

Shochu Showdown

Tasting through single-distilled shochus

SWEET POTATO, BARLEY, BUCKWHEAT: The potential ingredients of the Japanese distillate *shochu* sound more like a soup than a spirit. Crafted since the 14th century from one of any variety of starches, including everything from chestnuts to pumpkins, shochu is first fermented with *koji* mol (the same kind used to make sake) before being distilled, aged and bottled. Much of the shochu (or *soju*, its Korean cousin) available in the U.S. is distilled multiple times, stripping out the base ingredient's flavor—hence its misleading nickname of “Japanese vodka.” For this tasting, we focused on single-distilled shochus, where each spirit's base ingredient (or ingredients) was properly highlighted. This meant trying them in a variety of traditional styles since different shochus fare better in different formats. With the help of Gabe Rosen, shochu enthusiast and owner of Portland, Oregon's Biw restaurant, we sampled seven single-distilled shochus neat, and then experimented with the contrasting flavors and aromas by tasting them on the rocks and mixed with hot water. Judging each shochu on aroma, flavor and finish, our favorites combine subtle traces of their primary grain with delicate balance of earthy sweetness.



HONKAKU TOWARI “TOWARI SOBA”

Japan, 100% Buckwheat, 25% ABV, \$\$\$, grandwl.com



TOYONAGA “LAND OF PLENTY”

Japan, 100% Rice, 25% ABV, \$\$\$\$, drinkupny.com



TOMBO

Vietnam, 100% Barley, 24% ABV, \$\$, bevmo.com



DEN-EN SHUZO SATSUMA

Japan, 100% Barley, 25% ABV, \$\$\$, astorwines.com



HAMADA SHUZO KAKUSHIGURA

Japan, 100% Barley, 24% ABV, \$\$\$, winesanywhere.com



YAMA NO MORI “MOUNTAIN GUARDIAN”

Japan, 67% Barley and 33% rice, 25% ABV, \$\$\$\$, drinkupny.com



SATOH “SATSUMA DOMAIN”

Japan, 60% Sweet Potato and 40% Rice, 25% ABV, \$\$\$\$, astorwines.com

	HONKAKU TOWARI “TOWARI SOBA”	TOYONAGA “LAND OF PLENTY”	TOMBO	DEN-EN SHUZO SATSUMA	HAMADA SHUZO KAKUSHIGURA	YAMA NO MORI “MOUNTAIN GUARDIAN”	SATOH “SATSUMA DOMAIN”	
AROMA	Rich buckwheat; sweet yeast; plum; earthy mushrooms	Loads of banana with floral and earthy undertones; very sake-like	Fruity with notes of dark chocolate and vanilla	Sweet; cherry; almost candy-like; subtle floral notes	Cedar; clove; vanilla; coconut; banana	Dry dirt; marzipan; fresh-baked rolls	Earthy with notes of sweet potato, shiitake mushroom and orange peel	
FLAVOR	Mild mushrooms; toasted rice; grainy sweetness	Rice-y; sweetness is immediately overtaken by heat from the alcohol; hint of radish; bitter almond	Sweet, fruity and grainy with notes of melon and banana; well-balanced acidity; slight mushroom note	Hints of almonds and cherries; mossy	Very buttery with notes of cedar, bitter almond, burnt toast and vanilla; whiskey-like	Mushrooms and barley with a sweet undertone	Earthy, sweet and full-bodied with a hint of candied sweet potato	
FINISH	Slight bitterness on the back palate; creamy; almond-y	Harsh; bitter citrus pith; slightly vegetal	Creamy, nutty finish; rich mouthfeel	Bittersweet chocolate; lots of minerality; overly bitter; thick mouthfeel	Long and rewarding; slightly tannic; warming	Subtle barley; hint of cinnamon toast	Sweet and starchy; lightly bitter	
OVERALL	Nice balance; easy to drink neat; flavors become sweeter and more pronounced when served over ice; intriguing complexity	Heat from alcohol overwhelms when served both neat and on the rocks; try adding a slice of lemon to brighten it up and make it more approachable	Very balanced and nuanced; takes on pleasant notes of sweet barley tea when mixed with hot water	A little too rough around the edges; could use more balance and refinement	Unique and complex; takes on more sweetness and creaminess when mixed with hot water	Straightforward and enjoyable to drink neat, over ice and with hot water; flavors sit mostly at the front of the palate	Bold and multi-faceted; mellows considerably when mixed with hot water; nice complement to rich, fatty foods	
RATING	★★★★½	★★½	★★★★	★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½	
★—Not recommended	★★—Fair	★★★—Good	★★★★—Very good	★★★★★—Exceptional	\$—\$10 or less	\$—\$11-\$20	\$\$\$—\$21-\$30	\$\$\$\$—over \$31

Serving Shochu

The methods in which shochu can be enjoyed are as varying as the different starches from which they are derived. Different flavors and aromas emerge depending on how you choose to sip it, so experiment to see which approach you prefer.

NEAT: Recommended for single-distilled shochus.

ROCKS: Good for sweeter shochus (sweet potato, barley). You want to chill the shochu and not dilute it, so it should be poured over three to four large ice cubes and stirred.

COLD WATER: Most common with buckwheat shochus, but any type can be used. The typical mixture is 3:2 (shochu to water) but can also be mixed at equal parts. Simply add cold water to your glass of shochu.

HOT WATER: This method is mainly used with the sweet potato variety, but it is also recommended with rice, barley and buckwheat. Shochu with an ABV under 25 percent is usually blended with hot water in a 6:4 (shochu to water) ratio, while shochu with an ABV that is 25 percent or higher is mixed equal parts shochu to water. To mix, start with the hot water in the glass first, then pour in shochu. Because the shochu is heavier than the water, the two will mix together automatically when combined this way.