

# SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW™



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## About fans and fanzines

“An example of the 1990s ‘New Brutalism’ school of amateur desk-top design.”

You’ve been too kind but thank you. For reasons far beyond my abilities the SWR has become appreciated by many whisky folk – both trade and consumers; “polemic”, “refreshing” and “unique”. All this despite its non-glossy failings. To a non-literate fish as I, writing and editing has been a chore of whopping magnitude and so tiresome that I know the SWR has become stale; you Whisky Nuts deserve much better.

So I have handed our typewriter to Marcin Miller and Dave Broom; LFW retains ownership but production of the SWR is now their baby.

Phew! Relief!

In consideration of we Whisky Nuts, (consumers and producers), I remain fascinated about our chosen preoccupation and the people involved. Scotch Whisky attracts otherwise sensible people to study, appreciate, investigate, criticise, become obsessed-with and make demands of. And for a variety of reasons: whisky-consumption, whisky-heritage, whisky-

collecting or whisky-whatever. Wine buffery has a greater following but requires less involvement (of logic anyway, if not language) and frankly, plonk is pretentious. We’re far more smug than that; free-thinking, naturally-intelligent and (usually) socially-acceptable souls who happily spend long hours in shameless, animated discussion blethering-on about Scotland and drams. Distillery baggers, sampling obscure samples, all subscribing to the lore of John O’Corn. How sad are we?

Whatever our reasons and our collective embarrassment, Scotch is important to us, so much so that a bunch of really-really-wise-guys want to share their passion with you through my SWR and I reckon they can do a far better job than I.

So, it’s all credits to me, and all whinges to them: but in all cases let me have all of your thoughts, I’m [shop@lfw.co.uk](mailto:shop@lfw.co.uk) ■



## Spot the still

Every distillery is proud of the unique shape of its stills. Arguably still shape is a defining characteristic of each single malt as it is in the still the spirit is created. We’ve all heard tales about new stills having dents beaten into them so they are closer to the shape of the stills they are replacing.

If you are a Whisky Nut (see above) you’ll be able to identify this Speyside stillhouse.

Send a postcard naming the distillery (with your name and address) to Loch Fyne Whiskies and the first one out of the Founder’s hat will receive a bottle of Loch Fyne Blend. ■



## The great carve up

As this august journal goes to press (ie when the editor breaks out his John Bull printing kit and searches in vain for the letter E) it has just been confirmed how the Allied distillery carve-up will pan out. Chivas Bros. has definitely got Scapa – how nice of Allied to fix the place up for them! – and it seems that of the malts which Allied was beginning to promote, Tormore will also be turning French [that could have been a great joke if Suntory had tabled a bid, Ed]. This news will no doubt send shivers down the spines of every other distiller. Fortune Brands (aka Jim Beam) has taken Laphroaig. The fact that this brand would have been a perfect fit for Chivas’ portfolio suggests to us that it was one of the conditions set by Fortune for joining in the bid.

Chivas has also, after protracted negotiations, picked up Ardmore. This is a logical move as Ardmore has long been part of the Teacher’s stable and the American distiller snapped that blend up as well. There were suggestions that Chivas wanted the Aberdeenshire distillery as it would give them a significant boost in production capacity. We’re just glad that we now know who to buy our malts from. The question now is whether there will be any new bottlings and while Tormore doesn’t thrill us too much, the prospect of a proper release for Ardmore is exciting. Just hope we don’t have to fill in new credit forms. As for the rest? Well there were feverish rumours that Duncan Taylor was going to buy Glendronach, on the grounds that Euan Shand’s father once worked there. According to Mr Shand, while he would like to purchase a distillery he’s not buying this one.

But he would say that, wouldn’t he? ■

## APOCRYPHA by Acrospire

*The best laid malting floors of microdistillers gang afta' gley.*

1) There are rumours of a tiff at Kilchoman between farm owner Mark French and distillery owner Anthony Wills which has resulted in the former opening his own retail outlet next to the distillery shop. While not the ideal working relationship the spat is not understood to have affected the operations of the distillery.

2) According to our man on Skye, Sir Ian Noble's plans for a Gaelic distillery have taken a dunt after the project manager walked out. No news at time of press.

