

Awamori

The Spirit of Okinawa

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Shodan

Karateka Sakuma Chikudoun Peichin used to accept challenges in exchange for Okinawan liquor, as stated in Master Shoshin Nagamine's book. One time in Shuri, as told in Tales of Okinawa's Great Masters, Sakuma leaped into a well and then came flying out again. By pressing his hands and feet against the interior walls of the well, he was able to support his powerful body and win shots of awamori from his fellow Okinawans. Master Sakuma based his technique on the skills of Master Makabe Chuan, who had enormous size and great physical strength. Sakuma had long arms and legs, and a light but powerful body. He was able to develop great leaping skills like his boyhood hero. Some might infer that he was merely a show off, since he was characterized as being a brave but imprudent fighter, but one taste of awamori might prove that the stunts were worth it.

Awamori is a distilled rice alcohol that is the official spirit of Okinawa. It is recognized by the world trade organization similar to scotch in Scotland, tequila in Mexico and champagne in France. This means it can only be sold as "awamori" under certain conditions similar to the conditions of scotch, tequila and champagne. Only awamori made in Okinawa prefecture may use the name Ryukyu Awamori and this is protected by the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Awamori is "the spirit of Okinawa."

Western travelers in Japan may ask for sake thinking they will receive fermented rice beer as if they were in Makatos or Bennihanna. Unbeknownst to them is that rice alcohol in Japan is called "nihonshu" and that "sake" means "alcohol" in Japanese. It could refer to beer, wine or whiskey. Another misrepresented fact is that nihonshu is not the official alcohol of Japan. That honor belongs to "shōchū" and it is similar to awamori but, as stated earlier, awamori has a stricter guideline in order to be sold as awamori.

There are more than a few forms of alcohol. First off, the industrial alcohols such as isopropyl alcohol and methanol are not meant for human consumption, resulting in such problems as metabolic acidosis, kidney failure, blindness, brain damage and even death. "Problems" might be an understatement to these serious sequelae of alcohol poisoning. I intend to focus more on the libations people can safely imbibe.

Some definitions follow: wine is alcohol made from fruit juice, particularly grapes, but there are also strawberry wines, even though strawberries are neither fruit nor berries. There is blueberry wine, orange wine, cranberry wine and even banana wine. Beer is alcohol made from fermenting grain. Spirits are made from distillation, a process of boiling the fermented product and bottling the distillate. So according to these basic definitions, sake is not really rice wine; wine is made from fruit and rice is a grain, but it's not a beer because beer requires two distinct steps that sake combines into one. Awamori is a spirit distinct from others since the sake is then distilled and the distillate is collected in earthen jars and left to age, similar to whiskey being stored in barrels to be flavored by the wood.

As previously stated, sake is not rice wine. That unfortunate mistranslation was a clumsy attempt by sake importers in the 1970s to make sake accessible to Westerners. The earliest

evidence of winemaking was around 7,000 BC, but beer and sake didn't appear for another 3,000 years. The reason for this was simple—that is, it's simple to make wine, but not to make beer or sake. To make wine you only need grapes and feet: wine was traditionally made by stomping on grapes to break their skins; the natural yeasts from the feet would efficiently convert the sugars in the grapes to alcohol. Getting from the first stomp to the finished product might take 10 days to two weeks, with virtually no human intervention between the stepping and the pressing. If you step on rice, however, all you'll have is dirty rice. Grapes have large quantities of sugar that yeast can efficiently convert to alcohol, while rice is rich in starch, which needs to be broken into simple sugars before yeast can do its job.

The first sake-making appears to have been just as unsettlingly unsanitary as the image of dirty feet stepping on grapes, if not more so. Rice-based alcohol was first made in China, but Japan did not have access to it until the arrival of rice cultivation from the continent sometime around 1,000 BC. The earliest sake believed to have been made in Japan was kuchikamizake ("mouth-chewed sake"). Villagers—usually those too young or too old to participate in hunting, gathering or agriculture—would diligently chew steamed rice and spit it into a communal jar. By the end of the workday, the chewing and enzymes in the saliva would have converted the starches into sugars, and the yeast could begin making alcohol. The weak brew could be consumed in the evening. If the villagers were more patient, a beer-strength beverage would be available in about a week.

It is believed that sake was regarded as a gift from the gods due to the way it changed how people felt. As such, it became associated with the Shinto religion, and the making of kuchikamizake was elevated to a religious experience by Shinto priests, who recruited virginal young girls to do the chewing and spitting. This is vividly portrayed in the 2016 animated movie *Your Name* (Kimi no na wa) in which the protagonist, a teenage girl whose family runs the local shrine, is embarrassed to make kuchikamizake at the town festival with her classmates looking on. The spiritual relevance of this traditional drink is revealed later in the film. Lest you think this is a long-dead custom, kuchikamizake festivals continued in Okinawa until the 1930s; middle-aged Okinawans claim it was still being served at temples into the 1970s. If you'd like to try it at home, it's very simple. Steam some rice, chew each bite for four minutes, spit the liquefied rice into a container and leave it covered with a cloth for one week. You'll have a cloudy 5 percent brew that's quite a bit sweeter and more acidic than modern sake. You may enjoy it, but expect family and friends to be less enthusiastic.

