



Liquor Burn's Guide to Shochu 焼酎

The Distilled Spirit of Japan



What is Shochu?

Most people outside of Japan have never heard of shochu (pronounced like 'show-chew'). Shochu is the distilled spirit of Japan. You can think of it as Japan's version of vodka. Typical shochu is about 25% alcohol by volume (ABV), making it weaker than whisky or vodka but stronger than wine or sake. In recent years the popularity of shochu has risen above that of sake in Japan! The Japanese definitely love their shochu. Shochu is generally not served straight, but rather served on the rocks, mixed with hot or cold water, or used as a base for cocktails.

Shochu originated on the island of Kyushu, the southern most of the four main islands of Japan. Kyushu has a warmer climate than the other islands and parts of Kyushu are subtropical. In the past this climate made it nearly impossible to brew sake in Kyushu. Thus, the method for brewing shochu was developed. Shochu and sake taste completely different, so if you confuse the two you will be in for a big surprise! Sweet potatoes, which are one of the traditional crops of Kyushu, are still one of the most common ingredients used to make shochu today.



★ Pro Tip: You can identify a bottle of shochu by looking for these kanji characters: 焼酎. Also, two extra characters are usually used: 本格焼酎.

Understanding the World of Shochu

The terminology and labeling of shochu can be a bit confusing at first. Don't panic! Shochu is far less complicated than sake. There are two basic categories of shochu: a mass-produced version called **korui shochu** 焼酎甲類 and a premium version commonly referred to as **honkaku shochu** 本格焼酎.

焼酎甲類 Korui shochu is distilled multiple times using a *column still*. A column still is designed to continuously produce spirits in large quantities. It is typically odorless and has a taste of little distinction. It is sold in bulk and often forms the base of several cocktails and liqueurs such as canned "Chu-hai" beverages and umeshu (Japanese plum wine).

本格焼酎 Honkaku shochu, meaning "authentic shochu," is distilled using a *pot still*, just like a single malt Scotch whisky. You can think of it as the "Single Malt" version of shochu. A pot still produces a spirit that retains the character of the base ingredients, with a strongly individual taste and aroma. The main ingredient in honkaku shochu is typically rice, barley, or potatoes.

Shochu 101: How it's Made



The Process for Making Honkaku Shochu

Step 1: Rice or barley is steeped in water and then steamed.

Step 2: Water, koji, and yeast are added and the mash is fermented for 7 to 9 days to form unrefined alcohol.

Step 3: The steamed main ingredient (typically rice, potatoes, or barley) is added and it is fermented again to form what is called the "moromi".
Trivia fact: honkaku shochu is also called *moromi shochu*.

Step 4: The moromi is distilled once using a pot still.

Step 5: The distilled spirit is typically matured 1 to 3 months before bottling.



Maturation



Maturation causes the flavor and aroma of shochu to settle. This generally takes between 1 to 3 months. Shochu matured for 6 months to 3 years usually has a mellow taste. However, maturation over 3 years does not always improve the flavor and is typically not needed. The exception to this is Awamori shochu from Okinawa prefecture. Long-term maturation is good for Awamori and it is often matured for 10 years or more.

★Shochu is matured in large ceramic jars like these!

The Wonderful World of Koji 麹

Koji is a beneficial micro-organism native to Japan. It is necessary for making alcoholic beverages from rice. It is also used to make soy sauce and miso. Just like malt for beer, koji produces an enzyme that converts starch into fermentable sugar. Koji and yeast must work together in order for alcohol fermentation to take place.

There are three basic varieties of koji: white, black, and yellow. Each has its own unique characteristics.



White: White koji is easy to cultivate and its enzymes promote the rapid conversion of starch into sugar. As a result it is used to make shochu today. It gives rise to a refreshing, gentle, sweet taste.

Black: Black koji is mainly used in Okinawa prefecture to make Awamori, a special type of shochu. It produces plenty of citric acid which helps to prevent the souring of the moromi (the main mash). Of the three varieties of koji it most effectively extracts the taste and character of the base ingredients, giving the shochu a rich aroma with a slightly sweet, mellow taste. Because of the special properties of black koji many artisan distilleries have started to use it outside of Okinawa for different types of shochu. They usually advertise the black koji on the bottle. Look for *kuro koji* 黒麹.