3) Still no news of the much-discussed Shetland distillery. The latest news is that work may start this month but it's unlikely that the foundations will be in before spring 2006 as the tender for the building contract still hadn't been granted. The original site was deemed unfit for construction work meaning the site had to be shifted... er 65 metres ... then there were problems with effluent discharge ... and we don't mean the press releases about how the gin is made with water tankered from Shetland. Tankering water? That sounds familiar... ■

## Pseud's corner

This issue features tasting notes from Laing Bros. which would not appear out of place in the 1970s favourite BBC nostalgia-fest, *The Good Old Days*...

### *Bowmore 8 year old*

"Over-indulge intrusively in our opulently omnipotent opus – and savour a sea-shanty sorcery of seaweed, salty sails, saline smokiness and seafaring skiffs – Hello sailor"

### *Caol Ila 10 year old*

"Prodigiously provisioned to purveyors and proprietors of probity, for an absolute appreciation in abundance. It is ablaze with abiding acceptability within the dazzlingly delicious delectation of the delightful distillate!"

## The end of finishing

John Glaser is raising the hackles of the industry with his latest baby, The Spice Tree. It's a vatted malt a percentage of which has been given secondary period of maturation in casks fitted with "inner staves" made of new toasted Sessile oak.

The result is a great whisky, but there are some eyebrows being raised as to whether this fits in with the SWA's guidelines on 'tradition'. That'll be tradition along the lines of how distillers in the 19th century

always bought their casks from Château d'Yquem and would often age whisky in beer barrels... or add so much caramel to their whisky that it would go black... Pots ... kettles...

Our Portobello correspondent suggests that Glaser calls his next whisky Pandora's Box. Incidentally, have you noticed how no-one uses the term finishing any more? It's so passé dahling. One refers to secondary maturation, or Added Cask Enhancement. ■

## You couldn't make it up

God, I wish we'd thought of this... A curious yarn begins with a letter from Andrew Symington of Signatory. It sheds light on one of the most bizarre cock-eyed experiments in whisky – or any other industry for that matter – on the subject of Craigduff, a peated whisky believed to have been distilled at Strathisla. It's important to remember that in 1973 'dramming' – the distribution of large bumpers of whisky throughout the day to the workers in lieu of decent wages or acceptable conditions – was still the norm. Presumably very pissed distillers cooked up this idea – or they were on acid, maaan. It's a great industry that can come up with boffo wheezes like this!

*Lightly peated barley from Glen Keith maltings was used in conjunction with controlled amounts of concentrated peated water, being added to each wash charge.*

*Peated water was brought in 45 gallon drums from Stornoway, on fishing boats into the port of Buckie. The peated water was run through the small still at Glen Keith, which was coupled to an angled condenser and water driven off to concentrate the peatiness in the remaining water. It is understood that 10 gallons of the concentrated peated water was added to each wash charge.*

*We understand the drive behind the experimental distillation came from a sister company in Japan. Apparently, during the course of the experiment, a sample of the concentrated peated water, whilst en route*

*to Japan, was intercepted at Heathrow airport by Customs Officials who were convinced it was whisky in disguise, and decanted a fair bit of the drum before realising, too late, that it was in fact just water.*

Word reaches us of a chance meeting which led to a personal tour of Glenallachie distillery. As our heroes were led from Strathisla to Glen Keith distillery, they crossed the River Isla by a bridge connecting the two distilleries, with the waterfall and pool at Linn of Keith and the ruins of Milton Castle beyond. It transpires there was a right of way actually passing through the stillhouse at Strathisla!

Glen Keith was converted from a corn or oat/flour mill to a distillery by Jim Morrison of Seagram in 1957-1960 and originally copied Bushmills Distillery in Ireland, with triple distillation. This was the first malt distillery to be built in Scotland in the 20th century, predating Tormore, although the latter claims to be the first completely new malt distillery of the 20th century.

In the late 1970s column stills were also introduced for a trial period during which time both grain and malt whisky was produced. The product, Glenisla, was distilled from peated malt, the peat being shipped from Shetland.

