

New Frontiers for Awamori

Rice shortages in the period immediately after World War II made awamori production in Okinawa impossible. When distilling restarted, production initially centered on inexpensive and strong varieties of alcohol. After Okinawa's return to Japan in 1972, however, efforts to improve the quality of awamori began in earnest. In recent decades, Okinawa's distillers have focused on premium awamori, as well as bottlings that are lighter and easier to drink. Awamori was served to world leaders at the Okinawa G8 Summit in 2000, and distillers benefitted from the subsequent tourism boom and increase in demand for Okinawan products.

Today, awamori is available in a wide range of strengths, from types with an alcohol content similar to that of wine, to types that are similar in strength to whisky. (Some awamori has an alcohol content of 60 percent, but since Japanese tax law stipulates 45 percent as the upper limit, it cannot be sold as "awamori.") Sparkling awamori and awamori-based liqueurs are also available. Distillers are bringing innovations to the production process, such as the use of different types of stills. New strains of yeast and *kurokoji* mold have been developed; notably, a prewar *kurokoji* strain was discovered at the University of Tokyo and revived. Some distillers have also started to use locally grown rather than imported rice.

Traditionally, awamori was drunk neat, but it can be enjoyed in many ways. As a distilled spirit, awamori works wonderfully in cocktails and can be mixed with soda, ice, and even hot water, which produces the mellow aroma of roasted rice.