

## 【Chichibu's Local Alcohol】

The history of alcohol production in Chichibu dates back over 250 years, when the first sake breweries in the city were founded. Water quality is essential to brewing and is referred to as the “life” (*inochi*) of the alcohol. Chichibu's water contains an ideal ratio of mineral content for alcohol production, and a wide variety of different alcohols are made there. The city proudly embraces its identity as a *sakedokoro*, or “brewing town.” As of 2019, Chichibu has four sake breweries, two wineries, one beer brewery, and one whisky distillery.

### Sake and *Shōchū*

Chichibu's four breweries—Yao Honten, Nagatorogura, Bukō, and Chichibu Kikusui—were each built during the Edo period (1603–1867) and supplied sake to the miners and silkworm farmers that lived in the region. The subterranean rivers flowing within Mt. Bukō were included in the list of “100 Famous Waters” (Meisui Hyakusen) compiled in 2008. This same water is used at Bukō, makers of Masamune sake, considered to be the preeminent sake of Chichibu. The pure water used in their brewing can be freely taken from a spigot in front of the Buko brewery, and they also offer free tours. In 2004, the brewery and storefront were designated a national Tangible Cultural Property.

Another beloved local sake, Chichibu Nishiki, has been produced at Yao Honten since the brewery was opened in 1749 by Yao Kihei (1711–1784). The name “Nishiki” is a reference to the fact that the sake is made with both Yamada Nishiki rice and Miyama Nishiki rice. These two varieties of rice are considered top-class within the sake world. Like Bukō, Yao Honten offers regular tours of their brewing facility, which produces approximately 18,000 bottles of sake each year. The brewery's second floor is the Sakezukuri no Mori, a museum of the brewery's history that displays sake-making implements. At an attached storefront and tasting bar, visitors can sample Yao's brands of sake and Danbe *shōchū*, traditional distilled alcohol.

### Whisky

In recent years, Chichibu's sole whisky distillery, Venture Whisky Ltd, has gained worldwide acclaim. Founded in 2004 by Akuto Ichiro (b. 1965), the distillery has captured both domestic and international praise for its unique take on Japanese whisky. Since its founding, Venture Whisky has taken numerous titles at the World Whiskies Awards, including multiple awards for “Japanese Whisky of the Year” and “World's Best Blended Limited Release.”

Akuto, who was born and raised in Chichibu, comes from a family of sake

brewers. After receiving a degree in fermentation science, he briefly worked at the Suntory Yamazaki Distillery before returning to Saitama Prefecture to join his grandfather's brewery, Toashuzo. However, the business was eventually acquired by a larger company which chose not to continue the whisky production. Akuto acquired the leftover whisky mash, which he used to develop "Ichiro's Malt" at the Sasanokawa Shuzo Distillery in Fukushima Prefecture. After three years of work, Akuto founded Chichibu Distillery.

## **Wine**

The first wine to arrive in Japan was likely brought by European missionaries and merchants in the late 1500s. Domestic wine production did not come into its own until around 300 years later, with the establishment of the Dai-Nihon Yamanashi Wine Company in the late 1800s. In 1933, Asami Gensaku (1889–1985) was inspired to begin growing grapes after his son began reading *Robinson Crusoe*. He started selling his wine in 1940, but sales did not take off until 1959, when a French Catholic priest declared that it tasted "like a Bordeaux." Today, Gensaku wine is sold throughout the Chichibu area. Free tours of the winery are also available upon request for groups of five or more.

Usagida Winery opened in 2014 as part of the Chichibu Farmer's Factory in the Yoshida district of Chichibu. The wines produced there, which include Merlot and Muscat Bailey A, are made using 100% local Chichibu grapes grown on the farm's small, 2-hectare vineyard or purchased from local farmers. Like Gensaku Winery, Usagida offers wine tasting and free tours of their vineyard, held on Mondays by request.

During the summer, residents of Chichibu often cool down by drinking *kachiwari*, local red wine served in a beer stein with ice. It is said to pair especially well with barbecue.

## **Beer**

Chichibu's sole microbrewery, Bear Meet Beer, was started in 2016 by Tan Kōdai and his wife, Yuka. After a trip to Oktoberfest in 2010, the couple decided that they wanted to start brewing their own beer. Both Kōdai and Yuka are self-professed bear-lovers, and their beers and ales all feature bear-themed names and designs. Since making its debut at the 2017 Keyaki Beer Festival, the small brewery has rapidly been gaining attention. Bear Meet Beer is available on tap at Mahollo Bar, a café and bar that operates as part of Chichibu Omotesandō Lab, a combination restaurant and souvenir shop near

Chichibu Jinja Shrine.