And SWR remains convinced there ARE casks of peated Strathisla from around that time out there somewhere... ■

If you have anything for possible inclusion in these pages, please e-mail [swr@lfw.co.uk](mailto:swr@lfw.co.uk)

The mysterious case of the strange death of Campbeltown's distilling industry is one of the great whodunits, or perhaps whatdunits, of the Scotch whisky industry. However, sleuths trying to find the answer to this conundrum had better not hold their breath when it comes to David Stirk's new book, *The Distilleries of Campbeltown*. For, despite the author's best efforts, there are only a few clues here to help solve the mystery, and precious few answers.

Stirk's book is a rather old-fashioned amateur antiquarian's local history, and as such might be an attractive read to the non-analytical fact-hunter. But real history it is not. Parochial in its scope and outlook, it is constrained by the use of a very limited range of largely local sources, and eschews reference to either the extensive trade press of the time (both local and national), to Scotland's rich and still largely unused central repository of records relating to business formation and sequestration (always handy in the case of distilleries), property ownership and mortgages (land was always a critical form of security in the formation of businesses in mid-nineteenth century Scotland, and these records can reveal a wealth of information about informal, often family based capital networks) and wealth. Nor, from what I can gather, did he consult any of the various public and private business archive collections relating to the distilling industry.

Over-reliant on scant resources, the author has also chosen to pad out his limited text by including large, and very often repetitive, extracts from legal records (which more often than not are simply a record of process rather than fact), local newspapers (which often seem barely relevant) and occasional collections of correspondence. Of all of these perhaps the most interesting is the quite charming exchange of letters between David Colville and Peter Reid about the formation of Dalintober. Of most pertinence to our mystery is probably the series of letters relating to the ongoing problem of effluent disposal from the Campbeltown stills.

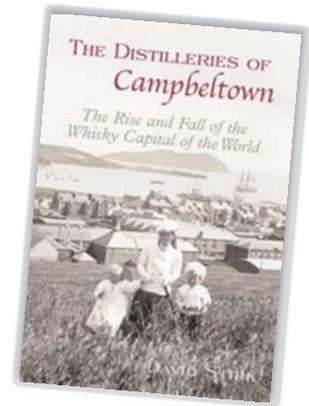
Most irritating of all, I imagine, for almost anyone who buys this book, is that about a third of it is made up of reproduced pages

about the Campbeltown distilleries from Alfred Barnard's *Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom* which, I assume, most readers will already have in their libraries. Short change indeed!

Stirk only begins to hint at the factors that led to the demise of this once famous concentration of distilling. Technical factors, principally effluent disposal were important. Hardly a subject to capture the heart of a romantic enthusiast this was one of the critical factors that determined both the location and size of 19th century distilleries (and under the current SEPA regulations it's of no less importance today) and as Campbeltown increased in size, and the legislative framework became more restrictive, distilling became a harder thing to do by the year – particularly when the industry was increasingly gearing itself up to large scale and not cottage production. Logistics was also a thorny issue – both in terms of sourcing grain (and there are numerous sources to show that the Campbeltown distillers went further and further afield in their search for barley – seeking lower and lower prices to reduce transport costs, and also quite possible suffering in terms of 'quality', of yield if not spirit character.

And then there is the issue of 'quality' itself. For Campbeltown whisky, contrary to Stirk's early assertion, did have a real 'quality' issue – but this was 'quality' in terms of the whisky trade's use of the word, not its current meaning. For 'quality' meant not 'good or bad', but style or character. And Campbeltown's whisky was renowned for having probably the most extreme character of all the whiskies available at the time. Forget your Ardbegs and Lagavulins, for these were second stringers to Campbeltowns, memorably described by Aneas MacDonald as "the double basses of the whisky orchestra", "potent, full-bodied, pungent ... masterful and assertive." And it wasn't as if Campbeltown distillers didn't know this.

Probably the most eminent (but barely mentioned by Stirk) were the Greenlees Brothers, the unsung heroes of Scotch whisky distilling, blending, branding and marketing, who left Argyll for London in their early 20s, where they set up the



blending house that 'practically held a monopoly of supply' to the trade in London.