Fortunately for hygiene enthusiasts, sake production evolved as more advanced techniques than chewing and saliva were discovered to convert the starches in the rice into alcohol. By the sixth century, *kōji* mold imported from the continent offered a more sanitary way of breaking down the starches than peasant spit. Around a century later, sake was being made in a filtered style and sold as a commodity, as evidenced by the word *seishu* (清酒, clear sake) discovered on a wooden tablet dating from about 700 AD in the remains of a warehouse in the city of Nara.

Let's start with the process of how scotch is made in Scotland. The grain is boiled to convert the starch into sugar. The fibrous strands are broken down and denatured into glucose. This is what the yeast consumes, producing ethanol as a by-product. Ethanol has a lower boiling point than water, so the ethanol is boiled off through pipes and the vapors are collected in separate containers to recondense in a more purified form. This is the alcohol we drink, after it has been aged for a minimum of 3 years.

Okinawa was once known as the Ryukyu Kingdom before being part of Japan. Birthplace of karate, Master Shoshin Nagamine, and awamori, the Ryukyu Kingdom traded with the Kingdom of Siam, present day Thailand, and learned the secret of distilling from trades with them. The Okinawans learned to take rice, polish it to remove the proteins, and then used a special enzyme to convert the sucrose in rice into glucose for the yeast. This enzyme is salivary amylase. The source is saliva, human saliva. Amylases and brush border enzymes (within the small intestine) are able to perform exact saccharification through enzymatic hydrolysis. Saccharification is a term for denoting any chemical change wherein a monosaccharide molecule remains intact after becoming unbound to another saccharide. For example, when a carbohydrate is broken into its component sugar molecules by hydrolysis (e.g., sucrose being broken down into glucose and fructose). Certain villagers would chew the rice and then expectorate it into the pots to break down the starch into glucose for fermentation. This was not a problem for bacterial infection since the resultant alcohol killed not only the yeast but also the *Actinomyces israelii* and other commensurate flora present in the human mouth.

Fortunately, today's process no longer includes salivary amylase. The sake is made with the yeast and mold working in parallel at the same time. After a few weeks the alcohol kills the mold and yeast so what is left is sake. The sake has a lower boiling point so it is then boiled and the vapors are collected in a copper still and filtered into earthen jars to age. So, the difference now is that scotch whiskey is boiled while awamori uses an enzyme, not human saliva, to convert starches into sugars.

One of the rules of awamori production is that all of the ingredients are mixed into the mash at the same time. In other words, there's only one stage of fermentation (zenkōji shikomi). The mold, kōji kin, and yeast immediately begin to alter the starch and produce alcohol and carbon dioxide, a serenely complex process called multiple parallel fermentation (heikō fukuhakkō).

As for starch supply, rice shōchū uses short grained japonica rice (*Oryza sativa* subsp. *Japonica*) while awamori is made with long grained indica (*O. sativa indica*), a clear legacy, experts claim, of the drink's ancestral link to Thailand. Awamori was first distilled in the islands of Okinawa around Columbus's time and then spread north to Kyushu within the next century. Awamori developed in Okinawa during the 1400s and reached mainland Japan sometime in the 1500s. That would mean that shōchū is a direct descendent of awamori.

Also significant is the fact that awamori tends to pack a more robust alcoholic proof than shōchū. It is standard for awamori to hit store shelves at a bottled ABV (alcohol by volume) of 30-40% which elevates it to the mind eraser level of spirits indigenous to the west. This is nearly always an adult-sized helping of ethanol more than what is normal for honkaku shōchū. As such, awamori is generally served on the rocks and with a couple splashes of water. Drinking it neat is advised only for those who have recently lost a significant court case.

Another important difference between awamori and shōchū involves the type of kōji kin that is used. The mold in question here is from the *Aspergillus* family, and it's the same kōji kin that is used in the production of nihonshu and a large number of dishes produced not only in Japan but in South Korea and China as well. Awamori, as a rule, uses only so-called black mold (*Aspergillus awamori*, or recently *Aspergillus luchuensis*) while nihonshu is made with a different color, yellow (*Aspergillus oryzae*).

