

# Chichibu *Onsen* Town



Since the Edo period (1603–1867), visitors have come to bathe in to the “Seven Waters of Chichibu” (Chichibu no Nanato), said to fully rejuvenate weary travelers on the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage. The oldest of these springs was discovered over 1,200 years ago, during the process of mining copper to make Japan’s first official currency. That original spring, dubbed the “Waters of the Medicine Buddha” (Yakushi no Yu), is said to have restorative effects, and for centuries local residents have used it to treat small cuts, arthritis, and nerve pain. Other springs in the area contain minerals that are beneficial to the skin, ease stiff shoulders and joints, or help to warm the body.

In addition to the springs’ therapeutic effects, the sheer act of getting out of one’s familiar environment and engaging the five senses with a hot bath in a new place is said to be a key benefit of a trip to the springs. This is referred to as the “power of a change of scenery” (*tenchi koka*). Chichibu’s hot spring district, which contains many day spas, is perfect for taking advantage of the *tenchi koka*.

Many of the Seven Waters of Chichibu have rich and interesting histories. Araki Kosen Ryokan, a public bath and inn, has been operated by the same family for nine generations. It is said that the spring that feeds its baths was discovered by a local grandmother who was sent there by the deity of Tsunemochi-jinja Shrine. Another spring, Hato no Yu (“Waters of the Doves”), was discovered in the Sengoku period (1467–1568) when a wounded warrior was led there by a mysterious pair of doves. After resting and bathing in the waters for

several days, the warrior discovered that his wound had healed. Of the original Seven Waters of Chichibu, three are no longer in operation. Oyubi no Yu ("Waters of the Thumb") was destroyed by the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. Yanaba no Yu ("Waters of the Fishgarth") was submerged with the creation of the Shimokubo Dam in 1966. Shika no Yu ("Waters of the Deer") shut down in the late 1990s, and the once-bustling Japanese inn that contained the spring now lies empty. In their place, three other local springs have been made honorary members of the Seven Waters of Chichibu.



Chichibu's springs are different from hot springs in many other regions of Japan in that they do not naturally bubble up from the ground. Before 1948, naturally occurring springs were largely divided into three categories by their temperature and mineral content. Springs that were sufficiently hot and contained a baseline level of mineral content or gases were called *onsen*, but colder springs that also contained mineral content were called "mineral springs" (*kosen*) or "cold springs" (*reisen*) depending on their temperature. Chichibu's springs were all *kosen*, but since the creation of the Hot Spring Law in 1948, the criteria were changed, and Chichibu's springs could be legally referred to as *onsen*. The water is lukewarm when drawn from the ground, but it is heated to around 45°C (84°F) before being pumped to the baths.

Notice : People who has any tattoos on their body are not allowed to get in Onsen in general.



# Chichibu's All-Star Snack

## Miso-Potato

Miso-potato is a humble food with simple goals. Its ingredients—steamed potatoes, tempura batter, and miso sauce—are common in Japanese cooking, but in Chichibu they have been combined into a delicious, prize-winning local specialty with an engaging history.

In the mid-twentieth century, local farmers would eat a small meal known as *kojuhan* ("small lunch") during mid-morning or mid-afternoon breaks. *Kojuhan* typically consisted of foods like miso-potato, which were easy to prepare, satisfying, and unpretentious.

A half-century later, the *kojuhan* tradition had almost died out. In 2007, a poll conducted by the regional revitalization initiative determined that half of all people over the age of 50 had never even heard the term. The organizers offered a free *kojuhan* sampling event, where portions of traditional *kojuhan* dishes were distributed. Miso-potato was very popular. The dish brought back fond memories for older people who knew the dish already, and those who tried it for the first time wanted to know where they could buy it. Two years later, miso-potato won the grand prize in Saitama Prefecture's competition for "B-class gourmet cuisine" (*bii-kyu gotochi gurume*), cheap and hearty dishes that often have regional associations. Soon, it began appearing in restaurants, convenience stores, and supermarkets all over the Chichibu region.

While the taste can vary slightly depending on where it is prepared, miso-potato typically consists of soft, flaky bites of potato coated in crisp tempura batter and covered with a salty-sweet miso sauce. To ensure the dish's quality and authenticity, the Chichibu Chamber of Commerce and Industry requires sellers to be certified. As of 2019, there are 44 locations registered. Miso-potato is particularly popular in local *izakaya*, Japanese-style bars that serve small dishes to share over drinks.