They also owned Hazelburn and Argyll Distilleries, and through family ties were linked in to most of the other distillers in the town. Yet they were hugely aware of the paradox that whilst their success lay in selling lighter styles of whisky to compete with what was then the dominant Irish style, what they were making at home was as heavy as you could find, and increasingly out of favour with the blenders whose demands, of course, were to shape the structure of the distilling industry. Like most of the other great Campbeltown whisky families the Greenlees Brothers eventually gave up, selling their blending business to Sir James Calder and their distilling interests to Peter Mackie.

Even he had to try and change the character of Hazelburn's new make to try and make it sell ("at a blind tasting by two of the best judges in the Whisky Trade in Scotland, our Hazelburn was placed alongside the three best North Country Glenlivet's") but to no avail. Hazelburn was closed and became the first technical laboratory in the industry. This is another famous little fact that fails to make its way into these pages.

At the end of the day, Campbeltown's decline lay in the fact that it produced a style, or quality, of whisky that no longer had a place "in an age when the standardized, anaemic grain-plus-malt are triumphant." But sadly you won't find that story told here. David Stirk deserves praise for writing a long-overdue book, but the end-result will disappoint those who all turned to the last page to try and find out 'whodunit'. ■

# From Kirkwall to King's Lynn

by  
Marcin  
Miller

The single best piece of news I've had in years nestles below the predictable headline (I've used it many times myself) "Make mine a (local) large one" in the *Eastern Daily Press*. The story begins thus, ahem; "It is a drink forever associated with scenic glens, peat fires, kilts and tartans. But now a Norfolk father and son are planning to produce their own whisky 300 miles from Scotland."

Allow me to introduce you to the Norfolk Whisky Company. We'll ignore the clichés in the opening sentence (and I remember being instructed never to begin a sentence with "but") and concentrate instead on the positive ramifications afforded by this splendidly bold new project.

No more flights from the sunny delights of Norwich International Airport (Terminal 1) to rain-sodden desolation; no more clammy shower curtains sticking to my shoulders in abhorrent Hebridean hotels; no more midges impersonating flying piranhas; no more cholesterol-packed, coronary-inducing breakfasts; no more squinting dirty looks from aggressive pished locals at the ceilidh to which I'm invariably dragged...

No, from now on, I'll be able to indulge my distillery-visiting addiction and my dunnage warehouse problem locally. I'll be swapping the A9 for the A11. With distilleries being planned for Cornwall and East Anglia, to say nothing of Penderyn in Wales, the Scotch Whisky Review will be re-named the (North) British Whisky Review.

Being a Norfolk initiative, it comes as no surprise that it is, in the words of Sly Stone,

a family affair. The Nelstrops have plans for a £1m plus distillery at Roudham in the Breckland countryside which will include a bottling plant, visitor centre and shop. They have a background in agriculture – which is not unusual in this part of the country – and intend to employ "a distiller from Scotland who has a good reputation." I hope they manage to find one.

Finding a distiller strikes me as a good idea, although they clearly have a grasp of what is required: "There are two main

*"But now a Norfolk father and son are planning to produce their own whisky 300 miles from Scotland"*

ingredients in whisky – malt barley and water. Norfolk is one of the biggest barley-growing regions in the country, and we are sitting on top of the Breckland aquifer."

Admittedly, there is no heritage of whisky distilling as such in East Anglia, but there is a very strong tradition of brewing in the area. Beer drinkers will be familiar with names such as Adnams, Woodforde's and St Peter's. To an extent, Mr Nelstrop has a good point; we've got great barley and lots of clean water, let's find a decent distiller (with a good reputation) and off we go.

If only it were as easy as that. To use wine as an analogy, it takes more than grapes. On that subject, there are wineries in East Anglia but, having tasted them, I feel confident in the assertion that no international awards will be heading their way. That's not to say there aren't any good English wines; there are – especially the sparkling ones – but they are expensive and the UK drinks market is exceptionally competitive at the moment.

The distillery aims to produce 100,000 bottles of cask strength single malt whisky a year. That's a hell of a lot of whisky to sell with a new product in a competitive environment. They will be unable to get any filling contracts either. No Scottish blender will want to touch English whisky and thereby

forego the cachet that is "Scotch".

