

Kuma Shochu—Distillation and History

Shochu made from rice has been produced in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region since the early sixteenth century. The spirit can also be distilled from sweet potatoes, barley, and brown sugar, but the rice variety is the original base. The traditions of making shochu have been maintained by the master distillers of Hitoyoshi Kuma, who continued to use rice when other distillers were switching to more affordable ingredient alternatives in the late Edo period (1603–1867).

Kuma Shochu is a premium shochu brand protected by a Geographical Indication (GI). It is a single-distillation shochu distilled entirely from rice. Only spring water from the Hitoyoshi Kuma region is used in the mashing and fermentation processes. There are 27 distilleries in Hitoyoshi Kuma, each with its own distinct range of Kuma Shochu. Many distilleries offer tours, some of which include tastings. Reservations are required.

Kuma Shochu was traditionally distilled at atmospheric pressure over a wood fire, using a wooden barrel-like still. Today, distillers use both atmospheric distillation and vacuum distillation (reduced pressure) methods to produce Kuma Shochu with a wide variety of flavor profiles. Atmospheric distillation tends to result in a rich and intense flavor and aroma. In contrast, vacuum distillation typically produces a milder flavor and more delicate aroma.

Rice was a highly valued commodity throughout Japan, and shochu made from rice was thus a luxury reserved for the ruling classes in most areas. In Hitoyoshi Kuma, however, the ruling lords accumulated a significant surplus of rice, allowing rice shochu to be produced in much larger quantities. They accomplished this by implementing irrigation systems and other strategies to improve rice yields. The wide availability of the spirit fostered its popularity and contributed to the strong Kuma Shochu culture that developed in the region.