

## Making Awamori

While modern distillers have introduced mechanization and new technologies to the process, the essential steps for making awamori have changed little since the days of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The process is relatively uncomplicated compared to making sake and *shochu*, but great care is taken to produce awamori that will age well.

### *Washing and steaming the rice*

The imported Thai rice is washed to remove all remnants of husk, left to soak in water, then steamed for about one hour. This moistening and softening of the rice prepares it for malting.

### *Making the rice malt*

The starch in the rice must be converted to sugar before fermentation can happen. This is done using a mold called *kurokoji*, and is the equivalent of malting wheat for beer or whisky making.

The steamed rice is transferred to a machine that makes the rice malt. *Kurokoji* mold spores in the form of a powder are then sprinkled on a portion of the rice. Over the next two days, the rice turns dark grey as the mold propagates. The rest of the steamed rice is cooled to 40° C and then mixed with the first portion so that all the rice—awamori's base ingredient—can turn to rice malt. During this process, the *kurokoji* converts the rice starch to sugar, and in two or three days the rice becomes ready for the next step, fermentation. Because all the rice is malted, the awamori will have a rich fragrance of *kurokoji*.

### *Fermentation*

Awamori fermentation happens in one step, unlike with sake or *shochu* making, in which the base ingredients such as rice or sweet potatoes are added gradually. With awamori, the rice malt is placed in a large tank with water and yeast, where over the next two weeks a highly complex process known as “multiple parallel fermentation” occurs. Two separate transformations happen: the conversion of starch to sugar by the

*kurokoji*, and the conversion of sugar to alcohol by the yeast. At the end of the two weeks, something similar to an acidic, unrefined wine has been produced. Citric acid from the *kurokoji* helps to prevent the fermentation mash from spoiling during this process, but it will be extracted during distillation. At this stage, the alcohol content is around 18 percent.

### *Distillation*

Most awamori distillers use the relatively simple distilling equipment of a pot still, and follow a straightforward process. (Pot stills are used to make many other well-known distilled spirits, including Cognac brandy and malt whisky.) When the fermentation mash is heated, alcohol turns into vapor, rises through the neck of the still, then returns to liquid form in the condenser. Typically, the liquid is only distilled once, which helps retain the complex and rich flavors created during fermentation. At this stage, the raw awamori has an alcohol content of about 50 percent.

### *Storage and aging*

Prior to storage, the distilled liquid is lightly filtered, which helps to preserve as many flavor and aroma compounds as possible. It is then diluted with water to lower its alcohol content, usually to between 30 and 40 percent. Most awamori is aged in ceramic or metal tanks for six months to a year. It can also be aged in traditional earthenware pots and sometimes for much longer periods. During the aging period, it develops the well-rounded character that awamori is celebrated for. Finally, it is transferred to bottles or earthenware pots for shipping to customers.