Of course, this will not be the first distillery to be established in England. Mr Nelstrop will be able to take heart from the fact that Alfred Barnard lists four (count them) in *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom*; Bankhall and Vauxhall in Liverpool, Lea Valley in London and the Bristol distillery. Granted, it's a while since I've seen any of those on a supermarket shelf but there you go.

As well as planning permission and a distiller (with a good reputation), I suggest they employ a marketeer with a keen brain and a sense of innovation. Perhaps they could take a leaf out of Mark Reynier's book. Bruichladdich's CEO intends to use new symbols to illustrate that his whisky uses no chill-filtering and no caramel. I suggest the Norfolk Whisky Company pioneers a symbol to show that no hills were used in the creation of this whisky ...

If only they had thought of this 200-odd years ago. Had whisky distilling started in King's Lynn at the same time as at Kirkwall, Nelson would surely have celebrated victory at Trafalgar with a large dram. And in this, his bicentenary, we'd all raise a glass of Norfolk's finest to Britain's greatest hero. Just imagine, rather than Britain's fifth biggest export, whisky could be Norfolk's second greatest export after Delia Smith.

I hope that the project succeeds. There can be no genuine contention that the Norfolk Whisky Company will become anything other than a local tourist attraction for the vast number of holidaymakers that visit East Anglia annually. With luck, it will become part of the long list of "things to do in Norfolk" such as... erm, I'll think of something. Ah yes, a visit to the Colman's Mustard shop. If the Norfolk Whisky Company does become a successful tourist operation and if it does produce a decent whisky, I will be delighted. Perhaps I'm getting slightly ahead of myself. If planning permission is granted, the newspaper states the distillery could be up and running by next autumn. That means I'll have to wait, for the sake of argument, at least nine years before I can buy a bottle.

In the meantime, I intend to continue visiting Scotland and its whisky distilleries as often as possible. If that means yet another ceilidh and smothering myself in Skin So Soft, I'll do it selflessly, courageously and with not a little dignity.

We each have our cross to bear. ■



# Fortune favours the brave

by Dave Broom

Maybe I've been in this game for too long, but sometimes I wonder if Homer Simpson is running the whisky industry. Why? Take the behaviour of Fortune Brands. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't it a mere four years ago (almost to the month) that Jim Beam Brands (the firm then was) sold Whyte & Mackay for £208m? Good business you may think until you recall that JBB had spent £582m in putting its whole Scotch arm together. That net loss doesn't strike me as being particularly good business. Ahh, but the reason given at the time was that this "positive strategic development" would allow JBB to "intensify its strategic focus on the premium and super-premium spirits and wine market." Aha! When you put it that way what does a few hundred million quid here or there matter?

Just let me get this straight. You own a Scotch firm, you sell it at a loss and then a few years later you buy another Scotch firm? Now I'm no businessman but if I went to potential backers with that sort of business plan I know what the response would be.

Maybe Fortune sees Laphroaig and Teacher's as part of its premium strategy. Imagine the scene in the boardroom. "It's a good buy. A top line malt and a million case blend."

"Of course it is Mr Simpson... er ... but couldn't we have spent the past four years building Whyte & Mackay, Dalmore and Jura and saved all that money?"

"DOH!!!"

Big business doesn't operate under the same rules as the rest of the world. I went to get a mortgage once and decided, fool that I am, to be honest. Told you I was useless at things like this. "So, Mr Broom," my interrogator said, "how much money do you earn a month?"

"Oh it all depends," I relied nonchalantly. "Sometimes X amount. Sometimes I won't earn anything at all!"

Now, this is true. That's the freelance life for you. I'm used to it, but it isn't the sort of message that a potential lender wants to hear. Actually it's not what they want to hear if you don't have any money. If you have millions



© Ardent Spirits

however then different rules apply.

"I appreciate that I've lost millions on a similar deal, but can we go again?" "Sure! Fill in the cheque yourself, old pal."

Business not only baffles, but scares me. Why? Because the bottom line is that these guys are playing around with people's lives. What confidence do the guys at Laphroaig and Teacher's have knowing they are being taken over by a firm with the above track record? Who is to say that four years down the line the next CEO of Fortune won't decide to offload the Scotch division again?

