

One thing many Asian drinks have in common is their scale and Japanese shochu is no exception. Professor **Yumiko Yoshizaki** explained the production process and serving styles of a spirit that is perhaps less well-known internationally than sake but no less iconic to Japan.

Shochu is mainly produced on the island of Kyushu in the south-western Japanese archipelago which historically was a centre of trade. Kagoshima is the island's chief shochu producer and its 110 distilleries have a greater annual output than Scotch whisky. Since the 1980s, shochu has been a high-growth industry and during the so-called 'Shochu Boom' of 2003-2006, its sales eclipsed those of sake.

Probably one of the reasons for this is that it stopped being regarded as a regional product and expanded its footprint nationally. Internationally,

however, its production process is little known and professor Yumiko Yoshizaki expounded further. The process involves five main stages: preparation by the 'toji' (or koji maker) of rice 'koji', a culture of yeast and enzymes, lasting approximately 45 hours; a first fermentation, the most important in terms of flavour profile using a mixture of koji, water and yeast; the second fermentation, before which the primary ingredients – i.e. a number of starches from barley, rice or sweet potato for instance – are added, lasting ten days, during which ethanol rises to about 13 to 14%; distillation in a pot still where the heart is not separated from the head and tail; and finally storage and bottling. The final product has an ABV of around 38%. Its aroma derives primarily from the late stages of distillation, whereas its flavour comes from the raw materials. Ageing in clay or steel vessels for two to three months removes aldehydes and sulphur.

Different serving styles for different flavours

Another similarity with other Asian spirits is that shochu can be served in a variety of styles in Japan, most of which use water. As demonstrated during the masterclass, it can be served straight, on the rocks or mixed with hot water. The water ratio is typically 4/6 or half and the aromas open up with temperature.

Conversely, when served chilled or with ice, the flavour becomes more bitter and vegetal. Its flavour profile and notable lack of sugary sweetness make it food friendly.

Aside from complementing food well, it may also have health benefits and potentially improve blood flow and lower blood glucose levels after meals, according to research. In an era of rising diabetes, both in Asia and around the globe, this may well endear it to a broader consumer base...

