

# A Beginner's Guide To Shochu



Exploring The  
Wonderful World  
Of Japan's National  
Spirit



# Intro

The spirits category is forever changing, forever building anticipation for the next big thing. The gin boom came in the UK and knocked down the door for a reexamination of words like 'premium' and 'high-quality.' (It's a little bit of marketing spiel with a grain of truth).

As tastes continue to evolve there's the opportunity for more niche spirits to have their time in the spotlight. Shochu is one of them. Japan's best kept secret, shochu is a diverse spirit that's endlessly fascinating and has the potential to take the world by storm.

How? Well, that's what this PDF is for. It's to introduce you to the wonderful world of Japan's national spirit, how it's made, types to look out for, drinking styles and helpful resources to continue your exploration down the shochu rabbit hole.

**KANPAI!**



# What Is Shochu?

Shochu (pronounced 'sho-chew') is a distilled drink native to Japan that can be made with a huge range of ingredients. (more on that later). It comes in between 20% to 45% ABV.

It's important to note that shochu isn't easy to pigeon hole based on the diversity of tastes, flavours and expressions. Generally, there are two main types.



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**"Due to its inherent diversity of aroma and flavour, it's difficult to compare it to just one other spirit category from another part of the world."**

**We can start by saying that it is an intensely artisanal product that is single-distilled and retains much of the character of the ingredients that were used to make it.**

**To offer a more concrete definition: (honkaku) shochu is a spirit distilled from approved ingredients and their koji."**

Chris Pellegrini, author of The Shochu Handbook

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# HONKAKU SHOCHU

Also known as authentic or genuine, honkaku shochu is made with a single distillation process. This single distillation ensures the type of honkaku shochu being made retains its rich flavour and is usually made from a starch base e.g. sweet potato, koji mould, yeast and water.



# KORUI SHOCHU

Korui (multi-distilled) shochu is mass produced shochu that is usually flavourless and often mixed with cocktails. A popular version of korui shochu is a chuhai (a drink containing shochu, soda and a sweet mixture).





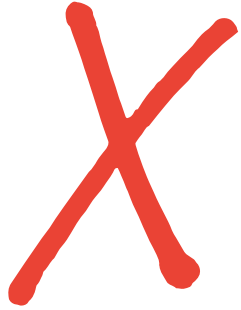
# What Shochu Is Not



Japanese vodka



Nihonshu (Sake)

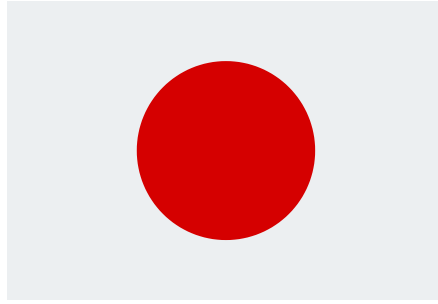


Soju (A Korean spirit)



Baiju (A Chinese liquor)

# The History Of Shochu



The history of shochu dates back to at least the 15th century, when Japan was introduced to distilled spirits by way of Korea, Thailand and Okinawa.

While there are several theories on how distillation technology made it to Japan, the most popular seems to be the overseas trade route between Thailand and Okinawa.

What's amazing is the first written records of distilling traditions are all within 70 years of each other: 1488 (Korean spirits), 1494 (Scotch whisky), Okinawan awamori (1534), Japanese shochu (1546), French calvados (1554).



An early reference to shochu comes from the Satsuma region on the island of Kyushu in 1559. This reference came from annoyed carpenters who had a bone to pick with the head priest of the Koriyama Hachiman Shrine. In Japanese they scrawled graffiti on the wall which said the equivalent of “the head priest is a cheapskate. He didn’t give us shochu at all! What an

a###€0\$¢!”



By 1696, some sake brewers were starting to add shochu to their nihonshu. But it wasn’t until 1705 when the king ingredient of honkaku shochu sweet potato took off in Kyushu. A man named Riemon Maeda returned from Okinawa, planted the spud and it spread from there.