Aspergillus awamori is the scientific name for the black mold spores used in the production of awamori and an increasing number of shōchū. Kōji made using black kōji kin is called kuro kōji. These mold spores help convert starch to sugar. There is not universal agreement on the correct name for this strain, so it is also called *Awamori luchuensis* by many scientists in Japan.

Making the Kōji

Just as with sake and shōchū, awamori production begins with kōji propagation. Awamori used to be made from all sorts of things, including millet, local rice, sweet potatoes and sugarcane, but today it is almost always made with long-grain Indica rice imported from Thailand, harking back to Okinawa's long trading history with Siam. Broken rice that cannot be sold as food is used, allowing producers to procure high-quality rice for "for a fraction of the cost of unbroken grains. The broken grains create more surface area, allowing for more efficient kōji propagation. Indica rice is less sticky than Japanese rice, but easier to turn into sugar and therefore alcohol.

The rice is one of the three main characteristics that distinguish awamori from mainland Japanese shōchū. The other two distinguishing features are that all awamori is made with black kōji (kurokoji), and that the kōji mold is propagated on all of the rice from the start, rather than in two stages as is done for shōchū.

The rice is first washed and then steamed for 45 to 50 minutes in a large stainless-steel drum. The rice is then cooled and mixed together with black kōji mold spores (kurokoji-kin). As explained earlier, the purpose of the kōji mold is similar to the malting of barley in beer and whisky-making: to convert the starches in the rice to sugars which can later be turned into alcohol when yeast is added to the fermentation. For awamori, the kōji-inoculated rice is usually spread out and left for about 24 hours for the mold to propagate. However, some traditionalist awamori makers, including Taragawa, still use the hinekoji method, which allows a

special type of black mold to propagate for three days. This creates a drink “with a strong flavor and aroma that its makers say is well suited to long maturation.

Fermentation

The moromi (fermentation) in awamori production happens in a single ferment, unlike the two-stage process used in shōchū production. Black kōji (*A. awamori* also known as *A. luchuensis* etc.) is mainly used to produce shōchū and awamori. In 1901, Tamaki Inui, lecturer at University of Tokyo succeeded in the first isolating and culturing. In 1910, Genichirō Kawachi succeeded for the first time in culturing var. *kawachi*, a variety of subtaxa of *A. awamori*. This improved the efficiency of shōchū production. It produces plenty of citric acid which helps to prevent the souring of the moromi. Of all three kōji, White kōji (*A. kawachii* etc. Yellow kōji (*A. oryzae* etc.)) it most effectively extracts the taste and character of the base ingredients, giving its shōchū a rich aroma with a slightly sweet, mellow taste. Its spores disperse easily, covering production facilities and workers' clothes in a layer of black. Such issues led to it falling out of favor, but due to the development of new kuro-kōji (NK-kōji) in the mid-1980s, interest in black kōji resurged amongst honkaku shōchū makers because of the depth and quality of the taste it produced. Several popular brands now explicitly state they use black kōji on their labels.

The kōji-inoculated rice, water, and yeast are added to a large tank and left to ferment for 10 to 20 days. The longer the fermentation, the more careful the producer needs to be, as the yeast needs to remain alive and active longer to keep off flavors from emerging. Higher fermentation temperatures result in a faster ferment and richer aromas and flavors, while lower temperatures take longer, but create milder, easier-drinking spirits. The mash ends up at about 18 percent alcohol, or around the alcohol percentage of an undiluted sake.

Distillation

Awamori distilling is somewhat basic: steam is simply injected from a boiler directly into a stainless-steel still containing the fermented moromi. But there are all shapes and sizes of stills on Okinawa. At the modern Helios distillery, they run three large copper stills not unlike those in a Scottish whisky distillery. At the old Zuisen distillery in Shuri—one of only four currently operating in the old Sanka awamori district—they have a complicated stainless-steel device in which the moromi fermentation mash is indirectly steam-heated in a side-arm before flowing into the main still.

Other distilleries use modern vacuum stills which produce a lighter spirit; on the other side of the technological coin, some distilleries, including the Takamine distillery on the island of Ishigakijima, are operating old direct-fired stills. Look for their Omoto Homura brand (於茂登炎), with the last character for “flame” dominating the label.

The proponents of all these types of equipment claim they improve their end product, but of course the basic process is same as any other pot still: the alcohol in the mash turns to vapor, rises through the neck of the still, and is turned back into liquid in a condenser. Most

awamori distillers collect distillate at about 44 per cent alcohol but will often dilute it down to 30 percent or lower before bottling. Notable exceptions are the three distilleries on Yonaguni (the island where the Korean sailors found only chewed miki in the 15th century), which are now famous for their ferocious 60 percent hanazake spirit—so strong that it cannot legally be labelled awamori. Look for the Donan (どなん), Maifuna, (舞富名), or Yonaguni (与那国) brands.

