

Satsuma *Shochu* and Geographic Indication



Masatoshi Motoki

Abstract In this chapter, I take up the subject of Satsuma *shochu*, which has developed into an industry representative of Kagoshima Prefecture, by examining the relationship between the supply of its ingredients and its local culture and environment. Historically, alcoholic beverages have been created in all regions using local ingredients and have been consumed by local people. Satsuma *shochu* is no different. These days, Satsuma *shochu* has currently acquired a geographic indication of its area of production, and the spirit has become established as a global brand. The key to this identity is locality. Using local ingredients, skillfully exploiting the regional climate, and maintaining the flavor beloved by local people is vital. For Satsuma *shochu* to continue as a spirit loved by local people as well as the Japanese nationwide, diligence by the producers is needed. It is also crucial to recognize the significance of producers and consumers working together to cultivate the rich local culture and climate through their involvement in the natural environment, and to take care to maintain this relationship.

Keywords Satsuma *shochu* · Geographic indication · Local culture · Natural environment

1 Satsuma *Shochu* as a Regional Brand

Shochu is a Japanese distilled spirit, generally distilled from rice, barley, sweet potatoes, or buckwheat. At present, with the exception of the Tokara Islands and the Amami Islands (Fig. 1), 86 *shochu* distilleries are located throughout Kagoshima Prefecture (Fig. 2). Their websites and ads prominently feature “the *satsuma-imo* [Japanese sweet potato] and water” and the “landscape” of Kagoshima, and show photos of the place where the distillery is located, sweet potato fields, and sources of water. Sameshima (1992) argues that a distilled liquor

M. Motoki (✉)

Faculty of Management and Administration, Tokiwa University, Mito, Japan
e-mail: motoki@tokiwa.ac.jp

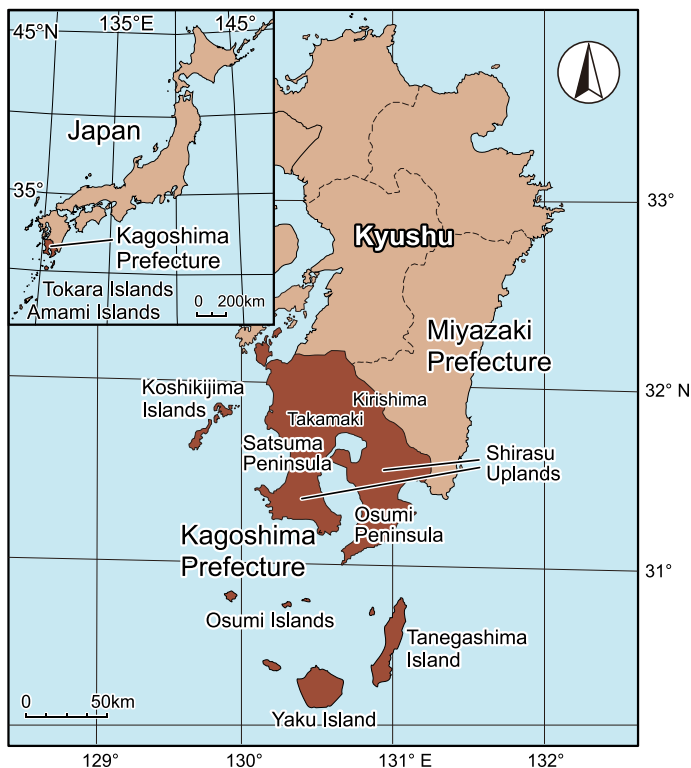


Fig. 1 Study area

such as *shochu* is the product of its given locality—the soil, climate, culture, customs, etc.—while at the same time it is constrained by it. Thus, it is an essential part of the milieu. In the past, the barrier to creating *shochu* had been its very locality, but now that serves as the foundation for its production. In this chapter, I take up the subject of Satsuma *shochu*, which has developed into an industry representative of Kagoshima Prefecture; I examine the relationship between the supply of its ingredients, its local culture, and its environment. Satsuma is a clan belonging to the Edo period, but Satsuma as used in this chapter means the current administrative district of Kagoshima Prefecture.

Since the 1970s, Satsuma *shochu* has enjoyed three booms (1970–1979, 1980–1985, and 2003–2006). Throughout these periods of growth, the market has expanded, and this liquor has grown from being a spirit representative of Kagoshima Prefecture to being a spirit representative of the spirit of the Kyushu region, and, furthermore, one of the alcoholic beverages representative of Japan (Nakano 2006). In 2005, “Satsuma” received geographic indication as the production area of its namesake *shochu* from the World Trade Organization (WTO). The geographic indication of Satsuma *shochu* requires the following four



Fig. 2 Representative brand of Satsuma *shochu* distilleries in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan

conditions: (a) it is a *shochu* made from only Japanese sweet potatoes; (b) it is a single-distilled *shochu*: sweet potatoes are added to the first *moromi* (fermentation mash) of fermented rice *koji* (addition of fungus *Aspergillus oryzae* to initiate fermentation) or sweet potato *koji* and water, further fermented as second *moromi*, and then distilled in a pot still (Fig. 3); (c) the sweet potatoes used as ingredients are grown in Kagoshima Prefecture; and (d) the process of production from distillation to bottling takes place entirely in Kagoshima Prefecture. The geographic indication of Satsuma *shochu* means protecting the brand of the production region by accentuating its local character to differentiate the product and ensuring consumers of Satsuma *shochu*'s quality and production methods.