In 1895, continuous distillation arrived in Japan, leading to the rise of korui shochu in 1910.

Single-distilled shochu finally started to get the respect it deserved in Japan in the 1970s and best selling brands like Iichiko and Unkai were created.



**Today, shochu has the potential to see steady growth in Western countries and it is the best-selling spirit in Japan.**



# How Is Shochu Made?

Honkaku shochu is considered to be the premium stuff, so we'll focus on how that's made:

## **1. Koji preparation**

Koji, (black, white and yellow), is a game-changing mould that's widely used in Japanese products.

In alcohol making, koji tag teams with yeast to help convert starch to sugar and then sugar to alcohol.

Koji spores (referred to as koji kin) are sprinkled onto steamed rice in a special koji room and then left for around 48 hours to propagate.





## **2. First moromi fermentation**

After the koji kin has spread through the rice the koji is ready. It's mixed with water and yeast to create the moromi (the mash). This starter fermentation may take place in clay pots or stainless steel vats.

The moromi is stirred regularly and bubbles away for 5 - 8 days.



## **3. Second moromi fermentation**

On the morning of the second fermentation, the main ingredient e.g. sweet potato or barley is washed and steamed. Then it's added to another fermentation tank with more water, yeast and a portion of the first fermentation moromi.

This is then left to ferment for 1 - 2 weeks.

## 4. Distillation

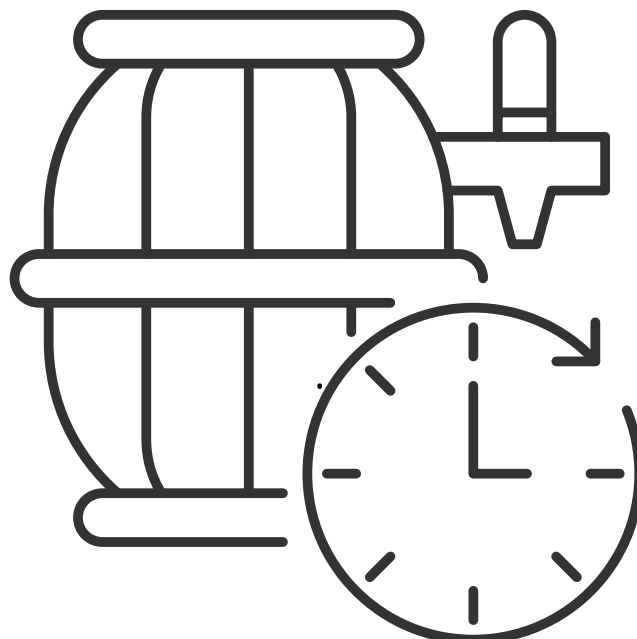
Once the mash is ready, a distillation method is chosen. With honkaku shochu it's usually a stainless steel pot still.

The result is a genshu (unprocessed) spirit that can range between 37% to 45% ABV.

## 5. Aging

The next step is to choose a way to age the genshu and there are a few ways to do it.

One way is to use large tanks, barrel age the distillate or to use clay pots. Typically honkaku shochu is aged from anywhere between 1 - 3 years to ensure a great flavour experience.



## 6. Dilution

After aging, an optional step is dilution. Not all shochu is diluted but it can be blended together with water in different vessels to bring the ABV down.



## 7. Filtration

Filtration is another step that can be used to ensure consistency in the flavour of your shochu.

Organic compounds in the shochu provide flavour but it may be filtered to remove anything that is not liquid. These methods range from porous cloth bags to sophisticated charcoal filtering systems.

## 8. Bottling

Once blending, dilution and filtration are out of the way, the shochu is put through a bottling machine and sealed in different sized bottles.