Maturation

Okinawans call their matured spirit *kūsu* (*koshu* in standard Japanese), which means “old alcohol.” Aged awamori, as encoded in the prefecture’s tax scriptures, is allowed to use the designation *kūsu* (古酒: pronounced “*koshu*” in most northern parts of the archipelago) which means that at least 50% of the bottle’s contents were aged for three years or longer. This also indicates that the bottle will be priced several echelons above the run-of-the-mill versions which is aged six months or less, so one must pay attention to the labels. Many people will tell you that *kūsu* tastes mellower and richer than unaged awamori, but in truth, the taste varies markedly with the nature of the original spirit and the methods of maturation. One old categorization described three different types of *kūsu*: the first was characterized by the “aroma of a white plum,” the second had an “aroma of cheek”; the third, the “smell of a male goat.” Those classifications can mean different things to different palates and there can definitely be a little funk in some *kūsu*, though generally it is milder and smoother than standard awamori. These odd classifications simply give an idea of the variety of flavors that maturation can impart to an awamori.

The islanders seem to have been aging spirits for almost as long as they have known how to make them. In fact, they may have been aging wine long before distilling arrived. The Omoro Soshi contains references to storehouses that some scholars think may have been used for holding wine, and a Korean eyewitness in 1461 said he visited an alcohol warehouse in Naha which had three separate sections for one-year-old, two-year-old, and three-year-old goods. Awamori aging was certainly well established by 1719, when the Japanese scholar and politician Hakuseki Arai came across a seven-year matured awamori. In fact, they must have been laying down stocks for much longer aging around that time; a 1926 report mentions awamori in Shuri that had been aged for 200 years.

The traditional way of maturing awamori is the *shitsugi* method, which is similar to the Solera method used for sherry: a series of earthenware pots holding awamori of different ages are kept beside each other in a storehouse. In a Solera setup the year’s vintage is put in a large aging container annually. After a number of years, six for example, the oldest container is partially tapped and bottled, and the containers are cascaded from younger to older. In other words, the oldest container is refilled with product from the second oldest vessel, which is in turn reimbursed with distillate from the third. This continues all the way through the Solera. After alcohol from the sixth aging container has been used to refill the fifth, the current year’s

product (shinshu) is added to the youngest vessel. Soleras are commonly used to make things like vinegar and sherry, and they can achieve impressive results when spirits are involved. In fact, distillers of Spanish brandy are required by law to use a Solera before bottling. The results can be impressive. Much of the roundness and smoothness of aged awamori can be attributed to this traditional system of fractional blending. This has the benefit of allowing the kūsu to be exposed to air and to interact with other spirits, promoting changes in the alcohol. The rough earthenware pots also accumulate residues and themselves give flavor to the alcohol over time. The pots are porous (though less so than oak barrels), and acquire some terroir depending on where they are stored. Awamori aged near the ocean can pick up a brininess like an island Scotch, while those stored in dank limestone caves can take on an earthy minerality. Awamori aged more than 3 years can legally be called “kūsu” or old awamori while awamori aged more than 10 or 20 years can cost a small fortune for an unopened ceramic vessel or bottle.

Unfortunately, the shitsugi system is also ideally suited to cheating, as any shitsugi-aged kūsu is in reality a blend of awamori of different ages. The oldest spirit in a “100-year-old” awamori will indeed be a century old, but it will also contain younger spirits. Depending on the speed of the shitsugi process, it might in truth contain a surprisingly small amount of 100-year-old alcohol. Some makers made the most of this when rules were lax. A code of conduct introduced in 2004 has cleared up the ambiguity. It states that 50 percent of the alcohol in any awamori labeled as kūsu must be over three years old, and all the alcohol in bottles labeled with age statements (e.g., “10-year-old awamori”) must be at least the stated age.

Many makers have abandoned the shitsugi method. Some retain the jars but do not use the method. Others are using stainless steel or enamel-lined tanks because they want to avoid the earthy notes introduced by the traditional pottery. Several makers, including the Helios distillery in Nago, are also aging awamori in oak casks. The result at Helios is so whisky-like in smell and appearance that the Japanese government currently insists that they lighten the color to avoid confusion. In fact, there are now almost as many variations in aging methods as there are distillers. At Zuisen in the Shuri district, they hold classical music concerts on site, theorizing that the music will affect maturation. The Onna distillery places pots 400 meters under the sea for a day, claiming it makes their Shinkai (しんかい, deep sea) brand more rounded and fragrant. There is no limit to how producers will try to gain an edge on the competition.

