

Aged Awamori

In Okinawa, traditionally aged awamori is highly prized, and any that has been aged more than three years is given the name *kusu*. But the aging process is seemingly endless. Before World War II, the oldest awamori dated back 200 years, and 150-year-old *kusu* was not unusual. The Ryukyu Kingdom kept its own store of aged awamori in Shuri Castle, which it served to envoys from China and other honored guests.

Spirits such as whisky and brandy absorb aromatic compounds from their barrels as they age. The aromatic compounds of awamori, however, are produced by changes in the spirit itself, so awamori will age even in glass. Over time, awamori becomes slightly viscous, and develops a mellower and sweeter flavor. It also takes on a beautiful golden hue, with flavors and aromas with a vast number of possible flavor and aroma combinations.

Awamori is traditionally aged in unglazed earthenware pottery jars, which are slightly porous and are said to let the awamori breathe, providing gentle oxygenation that helps it mature. Unlike with wine, gentle oxygenation actually helps the awamori mature. Meanwhile, minerals in the pots are believed to act as catalysts for chemical changes that improve the flavor and aroma. A 2010 study found awamori that had been aged in earthenware jars had 1.4 times as much of the aromatic compound vanillin as awamori aged in glass bottles.

For awamori bottled since 2015, regulations stipulate that in order to be called *kusu*, 100 percent of the awamori must be at least three years old. For older blended awamori, including awamori made using the traditional *shitsugi* method, the age on the front label must correspond to the age of the youngest awamori in the blend.