contained in the barley undergo hydrolysis to produce sugar, and the sugar combined with amino acids is heated to generate the sweet and roasted aroma. It also has a rich flavor brought about by the rice koji, which stands out when combined and drunk with hot water. The name “Iki Shochu” is protected by the World Trade Organisation’s TRIPS agreement on intellectual property.

By contrast, mugi Shochu produced in other areas, such as Oita Prefecture, is generally made with barley koji and steamed barley. The first shikomi is conducted with water and barley koji, which is cultivated with steamed barley and white koji fungus, followed by the second shikomi in which steamed barley and water are added for fermentation. Made by the vacuum distillation method, most of the varieties are of a fruity and light quality. As they are usually clear in color, it is best to drink them with cold water or on the rocks. It is also excellent as a base for cocktails.

Traditional mugi Shochu on Iki has a kind of roasted barley aroma, more like that of chocolate-covered barley.
Imo (Sweet Potato) Shochu

*Imo* Shochu is produced all over Kyushu, but in particular in Kagoshima Prefecture and southern Miyazaki Prefecture, as its main ingredient, sweet potato, is a signature product of these areas. Generally, *koji*, water and yeast are used in the first *shikomi* stage to cultivate yeast to a sufficient amount, and water and steamed sweet potato pieces are added in the second *shikomi* for fermentation, followed by distillation. The reason why there are two *shikomi* stages is that fermentation proceeds smoothly even when the scale of the *shikomi* is large. Before this method started around the early 20th century, the *koji*, sweet potatoes and water were combined at the same time. This method is called "Donburi (big bowl) Shikomi" and some distilleries have recently started to employ this method based on records from that time.

Although sweet potatoes are generally steamed before the *shikomi*, some distilleries bake them to achieve a distinctive flavor that is both sweet and savory.

Recently, a wide variety of sweet potatoes and *koji* have been used for *Imo* Shochu. The following are examples:

**Kogane-Sengan**: This is the most widely used variety as the main ingredient of *Imo* Shochu with its flesh a whitish yellow color. The Shochu produced has a sweet and rich flavor, distinctive to steamed sweet potatoes.

**Purple-colored variety**: Yamakawa Murasaki and Ayamurasaki are well known varieties. Their flesh is purple and contains pigments called anthocyanins. The flavor of this Shochu reminds us of red wine and yogurt.

**Orange-colored variety**: The Shochu made with this orange-fleshed variety has a flavor quite like that of boiled carrots and pumpkins, as well as tropical fruits like papaya. The orange color comes from beta-carotene, which brings a certain unique aroma to the product.

**Black *koji* fungus**: This fungus, which was previously used for Okinawa’s Awamori, started to be used in *Imo* Shochu production in the early 20th century. It is believed to help bring out the rich and deep flavor of sweet potatoes.

**White *koji* fungus**: This is actually a mutant strain of black *koji* fungus. Due to its black spores, black *koji* fungus tends to stain work areas, apparatus and clothing, so this white version became popular and spread to the Kyushu region after the war. The Shochu made with this fungus tastes slightly milder and lighter compared to that made with the black type.

Although it is delicious with cold water at the rocks, the relaxing mellow flavor particular to *Imo* Shochu is often enjoyed with hot water, as the drink’s distinctive aroma and sweet taste becomes richer when warmer. When Shochu with an alcohol level of 25% is diluted with water to a ratio of six parts Shochu to four parts water), the alcohol level comes down to almost that of Sake. The ratio is easily adjustable by changing the amount of hot water added to suit your mood. It is best to pour the hot water first and let it cool down a little before gently adding the Shochu, so that they mix well and the subtle sweetness comes out perfectly. In Kagoshima, however, there is another way to enjoy *Imo* Shochu, and that is to put the Shochu and cold water into a black pot, called a “Kuro Joka,” and warm it up over direct heat. This custom is called “Dareyame” or “Daiyame,” which originally meant “to stop fatigue.” *Imo* Shochu produced in Kagoshima Prefecture is called “Satsuma Shochu” and this geographical indication is protected by the World Trade Organisation’s TRIPS agreement on intellectual properties.

*Imo* Shochu is also produced on Tokyo’s Izu Islands, and the residents there call it “Shimazake,” or island liquor. Although its production method is believed to have come from Kagoshima, *Shimazake* is made with barley *koji*, rather than the rice *koji* of Kagoshima, and features a great combination of the sweet flavor of sweet potatoes and the light and savory flavor of barley.
Kokuto (Brown Sugar) Shochu

*Kokuto* Shochu, which features the subtle sweet aroma of brown sugar, is produced only on the Amami Islands of Kagoshima Prefecture. According to the Liquor Tax Act, these islands (managed by the Oshima Tax Office) are the only place allowed to produce the Shochu with brown sugar and rice *koji*. At present, there are distilleries on the Amami Islands, Kikaijima Island, Tokunoshima Island, Okinoerabujima Island and Yoronto Island.