Okinawa was the first place in Japan where distilled spirits were produced, and the shōchū industry can trace its roots back to the traditions that took hold nearly six centuries ago. The distillation of awamori has been gaining steam ever since, and there are now roughly four dozen distilleries on this wide-stretched archipelago that make the geographically protected drink. Awamori bearing the Ryūkyū banner must be locally produced and adhere to all of the normal awamori rules governing the ingredients, fermentation method (zenkōji shikomi), and pot still distillation. Aging is an essential part of the awamori production process, and fractional blending is common throughout the industry.

Awamori has an aging tradition that is far more developed than that found in the shōchū industry, and there is a whole range of technicalities and labeling details to go along with it. The most important word to know is koshu (古酒), pronounced kūsu in Okinawa, and it indicates that more than half of the liquid volume was aged for at least three years. It is also helpful to know the kanji for year (年: pronounced nen) since it will aid in determining the age of the bottled contents. Awamori that is a blend of 70% five year koshu and 30% eight year koshu will display something like this on the back label: 5 年古酒 70% ・ 8 年古酒 30%. On the front label, however, the claim will be that the contents were aged for five years; the younger of the two numbers is the official printed age of the awamori. A 'born on' date somewhere on the bottle should be clearly marked as well.

For most of its history, Okinawa was an independent country known as the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Ryukyu people were very active traders throughout the Pacific; they had strong economic relationships with Japan, China, Korea and even far-off Siam (modern-day Thailand). Their geographic positioning made them well suited to be a hub for trade across Asia. In keeping with its name, the Ryukyu Kingdom was ruled by a king, with a royal family and a strict aristocracy. Life for the peasants was hard, with typhoons, poisonous tropical creatures, and harsh class divisions. Nevertheless, they made the most of their lot in robust communities.

In 1606, Tadatsune Shimazu, lord of the Satsuma domain in Japan, received permission from the shogun to invade Ryukyu and turn it into a vassal state. The Japanese were prohibited from building seafaring vessels during this period, but Shimazu was allowed to do so for this purpose. The invasion, which took place in 1609, succeeded in less than a month, as approximately 100 ships carrying 3,000 samurai were able to systematically dismantle the Ryukyu defenses using superior firepower and military tactics. As was common with other vassal states paying tribute to stronger powers at the time the king was allowed to keep his position, but was expected to share his wealth with the Satsuma domain. This was a better deal than Shimazu gave to the people of the Amami Islands, which were turned into a sugarcane plantation, but the decision was practical. The Ryukyu Kingdom, made up of hundreds of islands covering thousands of nautical miles, was almost impossible to directly supervise. Better to have the Okinawan king continue keeping his people in check while paying tribute.

Today Okinawa is part of Japan, but is the only Japanese prefecture with no territory within the four main islands. The other 46 prefectures on Japan's four main islands may include one or more of the 6,848 outlying islands that are Japanese territory, but Okinawa is the only one that is made up entirely of outlying islands. The Ryukyu islands stretch from just south of Kyushu to Taiwan. Okinawa prefecture comprises 160 of these islands, of which 49 are inhabited. So remote is Okinawa that the southernmost island, Yonaguni, is closer to Taiwan than it is to the nearest Ryukyu island.

Japanese people from the mainland still think of Okinawans as Okinawan, not as Japanese. This may be just as well, as the Okinawans are proud to be Okinawan and find

mainlanders a little stuffy. Okinawa is very much a tropical paradise: adults are much more likely to be seen in shorts and colorful shirts there than in the rest of Japan.

As to their local booze, the Chinese imperial envoy Tung-yen Li, who visited Okinawa in 1800 for the crowning of the boy king Sho On, recounted that two big pots of the local spirit, awamori, appeared on their doorstep every morning. The stuff was good enough—another envoy lavished praise on it—but the locals seemed to expect them to drink it at an inhuman rate. The delegation did its best, but each morning two new pots would be waiting for them. Eventually, Tung-yen Li admitted, they had been forced to write to the Okinawan royal family: the alcohol was a very nice, but the envoys would be obliged if the king could send a little less.

The British captain Frederick William Beechey was also defeated by Okinawan hospitality at a reception held by a local official in 1827. “During the whole time we were closely plied with sackee in small opaque wine glasses, which held about a thimble full, and were compelled to follow the example of our host and [empty our glasses]: but as this spirit was of a very ardent nature, I begged to be allowed to substitute Port and Madeira, which was readily granted, and we became more on a footing with our hosts, who seemed to think that hospitality consisted in making every person take more than they liked.”