2 Sweet Potatoes, Rice *Koji*, and Water

Satsuma *shochu* was originally rice *shochu*, but became sweet potato *shochu* as a result of changes in the production method. It is a relatively new *shochu*, with a history of about 260 years. Kagoshima Prefecture has broad swathes of volcanic ash soil called *shirasu*. *Shirasu* land is not suited for rice paddies and makes irrigation extremely difficult. Because of such an environment, procuring rice for *shochu* production is difficult. Kagoshima Prefecture is also a region constantly



Fig. 3 Second *moromi* in a pot still. (Taken by the author, September 2014)

battered by typhoons. Sweet potatoes are hardier against natural disasters than rice and require little manual labor for cultivation. The sweet potato thus came to take hold as the main ingredient of Satsuma *shochu* (Suganuma 2009).

Originally, sweet potatoes left over from making starch were used for brewing. These sweet potatoes were grown close to the distilleries. According to interviews with *shochu* makers, many producers purchased sweet potatoes from farmers in the Satsuma Peninsula, Osumi Peninsula, or Miyazaki Prefecture through agricultural cooperatives or middlemen. However, because procurements of sweet potatoes were transacted between suppliers, *shochu* producers did not know the potatoes' provenance.

In general, raw sweet potatoes are used for brewing. However, as refrigeration technologies improved, *shochu* producers who increased their output by using frozen sweet potatoes also emerged. When the output of *shochu* grew rapidly, there were also producers who used sweet potatoes imported from China.

However, in recent years, in addition to receiving geographic indication of the production area, *shochu* aficionados have also become more interested in local production for local consumption. As a result, there are increasing efforts among Satsuma *shochu* producers to use sweet potatoes grown near distilleries as in the past (Figs. 4 and 5). Besides the benefit of increased cost effectiveness, this allows for fresher sweet potatoes to be used. There are now also *shochu* distillers who,



Fig. 4 Harvesting sweet potato (*Koganesengan*) for *shochu*. (Taken by the author, September 2011)

instead of directly contracting with farmers, establish their own in-house agricultural corporation to grow sweet potatoes. An increasing number of producers focus not only on the freshness of their sweet potatoes but also on the variety. These distillers seek to create highly distinctive *shochu* resulting from the type of sweet potatoes used, such as the *Koganesengan* variety developed especially for brewing.

The unstable supply of rice in Kagoshima Prefecture has also affected the supply of *koji*, which is essential to the production of *shochu*. There are producers who use sweet potato *koji* for Satsuma *shochu*. However, because the use of rice *koji* has been traditionally emphasized, foreign rice was often used in the past. It is said that the use of foreign rice for *koji* began around the 1910s when the supply of domestic rice became insufficient. However, another reason is that because of its low water absorption compared with domestic rice, foreign rice is considered superior as an ingredient for *koji*. Yet another reason in recent years is the more into about this requirement to provide foreign rice with minimum access opportunities as established in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). As a result, Thai rice, which is available at low prices, has a stable quality, and can be procured in large amounts, is now used for rice *koji*.

However, in 2008 the problem of illegal resale of rice unfit for consumption surfaced and resulted in a trend to publicize the origin of where rice products are grown. Distrust also grew among consumers, who had believed that domestic rice was used for *koji* in making *shochu*. As a result, the number of producers who seek



Fig. 5 Screening sweet potato in the *shochu* distiller. (Taken by the author, August 2013)

to switch from foreign rice to domestic rice as the source of *koji* for *shochu* is increasing (Yonemoto 2009). The movement toward using domestic rice is rising, as exemplified by the emergence of *shochu* producers that borrow rice paddies near their distilleries to grow rice for *koji*.

In addition to the question of rice used for *koji*, the role of water is especially critical for the production of *shochu*. A great amount of water, specifically *shikomi-mizu* (water used in fermentation), *senjo-mizu* (water used for cleaning and rinsing), and *wari-mizu* (water added to the *shochu* distillate to achieve the desired alcohol content), is used. As 70–80% of *shochu* is water, the amount and quality of water greatly affects the product.

As shown in Fig. 6, Kagoshima Prefecture has one of the highest levels of annual precipitation and annual amount of river discharge (value obtained by dividing the amount of discharge observed at a river by the surface area of the basin upstream from the observation point) in Japan. The region is thus blessed by the water environment needed for *shochu* production. This is because in highly permeable volcanic belts covered by a thick layer of shirasu, the water flows out underground.