# Chichibu's Local Alcohol

The history of alcohol production in Chichibu dates back over 250 years, when the first sake breweries in the city were founded. Water quality is essential to brewing and is referred to as the “life” (*inochi*) of the alcohol. Chichibu’s water contains an ideal ratio of mineral content for alcohol production, and a wide variety of different alcohols are made there. The city proudly embraces its identity as a *sakedokoro*, or “brewing town.” As of 2019, Chichibu has four sake breweries, two wineries, one beer brewery, and one whisky distillery



## Sake and Shochu

Chichibu’s four breweries—Yao Honten, Nagatorogura, Buko, and Chichibu Kikusui— were each built during the Edo period (1603–1867) and supplied sake to the miners and silkworm farmers that lived in the region. The subterranean rivers flowing within Mt. Buko were included in the list of “100 Famous Waters” (Meisui Hyakusen) compiled in 2008. This same water is used at Buko, makers of Masamune sake, considered to be the preeminent sake of Chichibu. The pure water used in their brewing can be freely taken from a spigot in front of the Buko brewery, and they also offer free tours. In 2004, the brewery and storefront were designated a national Tangible Cultural Property.

Another beloved local sake, Chichibu Nishiki, has been produced at Yao Honten since the brewery was opened in 1749 by Yao Kihei (1711–1784). The name “Nishiki” is a reference to the fact that the sake is made with both Yamada Nishiki rice and Miyama Nishiki rice. These two varieties of rice are considered top-class within the sake world. Like Buko, Yao Honten offers regular tours of their brewing facility, which produces approximately 18,000 bottles of sake each year. The brewery's second floor is the Sakezukuri no Mori, a museum of the brewery's history that displays sake-making implements. At an attached storefront and tasting bar, visitors can sample Yao's brands of sake and Danbe *shochu*, traditional distilled alcohol.



## Whisky

In recent years, Chichibu's sole whisky distillery, Venture Whisky Ltd, has gained worldwide acclaim. Founded in 2004 by Akuto Ichiro (b. 1965), the distillery has captured both domestic and international praise for its unique take on Japanese whisky. Since its founding, Venture Whisky has taken numerous titles at the World Whiskies Awards, including multiple awards for “Japanese Whisky of the Year” and “World's Best Blended Limited Release.”

Akuto, who was born and raised in Chichibu, comes from a family of sake brewers. After receiving a degree in fermentation science, he briefly worked at the Suntory Yamazaki Distillery before returning to Saitama Prefecture to join his grandfather's brewery, Toashuzo. However, the business was eventually acquired by a larger company which chose not to continue the whisky production. Akuto acquired the leftover whisky mash, which he used to develop “Ichiro's Malt” at the Sasanokawa Shuzo Distillery in Fukushima Prefecture. After three years of work, Akuto founded Chichibu Distillery.





## Wine

The first wine to arrive in Japan was likely brought by European missionaries and merchants in the late 1500s. Domestic wine production did not come into its own until around 300 years later, with the establishment of the Dai-Nihon Yamanashi Wine Company in the late 1800s. In 1933, Asami Gensaku (1889–1985) was inspired to begin growing grapes after his son began reading *Robinson Crusoe*. He started selling his wine in 1940, but sales did not take off until 1959, when a French Catholic priest declared that it tasted “like a Bordeaux.” Today, Gensaku wine is sold throughout the Chichibu area. Free tours of the winery are also available upon request for groups of five or more.

Usagida Winery opened in 2014 as part of the Chichibu Farmer’s Factory in the Yoshida district of Chichibu. The wines produced there, which include Merlot and Muscat Bailey A, are made using 100% local Chichibu grapes grown on the farm’s small, 2-hectare vineyard or purchased from local farmers. Like Gensaku Winery, Usagida offers wine tasting and free tours of their vineyard, held on Mondays by request.

During the summer, residents of Chichibu often cool down by drinking *kachiwari*, local red wine served in a beer stein with ice. It is said to pair especially well with barbecue.

## Beer

Chichibu’s sole microbrewery, Bear Meet Beer, was started in 2016 by Tan Kodai and his wife, Yuka. After a trip to Oktoberfest in 2010, the couple decided that they wanted to start brewing their own beer. Both Kodai and Yuka are self-professed bear-lovers, and their beers and ales all feature bear-themed names and designs. Since making its debut at the 2017 Keyaki Beer Festival, the small brewery has rapidly been gaining attention. Bear Meet Beer is available on tap at Mahollo Bar, a café and bar that operates as part of Chichibu Omotesando Lab, a combination restaurant and souvenir shop near Chichibu-jinja Shrine.