If these accounts give the impression of a culture lost in mindless drunkenness, they are a little unfair. In the 1800s alcohol was “was considered safer to drink than water due to sanitation concerns, and many great Americans and Europeans of the time were known to have drunk beer, wine or even whisky from morning to evening while still managing to be productive enough to be remembered by history. The first U.S. president, George Washington, spent a nearly 10 percent of his presidential salary on alcohol, and in 1799 his estate bottled more than 10,830 gallons (41,000 liters) of whisky. The German philosopher Karl Marx was known to ride donkeys through neighboring towns after benders while at university, and later drank his way through London with other German intellectuals of the day. Writers Charles Dickens and Mark Twain were also known for their drinking. When his son started at Cambridge, Dickens sent a care package that included 102 bottles of various wines and spirits, lest his son become thirsty. Mark Twain, a noted bourbon drinker, later discovered a taste for cocktails, and claimed to have one before breakfast, lunch and dinner. He’s also known for his exhortation to “never refuse to take a drink—under any circumstances.” Taking these examples into consideration, it is not so surprising that Okinawan royalty would ply their visiting dignitaries with vast quantities of their local brew.

In truth, Okinawan awamori was always one of the islanders’ finer pleasures, bound up with elaborate social rituals and spirituality. Traditionally, it was aged for years in large earthenware pots kept by the highest-ranking families. It was said that the head of an aristocratic household might let a trusted servant keep the keys to the safe, but never to his awamori storehouse. A mature awamori—some had reached 150 to 200 years when the oldest stocks were wiped out in World War II—was a precious thing. No one who actually tasted ancient prewar awamori is alive any longer, but the American traveler Bayard Taylor got a rare

chance to try some from the royal family's cellars in 1853. He wrote: "It was old and mellow with a sharp, sweet unctuous flavor, somewhat like French Liqueur."

Okinawans are well-known for their celebrations and awamori plays an important role in helping them to let loose. One such event is called *otori*, which originated from the people of Miyakojima to the south of Okinawa's main island.

Otori involves a storyteller called an *oya*, who downs a shot of awamori, refills it and then sends the glass to the next person. Each member of the circle tells a story, gives a speech or recites a poem.

Ageing awamori is a common practice in Okinawa. Called *kūsu*, (*koshu* in regular Japanese), aged awamori is usually kept in clay pots that are stored underground or in caves.

This tradition has a strong connection to family life. Okinawans purchase their own awamori clay pots to mark occasions like births or weddings. For example, on the day of a man's 20th birthday, the father may break out awamori from the pot and it'll be enjoyed by all the family to celebrate the milestone.

Japan has a history of producing medicinal drinks that feature 'natural ingredients' like plants and animals. One of the most infamous is *habushu*, which involves drowning a pit viper in awamori.

The snake's venom is diluted by the alcohol and is thought to give a potent kick. It is favored by old men who are convinced it can restore their virility.

A traditional way of drinking awamori is out of a *chibugwa* cap alongside a *carafe* called a *gari-gari*. It features a ceramic ball inside, which makes a 'gari-gari' sound once the vessel has been emptied.

Interestingly, this sound was a necessity when awamori was prized as a royal drink. It also stopped stingy hosts from refusing to pour more awamori for their guests. The noise of the *gari-gari* kept everyone honorable and ensured all the drinks were shared equally.

People from the island of Miyakojima, to the south of Okinawa's main island, have a reputation for eloquence. There is a good reason for this. It is called the *otori*: islanders gather in a circle and the first among them, called the *oya*, gives a speech. When they have finished, the *oya* drinks a shot of awamori and sends the glass around the circle to be filled and emptied by all present. The next person in the circle then becomes the *oya*, followed by the obligatory speaking and drinking, and so they continue into sozzled and word-heavy evenings. It is a testament to the importance of alcohol in traditional Okinawan society that, when one Miyako village decided to abolish the *otori* because it forced excessive drinking, the villagers elected to hold an *otori* to celebrate their progressiveness! Not all drinking customs of Miyakojima encourage overindulgence, however: some people still pour the first glass of a newly opened bottle on the earth. They call it *kami no mono*, "the gods' property."

The worlds of aristocratic and peasant alcohol collided on occasion. Chewed alcohol was an important part of some island festivals, and in 1756, the Chinese imperial envoys were served it at court (they stopped drinking as soon as they were told how it was made). In fact, a miki festival persisted in Okinawa into the 1930s, and by all accounts it is still a form of home brew on some remote islands. Takuya Sunagawa, president of the Taragawa distillery on the island of Miyako, remembers miki being served at his local shrine when he was a child, which would have been in the 1970s. Much of the elite's distilled awamori, on the other hand, was doled out by the king in rations to officials and noblemen who would then share it, in the form of gifts and hospitality, with others lower in the social pecking order. In this way, the spirit seeped down through society. But in general terms, the rural brewing and urban distilling continued as two separate traditions until the 1870s, when the formal annexation of Okinawa by Japan and the fall of the Okinawan royal family brought an end to the old restrictions on distilling outside Sanka. An explosion of distilling followed: by 1893 there were 447 distillers across the islands and less than a quarter of them were in Sanka. By the early 20th century, awamori could genuinely claim to be the "people's drink" for the first time in its history.

