

Kuma Shochu—Distillation and History

Shochu is a distilled spirit that was originally made from rice, though it is now also made using sweet potatoes, barley, and brown sugar. Shochu made from rice has been produced in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region since the early sixteenth century. The master distillers of Hitoyoshi Kuma have preserved the traditional production methods and ingredients. They continued to use rice when other distillers were switching to more affordable alternatives in the late Edo period (1603–1867).

What is Kuma Shochu?

Kuma Shochu is a premium shochu brand with protected by a geographical indication (GI). It is a single-distillation spirit made entirely from rice. Only spring water from the Hitoyoshi Kuma region is used for mashing and fermentation, and all phases of distillation and bottling are carried out within Hitoyoshi Kuma. Flavor profiles vary depending on the mash, distillation process, cask aging, and other factors, but most Kuma Shochu can be broadly categorized as light and refreshing (“Light Type”), fruity and floral (“Flavorful Type”), rich and aromatic (“Character Type”), or heavy and full-bodied (“Rich Type”). The alcoholic strength (alcohol by volume, or ABV) can range from 25 to around 44 percent.

How is it made?

The process begins by adding koji mold to rice that has been washed, steamed, and cooled. Koji is a specific type of mold used in the production of miso, soy sauce, sake, and other essential Japanese culinary products. The koji-rice mix is typically left for about three days.

Yeast and water are added to the rice mixture to create a mash. Many distillers use yeast strains developed specifically for Kuma Shochu. The mash is fermented in two stages. Once the first round of fermentation is complete, the mash is topped up with more water and steamed rice. The total fermentation process takes about three weeks and produces an end mash with an alcohol strength (alcohol by volume, or ABV) of about 18 percent. This makes it possible to produce a spirit with 40 percent ABV or higher in a single distillation. By comparison, the mash for Scotch is typically only 7 percent ABV, and the distillation process must be repeated multiple times.

All Kuma Shochu is single distilled using either atmospheric distillation or vacuum

distillation. Atmospheric distillation is carried out at regular atmospheric pressure, and the mash is subjected to higher temperatures and boiled for longer periods, resulting in a rich and intense flavor and aroma. Vacuum distillation is performed under reduced pressure to lower the boiling point of the mash and expedite the distillation process, and produces a milder flavor and more delicate aroma. Kuma Shochu was traditionally distilled at atmospheric pressure over a wood fire using a wooden barrel-like still.

Kuma Shochu is typically matured for six months after distillation to allow the aroma and flavor to stabilize. Some distillers create more complex flavor profiles by maturing their shochu in casks, such as those that have been used for sherry.

How can I learn more?

There are 27 distilleries in Hitoyoshi Kuma, each with its own distinct lineup of Kuma Shochu. Many offer tours (reservations required), and some include tastings. Information about the distilleries and more is available at [Kuma Shochu](#), the official website of the Kuma Shochu Makers' Association.