

Awamori's Special Ingredient: Black Mold

Awamori's special ingredient is *kurokoji* (black mold). *Koji* (*Aspergillus oryzae*) is a fungus used for fermentation in making miso bean paste and soy sauce, as well as sake and *shochu* (a popular Japanese distilled spirit). *Kurokoji* (*Aspergillus awamori*) is its relative; it originated on Okinawa and is used exclusively for distilling awamori.

Kurokoji converts the starch in rice, the base ingredient of awamori, to sugar, which is converted into alcohol during fermentation. This process, known as "multiple parallel fermentation," also occurs during sake and *shochu* production. *Kurokoji*, however, produces more citric acid than the white and yellow *koji* typically used to make sake and *shochu*. The high amounts of citric acid prevent airborne bacteria from infecting the fermentation mash. This is a key benefit in Okinawa's hot and humid climate, as it allows awamori distillers to produce alcohol year-round.

In the past, many varieties of *kurokoji* were used for awamori production, but almost all were lost when the distilleries were destroyed during World War II. Luckily, a few spores that survived the war were successfully cultivated and used to restart awamori production. In 1998, some samples of other prewar *kurokoji* stored at the University of Tokyo were discovered by one of the school's professors, and these have since been used for making awamori.