World War II completed the revolution by nearly extinguishing the old aristocratic tradition. On October 10, 1944, a massive air raid damaged Shuri Castle heavily. The following year the Battle of Okinawa, which killed more than 100,000 local civilians, smashed what little was left. Between May 24 and 26, the huge naval guns of the battleship USS Mississippi reduced the old castle to dust; Sanka, the traditional center of awamori-making nestled under the castle walls, was destroyed. Ancient stores of aged awamori, some of it well over 100 years old, were gone forever, and the stocks of black *kōji* spores necessary for making awamori were lost. After a desperate search, a straw mat with traces of *kōji* on it was found under the rubble of one distillery and, after several failed attempts, the mold was successfully resuscitated.

Such technical issues were the least of the distillers' problems. At the end of the war, when the US occupied the islands, they banned awamori production due to rice shortages. The Okinawans were not easily dissuaded: the US military reported brown sugar, palm, corn, wheat, fruit and even chocolate moonshine being made, and on outlying islands, where distilling had not been stopped, production was in full flow. In March 1946, locals sent a delegation to the authorities pleading for the ban to be lifted, and the Americans eventually relented. Initially, they set up five closely regulated factories making only molasses-based spirits, but two years later they allowed private companies to apply to make awamori. They received 229 applications, and 79 working distilleries were established. Only 11 of these could trace their roots back to the prewar industry. The new awamori map would have been unrecognizable to an 18th-century Okinawan: there were distilleries on almost every sizeable island, many with roots in village cooperatives.

The postwar story of the Tsukayama distillery is a sadly common one. Distilling since 1927 in the same building, the original owner died in the war and his eldest son, a soldier stationed in the Solomon Islands, succumbed to disease before being issued his transfer papers

to return home at the war's end. The distillery was shuttered and became a shelter for homeless families after the conflict, as every other building in the area had been flattened. The facility was subsequently commandeered by the occupying Americans, first as a bakery, then as a local headquarters. In 1949, the determination of the old master's wife, Tsuru Tsukayama, brought it back to its original use: she summoned her second daughter Sada and Sada's husband, who had been a classmate of her late son, home from Kyushu to start making awamori again. The operation has not changed much since then: three men still carry out all the production (about half of Okinawa's distilleries employ fewer than ten workers).

Just as the Tsukayama distillery needed to reestablish itself, awamori had lost its image as a highly regarded spirit. "In those days, the drink got a bad reputation," says Akiyoshi Miyagi, owner of Awamori Kan, an iconic awamori bar in Okinawa. "It was partly to do with competition from whisky, but it was also to do with the image that surrounded awamori itself. People here, not just the Americans but the Okinawans too, didn't want to drink the old spirit, and to be honest, it wasn't always that good."

The advent of bottling and the emergence of bottled brands from the early 1950s brought different problems. Awamori is rich in rice-derived fatty acids; these are important for lending character and mildness to a matured spirit, but can also produce unwanted smells and flavors. Traditional earthenware pots disperse these aromas naturally, but glass bottles, if not handled properly, shut them in. Many islanders turned to whisky and neutral spirits like the popular Shirasagi brand in the 1960s. Awamori production declined nearly 40 percent between 1958 and 1963, and the number of distilleries fell from 118 to 85.

Since America returned Okinawa to Japan in 1972, the number of active awamori distilleries has fallen further to a current total of only 46, but there has also been a gradual rebuilding of the old pride. Miyagi started buying and maturing the Okinawan liquor in 1987; even then, he says, the spirit was being dismissed by many. A series of initiatives including a project to document the history of awamori and a committee to encourage long maturing of awamori, have helped remind people of the drink's heritage. Although it saw a spike in popularity across Japan in the early 2000s, with sales outside Okinawa growing 50 percent every year at one point, this has not been sustained. Nonetheless, awamori has regained its place as a key part of Okinawan culture and is sold as such not only on the islands, but across Japan. Perhaps most significant in the long run is the emerging consensus among producers that the future of awamori lies in producing top-quality spirits. Rules on the labeling of matured awamori have been sharpened up and an increasing number of premium drinks are reaching the market.

Miyakojima, an island of about 50,000 inhabitants, is pristinely Okinawan. It caters to tourists who flock from around the world for the famous scuba diving, but even this is minimal. There's a single business hotel in the town center across the road from a beach, but not much more. The local dialect can be inscrutable even to native Japanese, and non-Asian faces draw stares from children and adults alike.

