

Awamori and the Ryukyu Kingdom

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, awamori production was restricted to the area known as Shuri Sanka, the name given to the villages of Sakiyama, Akata, and Torihori. The area had plenty of fresh spring water and rice fields nearby, so was ideal for brewing and distilling.

Shuri Sanka was less than 1 kilometer from Shuri Castle, the seat of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The proximity of the villages helped the Ryukyu government closely control production. Only 40 (or 48, depending on the historical source) individuals were allowed to make awamori. Everything they produced went to the government, though they were allowed to keep a small portion in the form of payment. The penalties for unlicensed brewing were harsh, and included exile to a prison island.

Awamori was officially reserved for the very highest echelons of the Ryukyu Kingdom and their guests. Nobles and court officials, however, were known to share their rations, so townspeople may have had chances to sample the drink. Over time, awamori found a place throughout Okinawan culture, from diplomacy to cuisine and religious ceremonies. When Okinawa was annexed by Japan, the kingdom's strict control of distillation ended, and by 1893 the number of distilleries across the islands had swelled to 447.