

Single Malt Scotch Whisky Tasting – 4th Annual @ Saratoga Woods

Whisky: The name is an English corruption of the ancient gaelic name for spirits "water of life" - in Scottish & Irish Gaelic is "usquebaugh" - sounded to the English ear like "whisky". Note spelling of Scotch Whisky – “ky” not “key” at the end.

Scotch - means simply that the whisky was distilled and matured at least 3 years in Scotland.

The natural elements of water, peat and the Scottish climate all have a profound effect on the flavour of Scotch Whisky. Water is the most important single factor and a source of good, soft water is essential to a distillery. Peat, which is used in the kiln or oven in which the malt is dried, also can be detected in the ‘peaty’ or smoky flavour of many Scotch Whiskies.

Grain Whisky is made from unmalted barley, wheat or maize produced as a continuous process in a column still. There are 8 grain distilleries in Scotland.

Malt Whisky – is made from barley malt, by itself fermented with yeast and distilled in a pot still. Malt is essentially barley that has been allowed to germinate by soaking in water then dried by heat. The malting process converts the stored starch so that fermentation is possible. Drying the malt over a furnace stops the germinating process and lacing the furnace with peat imparts a peaty aroma to the malt.

Single Malt is whisky made in only one distillery and it has not been blended with any other product from elsewhere. It may however contain whisky from several production batches over a period of up to a couple of years.

Blended Scotch whisky contains a variable proportion of blended malt and grain whiskies. A good quality blend may contain more than 40% malt, a cheap one much less.

There are fewer than 100 working malt whisky distilleries in Scotland. Most are concentrated in the Spey valley or “Speyside” in north-east Scotland. Some in Highland, Lowland, Islay and even the northern island of Orkney.

The Gaelic toast: Slainte. (pronounced... “slange”)

“The Macallan”

The Macallan Distillery lies on the Macallan Farm on the banks of the river Spey. Macallan distillery has been owned by several people over the years. Alexander Reid ran the distillery when it became legitimate in 1824. At this time it was called the Elchies Distillery. In 1868 it was bought by a James Stuart. The distillery was sold again in 1892 to Roderick Kemp who immediately renovated and modernized it. Kemp also changed the name of the distillery to Macallan-Glenlivet. In 1996, Highland Distilleries bought Macallan together with Suntory in a hostile takeover. Since then, Highland has been acquired by “The 1887 Company” which is an investment vehicle or joint venture between the Edrington Group and Wm Grant. They also own Balvenie, Glenfiddich, Glenrothes, Glenturret, Glenglassaugh and Highland Park... as well as “The Famous Grouse”.

Very selective – only the best is put into casks for Macallan single malt – typically just 16% is selected to fill The Macallan casks – the rest will go to other companies to make blends.

In 2007, a bottle of 1926 vintage The Macallan was sold at a Christie's auction for \$54,000, making it one of the most expensive bottles of liquor ever sold.

How to Taste Whisky

Tilt and turn the glass. Let the whisky coat the glass to increase the surface area for greater evaporation and thus enhancing the aroma. Observe the consistency as it sticks to the sides of your glass.

Nose the whisky. Place your nose a few inches away from the glass. What do you smell? Now get a little closer. How is that? Now get as close as you can. What other aromas are there? Keeping your mouth slightly open as you nose the whiskey will help you to better discern and 'taste' the different aromas.

Add water (Optional) - as much as half-and-half or as little as a few drops. Adding water depends on the whisky’s strength / style and taster's preference.

Gently agitate the whisky. Nose the whisky again. Change the angle and distance of the glass to pick up all of the subtle aromas. Continue this for a few minutes. Have patience. It takes time before the whisky and water are completely married.

Take a sip - just enough to coat your mouth and begin to slowly swirl it around your tongue. Feel the consistency of the whisky. This is referred to as the "mouthfeel." Try and coat your tongue so that the whisky touches all of your taste buds.

Taste the whisky. Try to hold the whisky in your mouth as long as it takes to notice all of the different flavors. Swallow. Try not to open your mouth or close your throat. Let in a tiny amount of air through your mouth and breathe through your nose slowly as the fumes rise up into your sinuses. You may notice different flavors. This is called the "finish."

Repeat these steps. Unless tasting whiskies in quick succession, consuming a dram can often take half an hour or more. Notice how the flavors and aromas change throughout your session.

Aging: When you see an "Age Statement" on a whisky, this gives the age of the youngest component of the whisky. Note that maturation stops at bottling, so both the year and the age may be significant. A 12-year-old whisky bottled 4 years ago is still a 12-year-old, not a 16-year-old.

Proof: Originally meaning "of tried strength or quality", this eventually was defined with the invention of the hydrometer - used to determine specific gravity of the alcohol/water mixture. Watch out that the British "proof" and US "proof" measures are different – US 100 deg proof spirit is 87.7 deg proof British.