Although sugar is present, *Kokuto* Shochu also uses rice *koji*, which supplies the amino acids, vitamins and fatty acids that yeast needs to grow. The citric acids contained in the *koji* also maintain the acidity of the *moromi*. In addition, amino acids are the source behind the aroma of high-quality alcohol and ester, and rice *koji* enhances the fermentation process, resulting in a richer flavor for the product.

Generally, the first *shikomi* for *Kokuto* Shochu uses rice *koji* cultivated with white *koji* fungus to develop the first *moromi* mush, and brown sugar is added at the second *shikomi*. Brown sugar is not produced directly from the white juice squeezed from sugar cane, but comes about after the juice is simmered, concentrated and solidified. The solidified brown sugar is resolved with water and steam, and the liquid is cooled for use in the second *shikomi*. The brown-colored sweet-smelling *moromi* mush looks delicious, but actually tastes quite sour with no sweetness, as it is in its pre-distillation state.

*Kokuto* Shochu’s aroma has a distinctive sweetness, typical to brown sugar, and is slightly acidic with a hint of coconut oil. It has a subtle taste, and is probably more enjoyable when diluted with cold water, rather than with hot. The Amamioshima Branch of Kagoshima Prefecture Sake and Shochu Makers Association designated May 9th and 10th as “Amami *Kokuto* Shochu Day,” as this Shochu represents the rich natural environment and long tradition of the Amami region.

Awamori’s rich flavor is also brought about by the single *shikomi* method.
Sakekasu (Filtered Sake Cake) Shochu

Sakekasu Shochu is made with Sake cake, which is what is left after Sake has been pressed out of the moromi mush. It has long been employed for a range of purposes, including as an ingredient for drinks and as an antiseptic. It has also been used as a Hashira Shochu, a support spirit for Sake making, which is added to the moromi before the pressing in order to raise the level of alcohol for better preservation. In some regions, the alcohol-free leftovers obtained after distillation are used as a fertilizer in rice cultivation, and therefore Sakekasu Shochu is often drunk on those special occasions related to rice growing. This would include ritual events at shrines and the Sanabori festivals that celebrate the end of harvesting. (“Sanaburi Shochu”) These are based on the philosophy that rice is used without wastage, for example, rice as a staple food, as an ingredient in Sake, Sake cake, and Shochu, as well as recycling the residue after distillation to be used as fertilizer to grow rice the following year.

There are two methods used in the production of Sakekasu Shochu: Kasutori and Kasumoromitori. Sake cakes contain remnants of the yeast and rice, as well as about 8% of the alcohol, and this is refermented to increase the alcohol content by a little more before distillation.

Kasutori: In this traditional method, Sake cakes are added with a small amount of water, and fermented for about a month with the help of yeast contained in the cake and distilled in steaming vessels. The fermented Sake cakes are mixed with rice hulls and spread in the vessels to ensure proper exposure to the steam. This steam that contains a fair amount of alcohol is then cooled down to become Shochu.

Kasumoromitori: In this method, Sake cakes and water are mixed to a porridge-like state, fermented for two weeks, and then distilled using the atmospheric or vacuum distillation method. Sake cakes are sometimes used as ingredients for the second shikomi.

As these distinctive aromas and tastes are very strong just after distillation, the Shochu is stored for some time to allow for settling. The most popular way to enjoy Kasutori Shochu is chilled or on the rocks, and it can also be used as a base in the making of plum liquor. Generally speaking, Kasumoromi Shochu is a little milder than Kasutori Shochu, in terms of aroma and taste.

One new variety of Sakekasu Shochu is made with the finely crushed cakes from high-quality Sake using the vacuum distillation method. It has a sophisticated flavor similar to that of high-quality Sake. It tastes excellent both chilled and on the rocks.

The fermented Sake cakes are mixed with rice hulls and spread in the vessels to ensure proper exposure to the steam.
Appellation of Origin Status – World Trade Organisation’s TRIPS Agreement

Appellation of Origin Control (French: Appellation d’origine contrôlée) is the system whereby the WTO grants certification to certain agricultural products such as wines from Bordeaux and Chablis, Champagne sparkling wines from Champagne region, Cognac, etc, based on the concept of “terroir” or traditional regional unique qualities.

Among Honkaku Shochu and Awamori varieties, Iki Shochu, Kuma Shochu, Satsuma Shochu and Ryukyu Awamori have been granted Appellation of Origin Status by the WTO.