



Brown sugar is unloaded into a container at Kaiun Shuzo.

Kokuto Shochu

Treasure of the Islands

Kyushu is known as the birthplace and heartland of the national drink known as *shochu* (distilled liquor). Kyushu's remote Amami islands meanwhile are known as the production center of a rare and special variety of the drink, *kokuto shochu*.

KYOKO MOTOYOSHI

THE Amami archipelago consists of eight inhabited islands that are home to nearly 130,000 people. The main island, Amami Oshima, is located nearly 380 kilometers south-southwest of Kagoshima in Kyushu. Each island in the archipelago is full of rich and diverse forms of nature, such as one of Japan's largest subtropical laurel forests, a white-sand beach, and beautiful ocean waters with an abundance of coral reefs. The weather on the islands remains warm throughout the year, with an annual average temperature of 21°C and plenty of rainfall.

Amami is the only place in Japan where *kokuto* (brown sugar) *shochu* (distilled liquor) is produced. While rum is also a type of distilled liquor made from

sugar cane, *kokuto shochu* characteristically has a faint aroma of brown sugar and a rich, malted rice-derived flavor because it is prepared with the use of malted rice and sugar cane-derived brown sugar.

“The sugar cane plantations on the Amami islands are said to date back to the seventeenth century. However, the brown sugar made from this sugar cane was exclusively sold by the Satsuma-han, the domain that governed the Amami archipelago at that time. The islanders were not allowed to use brown sugar,” says Shojiro Maki of the Amami Branch of Kagoshima Sake Brewers Association. “However, according to a book written in the nineteenth century, *shochu* was already being made from sugar cane juice at that time, implying that our ancestors on these islands secretly distilled brown sugar-based liquor.”

Today, *kokuto shochu* is made by twenty-five breweries on the five islands of Amami Oshima, Tokunoshima, Kikaijima, Okinoerabujima and Yoronjima, with the volume shipped in recent years totaling approximately 7,500 kiloliters. Easily identified by its cool aqua bottle, Lento is a particularly



- 1 Kaiun Shuzo's tanks for Lento are equipped with audio devices from which classical music plays. "Lento" is a musical term for a slow tempo.
- 2 Yoshimi Kozuma of Kaiun Shuzo monitors the progress of fermentation by checking the smell that comes from the tank.
- 3 Kaiun Shuzo's Lento
- 4 Sakaya Maekawa, a liquor shop that sells kokuto shochu from all of the breweries on the Amami islands

popular brand of kokuto shochu and boasts the largest volume shipped among all brands made on the islands. Produced by Amami Oshima Kaiun Shuzo, a brewery established in 1996 on Amami Oshima, Lento's popularity stems from its light, refreshing flavor and mild texture. Lento is aged in a tank with classical music playing all around it. The brewer says the vibrations of the music facilitate the aging and help soften the taste. Moreover, 90% of Kaiun Shuzo's products are distilled under reduced pressure. The brewery utilizes a principle of lowering the boiling point by reducing the pressure of the distiller and distilling the liquor at about 40°C.

"Lento is also distilled under reduced pressure. It is especially well-liked among women because it has a lighter taste than kokuto shochu made with the traditional atmospheric distillation process," says Yoshimi Kozuma, production manager. "Kokuto shochu still accounts for a very small portion of the volume of shochu shipped around the country. We would like more people, both in Japan and abroad, to discover the taste of this rare liquor brewed here on these remote islands."

All photos: Masatoshi Sakamoto

Kokuto shochu comes in a diverse range of flavors. Varieties distilled under reduced pressure are very popular, while some people are fond of the conventional atmospheric distillation kokuto shochu, which is characterized by a deep flavor and aroma. Brown sugar, the main ingredient of kokuto shochu, also comes in many different forms. Some brands use only locally sourced pure brown sugar, while other brands procure brown sugar from Okinawa or import it from other countries. The hardness of the water also varies among islands. One factor that makes kokuto shochu appealing is that it allows people to appreciate these differences.

"Many people drink kokuto shochu mixed with water at local drinking establishments or at other gatherings. Younger people are increasingly leaning towards drinking shochu on the rocks or with soda," says Haruki Maekawa of Sakaya Maekawa, a liquor shop that sells kokuto shochu from all of the breweries on the Amami Archipelago. "To the people on the Amami archipelago, kokuto shochu is the treasure of the islands, and is as common and indispensable as air."