

World Class Whiskies from the Chichibu Countryside

Whiskies distilled using local mineral water and barley in Chichibu in the abundant natural environment of Saitama Prefecture are winning fans around the world.

KATO KYOKO

Chichibu City, located in the northwestern part of Saitama Prefecture, is almost 90 percent forest. Running through the center of the city is the Arakawa River, which collects water from the mountains and flows into Tokyo Bay. Here in Chichibu's abundant natural environment, Akuto Ichiro makes whisky.

Akuto's family had been brewing sake in Chichibu since the seventeenth century, shifting in his grandfather's generation to making whisky as well in a distillery in the prefecture's Hanyu City. However, the distillery had been in financial difficulties since his father's generation, and soon after Akuto became the 21st head in 2001 he was forced to transfer the business to a company in another prefecture. As a result, 400 casks of unblended whisky, which in some cases had been aged at the

distillery for close to twenty years, were in danger of being discarded.

"Due to the expense of storing the casks, the company that took over the business decided to dispose of the entire stock and withdraw from the whisky business. However, it seems that Akuto couldn't bear the thought of this and was so troubled by it that he couldn't sleep at night. So,

in 2004, he decided to take back his father's unblended whisky and set up a new company, Venture Whisky Ltd.," says Yoshikawa Yumi, the company's global brand ambassador.

The distillery had been torn down, but fortunately a sake brewery in Fukushima Prefecture, alarmed by the prospect of losing the unblended whisky, came to the rescue and agreed to store it temporarily. Akuto used this to make



- 1 Ichiro's Malt Wine Wood Reserve
- 2 Double Distilleries blend of single malt from Hanyu Distillery and malt from Chichibu Distillery



The two pear-shaped stills at Chichibu Distillery



Whisky matures in casks made from a variety of different oaks in a warehouse at Chichibu Distillery

his first whisky, launching Ichiro's Malt in 2005 and going round bars and liquor stores to promote it. Eventually, the reputation of Ichiro's Malt began to spread by word of mouth, and was rapidly gaining in popularity in 2006 when it was awarded the Gold Medal in the Japanese Whisky category by a UK whisky magazine.

In 2008, Akuto's Chichibu Distillery began operations. The decision to build the distillery in his hometown of Chichibu was largely due to the environment. One reason is that the city is blessed with good quality water. As well as containing just the right amount of minerals, Chichibu water is neither too hard nor too soft, and has no distinct flavor. Another reason is that the area experiences extreme differences in temperature. In winter, morning and evening temperatures fall to minus 5-10 degrees Celsius, while summer temperatures can exceed 30 degrees Celsius. These temperature differences cause the whisky to mature more quickly.

The hallmark of the company's whisky production is its washbacks, the containers where wort, the crashed malt infusion, is fermented. Instead of the more commonly used stainless steel or conifer wood, Chichibu Distillery uses wooden washbacks made of

mizunara oak, a broad-leaved tree native to Japan.

"The lactobacilli that live in mizunara oak produce fruity notes that give the whisky a more complex aroma. The fermentation period for whisky is usually 48 to 72 hours, but we ferment it for an average of 90 to 100 hours to extract the maximum aroma," says Yoshikawa.

While imported British malt is also used, barley grown locally in Chichibu contributes some 10 to 15 percent of the total malt used. This locally grown barley is said to have a significant impact on the fruity aroma.

Chichibu The First, the first whisky brewed at Chichibu Distillery, was launched in 2011, with all 7,400 bottles sold out through pre-order the same day. Since then, the company has been highly acclaimed both in Japan and abroad, regularly winning or placing in various categories at the World Whiskies Awards (WWA), for example, including winning the World's Best Blended Limited Release award in 2020. In 2019, Akuto won the Blender of the Year award at the International Spirits Challenge.

Every February since 2014, the Chichibu Whisk(e)y Matsuri (festival) has been held in Chichibu City, inspired by local whisky pro-

duction. Bringing together Japanese and international whisky makers, the festival attracts large numbers of visitors from Japan and overseas. Visitors are able to enjoy tastings and make purchases of various whiskies as well as attend seminars led by critics and others involved in whisky making. In 2021, virtual tours of the distillery and seminars based in Chichibu will be held online in view of the impact of the novel coronavirus. Until the next tasting, we will wait patiently for the whisky to quietly mature. [▶](#)



Chichibu Whisk(e)y Matsuri