

Entertaining Honored Guests

The Ryukyu Kingdom prided itself on its hospitality to all visitors, and a side gate of Shuri Castle was even painted with characters meaning “the land of courtesy.” Envoys from China and Japan, as well as other visitors, were treated to fine food and awamori, sometimes for weeks at a time.

In 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry (1794–1858) stopped in the Ryukyu Kingdom on his way to Japan to force the shogunate to open its ports and trade with the United States. Although the Ryukyu king was initially reluctant to allow the American party into Shuri Castle, he eventually consented, greeting them with customary Ryukyu hospitality. Bayard Taylor, who joined and chronicled Perry’s journey, was impressed by a drink that was “old and mellow… somewhat like French liqueur” (probably a reference to brandy). It is very likely he was served aged awamori.

Records of the event show, however, that the Americans were served somewhat less refined food than that offered to Chinese and Japanese guests. After all, the Ryukyu Kingdom had been nurturing relationships with those nations for centuries. The awamori that so impressed Taylor may have been far from the best the Ryukyu Kingdom had to offer.