

A Kaleidoscope of Taste and Aroma

For centuries, Okinawans have known that aging awamori can produce a dizzying variety of taste and aroma combinations. In the nineteenth century, Sho Jun (1873–1945), the fourth son of the last king of the Ryukyu Kingdom, categorized matured awamori by its aroma. A culinary expert as well as a connoisseur of many other arts, Sho identified three main aromas: ripe groundcherry (*Physalis*), white plum, and, interestingly, male goat—a delicacy at the time.

In 2016, awamori distillers and researchers produced a “flavor wheel” featuring 49 different tastes and aromas that had been identified. Even though awamori contains no sugar, it often takes on a caramel, chocolate, or vanilla sweetness as it ages. There may be fruity aromas of apple and banana, especially when vacuum distillation is used, or earthy and floral notes. When aged skillfully, awamori becomes smoother and rounder over time, as fats from the rice mash dissolve in the alcohol to give a viscous, mellow mouthfeel.

Awamori has traditionally been drunk neat as a digestif, but adding a little hot or cold water helps it go well with food. Some distillers and chefs are exploring how to pair the spirit with specific dishes, similar to wine. Like other spirits, some people find awamori a good match for sweet foods, such as chocolate.