The largest producer on the island is the Taragawa distillery, which makes the popular Ryukyu Ohcho (琉球王朝) brand. “Large” is relative, of course. Taragawa has a team of just five men making its awamori and produces a little more than 264,000 gallons (1,000 kiloliters) per year. The distillery is surrounded by sugarcane fields, and the signs—and scars—of sugarcane cultivation are everywhere (the president of Taragawa is missing several fingertips due to a childhood accident). Next to the distillery is a small hillside that shelters the company’s aging cave. The natural limestone cave has been improved to store hundreds of clay pots and bottles of awamori. The distillery was established in 1948 at this location after the founder had a dream in which he was instructed to dig a well. When he did, he found water that was ideal for awamori production, and Taragawa was born. They use a production process common to virtually all awamori today.

A unique feature of awamori culture is that families living near a distillery can buy and fill their own clay storage pot and leave it in the distillery’s aging cave; whenever they need it, they call up the distillery and have it delivered to their home. When it’s empty, the distillery picks up the pot, refills it, and puts it back in storage until the next festivity. Parents will buy a pot for their newborn children and give them the 20-year-old spirit—which has been aging in the cave all the while—as a birthday present when they’re old enough to drink. At the Taragawa distillery on Miyakojima, when elementary-school field trips visit the distillery (there is no moral compulsion against alcohol consumption in Japan, so this seems completely natural to virtually everyone), each child gets their picture taken; a bottle of awamori with that photo imprinted on the label is set aside to wait for them in the aging cave until they retrieve it upon adulthood.

Okinawa (and neighboring Kyushu) is a popular spring training location for professional Japanese baseball teams. The Orix Blue Wave team trains in Miyakojima, and one table in the Taragawa aging cave is reserved for their clay pots. At the start of spring training, the pots are delivered to the players’ hotel rooms. They are collected when the team heads home to Osaka. It is not known if former Blue Wave star Ichiro Suzuki still has his own pot awaiting his return.

How to Drink

Okinawans are voracious drinkers and their reputation on the mainland is legendary. Many Japanese will not even try awamori, citing its strength. When they’re told it’s almost always bottled weaker than whisky, they’re skeptical until shown the label. Even then, the look of worry doesn’t leave their face until they’ve enjoyed a glass and realized they’re not (yet) falling-down drunk.

The classic way to drink awamori is straight. Most early sources talk of small thimble-like cups called chibugwa, which are indeed the best vessels for tasting awamori. Many bars now use gorgeous Ryukyu glass tumblers or fancy brandy-tasting glasses, but there’s something about the feel of a tiny pottery chibugwa that helps concentrate the taste buds on the alcohol. These diminutive cups are usually served alongside a gari-gari—a small narrow-necked carafe

with a ceramic ball inside—filled with awamori. The ball is silent until the vessel is empty; then it makes a “gari-gari” sound, signifying it is time for a refill. This was a necessity in the past when awamori was a highly sought-after delicacy carefully meted out by the royal family. Furthermore, as in Japan, pouring “for your neighbor” has long been an Okinawan sign of hospitality and friendship. However, due to the rarity of fine kusu awamori, stingy hosts were known to occasionally pretend to pour for their drunken guests even when the carafe was empty. This “honesty pebble” in the bottom of the vessel keeps everyone honorable even when they’re drunk or feeling stingy.

Straight awamori can be too strong for some. Therefore, most people now drink it on the rocks or mixed with cold water as a mizuwari. In fact, on Miyakojima, mizuwari is the standard way of drinking awamori. A room-temperature mizuwari is best for bringing out the flavor, but some find it easier to drink if ice is added. Vary the proportion of water according to your taste and the strength of the liquor. Four parts awamori to six parts water is preferable with a standard 30 percent spirit.

Another method, recommended by distiller Hajime Sakimoto for her 60 percent Yonaguni hanazake, is to drink it straight after chilling in the freezer. She says this makes for a sweet, thick liquor that goes well with salty foods. You can also drink awamori mixed with hot water as an oyuwari. This custom may have been introduced by Japanese samurai from the Satsuma domain, as it became quite common in the Edo period. Ideally, the water should be between 158°F (70°C) and 176°F (80°C) when it is poured into the glass. Shake the bottle and pour the awamori into the water. Okinawans often prefer a stronger mixture than they serve on the mainland: a 1:1 ratio of water to liquor is common for 30 percent awamori. Finally, unaged awamori (ippanshu) is often drunk mixed with fruit juice, particularly citrus juice.

I wish there was more about Sakuma and how he drank his awamori but all I could find was the short mention in Master Nagamine’s book. I had never heard of awamori before, and because of Tales of Okinawa’s Great Masters I started researching awamori online, mostly where to get it. I thought it was just another sake type drink but I learned so much more about its history and cultural impact. Then I got interested in the science and chemistry of awamori production. The next step would be to visit Okinawa and experience awamori and all Okinawa has to offer to an ignorant tourist such as myself. Maybe I can learn more about Sakuma himself. But I will not be jumping into any wells.