Yellow: Yellow koji is used to produce sake. It is extremely sensitive to temperature, so its moromi can easily sour during fermentation. This makes it very hard to use in warm regions. Its strength is that it gives rise to a rich, fruity, refreshing taste.

Varieties of Honkaku Shochu

Komejochu 米焼酎

This is rice shochu. Often has a fruity fragrance and taste reminiscent of sake.

Mugijochu 麦焼酎

This is barley shochu. It is generally less distinctive than komejochu (rice shochu) and is easy to drink. *Cask-aged mugijochu looks and tastes very similar to single malt whisky. Delicious!

Sobajochu そば焼酎

This is buckwheat shochu. You have probably heard of soba noodles in Japan, and this shochu is made of the same ingredient as the noodles. It has a milder taste than mugijochu.

Imojochu 芋焼酎

This is potato shochu. Typically sweet potatoes are used. It tends to have a strong taste and distinctive smell. It is often described as "earthy" or "nutty."



Awamori Shochu 泡盛焼酎, or just "Awamori"

This is the shochu made in Okinawa prefecture. It is made from Thai long-grain rice. It is made using black koji with no secondary fermentation. The flavors and aromas are very rich and strong.

Konwashochu 混和焼酎

This is blended shochu. It is the same concept as blended Scotch whisky. Honkaku shochu of one or more distillery(s) is blended with korui shochu.

Other Varieties

Shochu can be made out of just about anything. Other varieties include sesame, chestnuts, brown sugar, shiso leaf, carrots, and even milk!

★★ Pro Tip: The kanji characters written on liquor bottles are often extremely stylized. Don't feel bad if you have a hard time matching these printed characters to the stylized characters on the bottles.

Shochu List 本格焼酎

Type	English	Japanese 日本語	Price	No.
Imo (potato) 芋	Kuro Kame	25° 黒甕 本格芋 720ml	¥ 980	19
	Ikomon Junimo	25° 一刻者 純芋 720ml	¥ 1,320	18
	Tomino Hozan	25° 富乃宝山 720ml	¥ 2,300	17
Kome (rice) 米	Hakutake Shiro	25° 白岳 しろ 720ml	¥ 1,040	21
Mugi (Barley) 麦	Ichiko Silhouette	25° いいちこシルエット 720ml	¥ 930	20
Awamori 泡盛	"7 Years Sleeping"	千年の眠り 720ml	¥ 2,780	22
	Seijaku no Toki	静寂の時	¥ 1,101	23
Green Tea 玉露	"Heaven's Miroku"	25° 天の美緑	¥ 830	31
Chestnut 栗	Dabata Hiburi	25° ダバダ火振 720ml	¥ 1,300	27
Brown Sugar 黒糖	Rento Kokuto	25° れんと黒糖 720ml	¥ 1,145	28
Burdock ごぼう	"White Beard"	25° 白髭 ごぼう 720ml	¥ 1,060	29
Sesame 胡麻祥酎	Benio Tome	25° 紅乙女 720ml	¥ 1,350	24
	Tsukiyomi no Shizu	25° 月読の雫 長期貯蔵 胡麻	¥ 1,300	25

Shiso (Perilla) 紫 蘇焼酎	Tan-taka-tan	たんたかたん	¥ 838	30
Corn とうもろこ し	Sutera Konen	2 5 ° ステラ光年 720ml	¥ 783	32
Purple Potato 紫 芋焼酎	Purple Sekitoba	紫の赤兎馬	¥ 1,460	26

Serving & Enjoying Shochu



There are many ways that shochu is enjoyed in Japan. Here is a list of the most common serving styles.

- Mizuwari - mixed with cold or room temperature water
- Oyuwari - mixed with hot water. This is the *Kyushu style!
- Mixed with water and ice
- Ochawari - mixed with oolong tea (black Chinese tea)
- Mixed with fruit juice
- As a base for cocktails
- Neat or straight-up
- On the rocks



*As mentioned earlier Kyushu is the home of shochu and the center of production. You won't find a lot of sake drinkers in Kyushu! The people of Kyushu normally drink shochu mixed with hot water. The drink is enjoyed for its pleasant aroma. First, hot water is poured into a glass. Then the shochu is gently added. The typical ratio is slightly heavier on the shochu side. The heat naturally mixes the water and shochu together, so no stirring is necessary. In the right light this mixing process can be mesmerizing!

