

## The Royal Awamori Store

During the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879), awamori was brewed and distilled in the Shuri Sanka villages near Shuri Castle. Once it was ready, the spirit was transported to the castle, where it was kept safe in a storehouse called the *zenigura*. Because it was made from rice, a prized grain that had to be imported, awamori was watched over with great care. (Sweet potatoes were the staple food of the kingdom's subjects at the time.) The *zenigura* was the court's awamori store; it supplied the spirit for the king and nobles to drink and serve to high-ranking guests, and for use in religious and courtly ceremonies.

Archaeological excavations have established that the *zenigura* was built sometime after 1600. Historical records show that court officials working there managed not just the awamori, but vinegar, tin sake bottles, and packaging to protect the awamori jars during transport. On a drawing of the castle, the *zenigura* is clearly shown as a two-storied building with a tiled roof. It was located about 100 meters from the main hall of the castle and close to a side entrance, probably so goods could be easily transported in and out.

From the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, awamori from the store was also regularly sent to Edo (present-day Tokyo) as a gift to the shogun. Over this time, the Ryukyu Kingdom dispatched 18 missions to pay tribute to Japan. Records of these missions show that by 1671, awamori was listed separately from *shochu*. Other contemporary documents show how awamori was well known in Edo as a fine alcohol from the Ryukyu Kingdom.