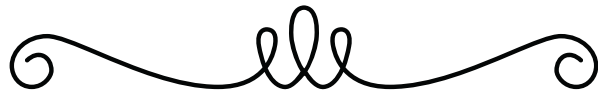
**"Traditionally, shochu was sold out of the maker's shop. Families would bring their empty ceramic vessels to the shop for refilling.**

**This was obviously an economical process for the makers, but not so much for the buyers. Eventually makers started selling shochu in smaller ceramic jars and finally moved to glass bottles." - Stephen Lyman, author of The Complete Guide To Japanese Drinks**



# Types Of Shochu

One of the major appeals of shochu is that it has a dizzying range of ingredients that it can be made from. Some of the most unusual include aloe, pumpkin, milk, chestnut, sesame, carrot, kelp, perilla, cactus and more!



**“Barley shochu appears to be easy for people to get into because beer and whisky are omnipresent around the world. However, there are myriad directions we can go in here.**

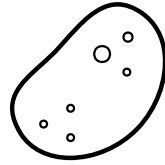
**For red wine drinkers I might suggest a sweet potato shochu made with something from the “beni” family. These potatoes are generally purple or red, and the resulting shochu mixes sweet and tart in a way that’s reminiscent of tannins.” - Chris Pellegrini**



Here's five of the most popular types of honkaku shochu to try...



# 5 Styles Of Shochu



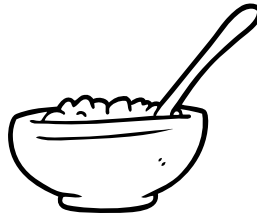
## IMO (SWEET POTATO)

Sweet potato is the most common type of honkaku shochu.



## MUGI (BARLEY)

Barley is another common ingredient and can give shochu whisky characteristics.



## KOME (RICE)

Rice shochu can be made from Japonica or Indica variations.



## KOKUTO (BROWN SUGAR)

Kokuto shochu can only be classified as such if it's made in the Amami Islands.



## SOBA (BUCKWHEAT)

The first soba shochu was produced in 1973 by Unkai Shuzo in Miyazaki Prefecture.

# Shochu Serving Styles



Another wonderful thing about shochu is that it can be served in multiple ways. Have fun experimenting with the different flavours and aromas that appear!

Popular ways to serve shochu include:

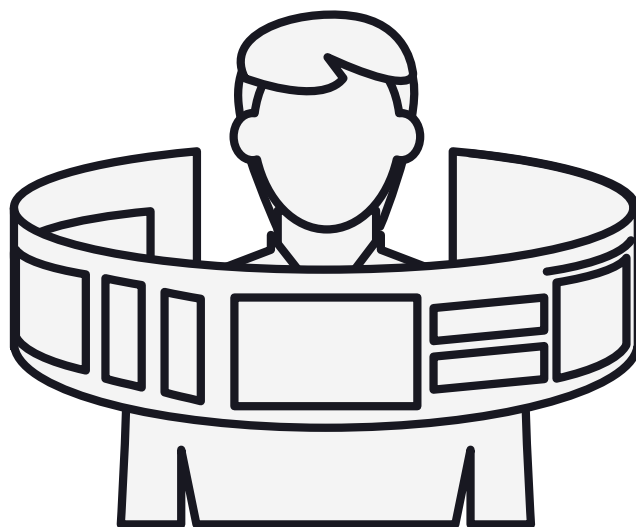
- Mizuwari: Mixing shochu with a splash of cold water.
- Oyuwari: Adding hot water to shochu. Can help to bring out certain aromas in your drink.
- Maewari: Preparing your own bottle of mizuwari mix 24 hours before you plan to drink it. Great for dinner parties!
- Hanatare freezing: This method is for hanatare (high ABV shochu). Stick it in the freezer, enjoy it ice cold.

# The Future Of Shochu

**"Much like in the nihonshu industry, shochu producers are struggling in Japan due to waning domestic demand. It is likely that the industry will have little choice but to develop markets in other parts of the world.**

**But I see positive signs on the horizon for Japan's indigenous spirits. There are clear trends of consumer groups opting for quality over quantity, and shochu should be able to take advantage of that.**

**With bartenders showing ever-increasing excitement about working with the category's immense diversity of flavour and aroma, I don't see anything getting in the way over the next decade." - Chris Pellegrini**



