

## **A Drink for a Trading Nation**

Awamori's roots are not completely known, but it is likely they were cosmopolitan, which is consistent with the Ryukyu Kingdom's history as a trading nation. Although a previously popular theory linked awamori to the Thai spirit Lao Khao (because of their similar tastes), other research points to spirits made in China's Fujian Province, which tallies well with the kingdom's history of trade. More evidence in favor of Chinese origins is the practice of measuring awamori's alcohol content by the number of bubbles that appear when poured, a method traditionally used for Chinese spirits. This is also the possible origin for the name "awamori," which can be translated as "swelling bubbles."

From accounts by Chinese visitors, shipwrecked Koreans, and records left by the samurai of the Satsuma domain, it appears that awamori production had begun by the end of the fifteenth century, making it Japan's oldest distilled spirit. The first written mention is from 1671, when the Ryukyu King Sho Tei (1645–1709) sent the shogun Tokugawa Ietsuna (1641–1680) a certificate promising gifts, including awamori. In 1719, a famous Confucian scholar named Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725) wrote about the awamori production process, noting that awamori was drunk after being "sealed for seven years." This may be an early reference to *kusu*-aged awamori.