The malting process

The process of malting converts the plain barley grain into malted barley changing its chemical makeup. The barley is first soaked for between 48 and 72 hours in tanks and allowed to germinate. Germination releases heat which has to be controlled in order to keep the temperature around 60 deg F/16 deg C and avoid the barley killing itself from its own generated heat. Traditionally the malting barley was drained and spread out over a large floor then turned regularly by hand with rakes or shovels. Now they use either mechanical rakes or large revolving drums to achieve the same effect.

The Malt Kiln

The fully germinated malt is next transferred to the kiln for drying on a mesh over a fire containing a certain amount of peat, thus contributing to the peaty taste evident in many malt whiskies. The malt is dried and roasted for two days and is then ready for the next stage which is a thirty-six hour fermentation to produce a weak alcoholic clear liquid called the 'wash', which will now be distilled.

Distillation: takes place in pear-shaped copper vessels called 'pot stills' and at least two different types are required. The wash is first distilled in the 'wash still' to produce an impure intermediate product called 'low wines'. This is then fed via a spirit safe into the second stage of distillation. The spirit safe is a heavy glass-fronted and padlocked box in which the distillate may be inspected and directed onwards or back for re-distillation. The final product - raw, unaged whisky passes via the spirit safe to spirit receiver, ready for filling into barrels. Macallan uses small pear-shaped stills.

Casks are critical to the taste and appearance of the final whisky. The need is for casks, which will give a characteristic taste to the whisky without dominating it or giving a 'woody' flavour. Two types of cask are used - Oloroso sherry casks and American oak Bourbon casks. Some distilleries use intact barrels, others remake barrels from selected staves. The barrel may be charred before use, to assist the release of vanilla from the wood.

Cask Strength

Newly distilled malt whisky is generally 115-120 deg proof as it comes off the still. It is generally watered down and bottled at 70 deg proof for the domestic British market. It is believed that whisky bottled at full strength and diluted in the glass tastes better than the same whisky diluted at bottling. So, now you can buy "cask strength" malt whiskies bottled at typically 100-110 deg proof so you can add your own water.

Maturation

The whisky is left a minimum of three years but usually between 8 and 25 years in wooden barrels to mature. The bonded warehouses are cool and earth-floored to provide an even temperature and humidity. The barrels lose about 2% alcohol per annum - the so-called 'angel's share'.

The Scottish climate is extremely important, particularly when the whisky is maturing. At this stage the soft air permeates the casks and works on the whisky, eliminating harsher constituents to produce a mellow whisky.

Marrying

Occasionally, bottlings are produced from one single cask - the so-called 'single single' malts. More normally, several casks of similar ages from the one distillery will be 'married' by vatting them together then maturing them further for a few months.

Macallan 10 year Fine Oak – triple cask
Euro/seasoned sherry, Amer oak/sherry, Amer/bourbon
Appearance: Pale straw
Aroma: Complex with hint of fruit and heather honey
Flavour: Soft and malty, balanced with oak and fruit
Finish: Lingering with a hint of oak and fruit
\$36

Macallan 12 year Fine Oak – single cask
Jerez, Spain / seasoned sherry, soak 2 years
Appearance: Rich Gold
Aroma: Vanilla with hint of ginger, dried fruit, sherry sweetness & wood smoke
Flavour: Deliciously smooth, rich dried fruit and sherry – balanced with wood smoke and spice
Finish: Sweet toffee and dried fruit with wood smoke and spice.
\$53

Macallan 15 year Fine Oak – triple cask
Euro/seasoned sherry, Amer oak/sherry, Amer/bourbon
Appearance: Rich straw
Aroma: Sublime and full with a hint of rose and cinnamon
Flavour: Intense rich chocolate with a hint of orange and raisin
Finish: Lingering with a hint of chocolate, orange and dried fruit
\$77

Macallan 18 year Fine Oak – single cask
Jerez, Spain / seasoned sherry, soak 2 years
Appearance: Light mahogany
Aroma: Dried fruit and ginger, with hint of citrus, vanilla and cinnamon
Flavour: rich dried fruit with spice, clove, orange, and a hint of wood smoke.
Finish: Full & lingering with dried fruit, sweet toffee, ginger and a hint of smoke
\$148

Macallan 25 year Fine Oak – single cask
Jerez, Spain / seasoned sherry, soak 2 years
Appearance: Rich Mahogany
Aroma: Citrus, balanced with cinnamon, sherry & wood smoke
Flavour: Full & rich, with dried fruit and wood smoke
Finish: Long, with dried fruit, wood smoke and spice.
\$600

Above are all tasting notes provided by the company itself. Following is an example of less favorable tasting notes for the 25 y.o....

Colour: Old gold- amber

Nose: Starts on window cleaning product, then it develops on apples, cinnamon, some oranges, a touch of rubber, then on honey and heather. Very round.

Needs a few minutes to open.

Taste: Tannic, faint and fragile if you take a small sip. Otherwise, the body is full, tannic, on orange, old leather and some butterscotch. The sherry influence is strong. This whisky is slightly bitter, on toffee and it is complex. The finish is rather short, on leather, orange, some peat and smoke.

General Impression: Old and tannic, with some complexity, but would have benefited from a few extra %ABV for more expression of its complexity and flavour profile.