# Shochu Resources

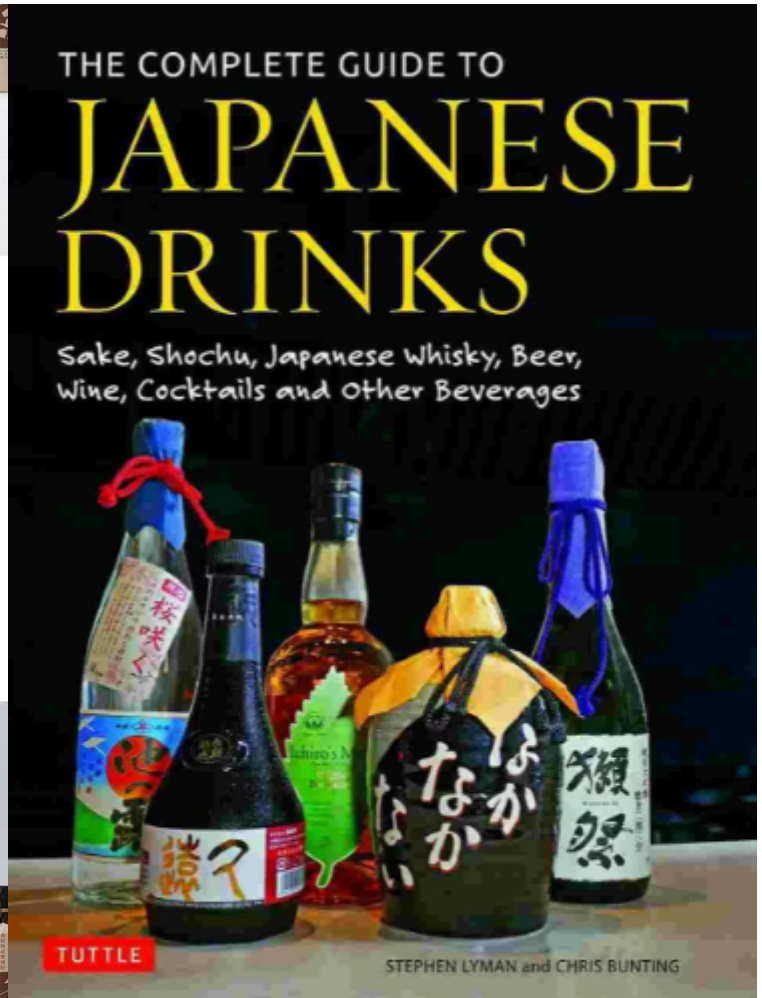
There's a wealth of great shochu information out there and if you'd like to explore this beautiful spirit in more detail, check out:



## THE SHOCHU HANDBOOK

AN INTRODUCTION TO JAPAN'S INDIGENOUS  
DISTILLED DRINK

BY  
CHRISTOPHER  
PELLEGRINI



SAKE  
ON AIR



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# Image credits

- **Iichiko shochu bottle:** <https://thejapanesebar.com/spirits-whisky-shochu/shochu/shochu-distillery/iichiko-silhouette/>
- **Koji fermentation:** <https://www.dewazakura.co.jp/en/dewazakura/sake-02.html>
- **Iichiko Saiten bottle:** [https://alcademics.typepad.com/new\\_booze/2019/03/iichiko-saiten-shochu.html](https://alcademics.typepad.com/new_booze/2019/03/iichiko-saiten-shochu.html)
- **Shochu bottles:** <https://www.winemag.com/gallery/japans-best-kept-secret-shochu/>
- **Chuhai:** <https://www.japanesefoodguide.com/chuhai/>
- **Iichiko shochu bottle:** <https://shop.foodland.com/product/iichiko-shochu-893041000012>
- **Unkai shochu bottle:** <https://www.astorwines.com/SearchResultsSingle.aspx?search=15704>
- **Koji:** <https://www.clearspring.co.uk/blogs/news/8024723-koji-the-culture-behind-japanese-food-production>
- **Moromi:** <https://en.sake-times.com/learn/moromi-sum-of-all-the-ingredients>
- **Shochu bottles:** <https://boutiquejapan.com/shochu/>