A survey of the distribution of *shochu* distilleries in the 1970s revealed that they were not located in Shirasu plateaus where water access was poor. Instead they were concentrated in alluvial plains surrounding the Shirasu plateaus (Kanemaru 1975). The results indicate the close relationship between water in the Shirasu plateaus and *shochu* production.

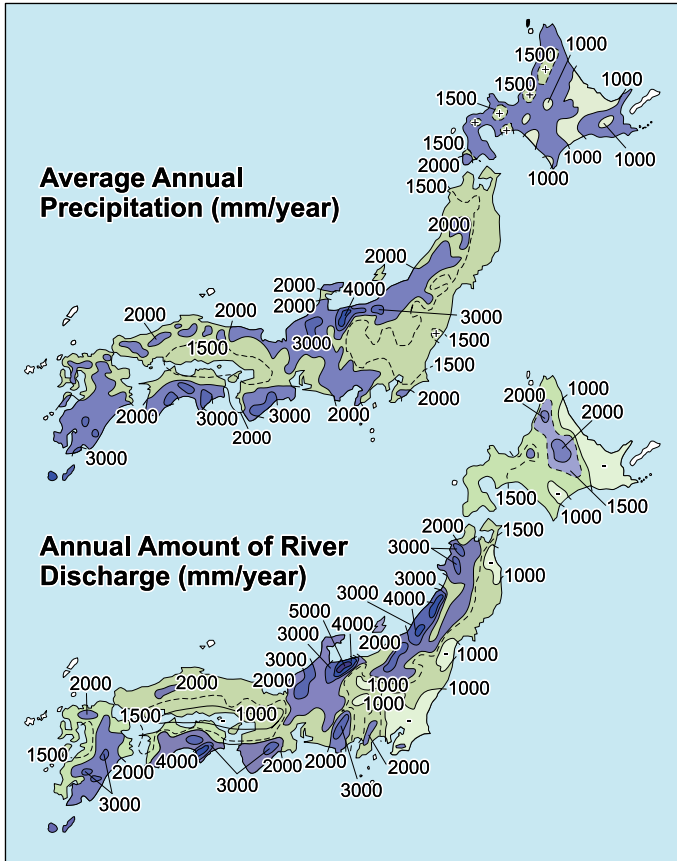


Fig. 6 Average annual precipitation and annual amount of river discharge in Japan (based on Arai (1980) and Japan Meteorological Agency)

According to a survey that I conducted of *shochu* distilleries in Kagoshima Prefecture, *shochu* producers in the past used water that was relatively easy to access, such as shallow groundwater about 10–30 m deep, as *shikomi-mizu*. Later, for new production sites selected as a result of company mergers or partnerships, locations with a rich supply of water were also chosen. There were also producers that moved their distilleries to allow for better access to water supplies. In recent years, seeking more stable water sources and better quality to improve production output, more distilleries are drawing groundwater about 80–120 m deep. Since the late 1970s there have also been *shochu* producers that use as *wari-mizu* water from locations far from their distillery, which they transport with water trucks. Furthermore, the survey also revealed *shochu* producers that seek to make their product highly individualized by using good quality water from around Kirishima and Takamaki, hot springs water, and deep ocean water for *wari-misu*.

2.1 Satsuma Shochu and Locality

Historically, alcoholic beverages have been created in all regions using local ingredients and have been consumed by local people. Satsuma *shochu* is no different. It is a spirit strongly influenced by its locality. It is a product of the region's environment, history, and culture. However, the market for Satsuma *shochu* has grown through several *shochu* booms, resulting in the need for its mass production. Producers of sweet potato *shochu* using ingredients of unclear provenance also appeared. It became the case that a *shochu* produced in Kagoshima Prefecture using sweet potatoes as the main ingredient could be made commercially with a philosophy that completely departed from that held by traditional distillers of Satsuma *shochu*, and the connection between Kagoshima's locality and *shochu* severed. However, consumers who sought safety in food products and the meticulous care of Satsuma *shochu* producers has resulted in the restoration of the tradition of Satsuma *shochu*—in other words, of the connection between the liquor and its milieu. As a result, Satsuma *shochu* has received geographic indication of its area of production, and the spirit has become established as a global brand.

In a diversified, globalized *shochu* market, the identity asserted by *Honkaku* (authentic) *shochu* (in legal terms a “single-distilled *shochu*”) is critical (Noma and Nakamoto 2003). The key to this identity is locality. Using local ingredients, skillfully exploiting the regional climate, and maintaining the flavor beloved by local people is vital. For Satsuma *shochu* to continue as a spirit loved by local people as well as the Japanese nationwide, diligence by producers is needed. It is also crucial to recognize the significance of producers and consumers working together to cultivate the rich local culture and climate through their involvement in the natural environment, and to carefully maintain this relationship.

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