No doubt we'll get the usual platitudes trotted out of how the firm knows that whisky is a "people industry". Pull the other one. Every distiller is looking at ways of making its operation more "efficient", a word which means laying folk off and you can be guaranteed it will be the best folk who go. We've seen plenty of that already this year from stillhouses to visitor's centres to top level execs. It's not just Fortune.

Every distiller is prone to similarly bizarre volte faces. Take Diageo. Some years back it decided to pull out of American whiskey and sold its Bernheim distillery and all the stock (including a range of top-notch, small-batch rare whiskeys which simply disappeared). Now, DOH!, it has decided that it wants back in. It's common knowledge that one reason it was contemplating joining a counterbid for Allied was because of Maker's Mark. It didn't get it, but is pushing Bulleit heavily. Trouble is, Bulleit is made under contract at the Four Roses distillery which doesn't have

the capacity to make it a major brand.

"Can't we switch production to Bernheim?"

"Er sorry Mr Simpson, you sold it."

"DOH!!!"

Actually, Diageo does have a distillery. It has Dickel in Tennessee which makes (or made) one of the finest American whiskeys of all, but despite the firm's push on the "international whiskey" category it has... well... forgotten about this brand and closed the distillery and refused to sell it. Confused? Don't be... it's the corporate world.

Diageo is on firmer ground with the purchase of Bushmills which was offloaded by Pernod to keep its arch rival out of the running for Allied. It worked. The most intriguing aspect of this is that by selling Bushmills, Pernod has done precisely what it has been trying to avoid for years, namely create an Irish whiskey category.

The whole IDL strategy has been to promote Jameson's and forget about the rest. This was a firm which even tried to buy Cooley in order to close it down. Now, all of a sudden, Irish whiskey has three players and you can bet that Diageo will be backing Bushmills heavily.

Fast forward four years. "Bushmills is taking market share off Jameson, Mr Simpson."

"Never mind Simkins, it's ours. Isn't it?"

"Er, no Mr Simpson. We sold it."

"DOH!!!" ■

# I don't believe my mince pies

Chris Orr is a leading commentator on drinks. As former editor of *Wine International*, *Decanter* and *The Drinks Business*, he knows what he is talking about ...

I wouldn't call myself a whisky novice. That wouldn't be accurate. But on the basis that whisky was the first source of a drunken hangover, I've traditionally steered a little clearer than most of the wonderful liquid. I can't tell you the number of times I've wished it hadn't happened. Mostly for fairly personal reasons.

I'll always, for example, regret sitting down on the antique chess table belonging to the parents of the girl who threw the party and breaking it in two. I also regret passing out in the only loo in the house – it's left me sub-conscious images of my friends that no man should have to live through on a weekly basis for the rest of his life. And I sincerely regret discovering two days later as I walked out of the shower that my mother was less than impressed by the phallic images my friends had drawn over my back in permanent marker.

But most of all, I regret that it's taken me around 20 years of my 37 year old life to shrug the automatic gag reflex that I developed once the hangover had worn off. Some people choose a dodgy bottle of sherry to celebrate their first drinking opportunity. Others Malibu or Baileys. Frankly I could do without all of those in my life but not whisky – which is shame because its taken me two decades to get over that first experience.

I've always been able to taste whisky, sadly just not drink it. Which means, fundamentally, I've never been able to enjoy whisky. But a funny thing happened a few years ago. A scallywag named Broom took me on a jaunt recreating the steps of old whisky smugglers. We hiked for three days through numerous glens with two flatulent ponies, and the wonderful Jim Cryle. Thanks to rain, cold, sore feet, chapped legs (we were wearing kilts) and a considerable number of midgy bites, we had no option but to drink copious amounts of whisky. I was, thus, cured overnight of my unfortunate affliction.

Since then, I've been getting to know the whisky world as a strictly new, and fascinated admirer. Which is why you're going to be subjected to the occasional column by me in this august publication. And



*Some people choose a dodgy bottle of sherry to celebrate their first drinking opportunity. Others Malibu or Baileys*

I have to say, my first is proving to be pretty damn difficult. How do I convey my relatively junior credentials, without also embarrassing myself, but also reassure you that I have something valid to say. Well, I think I've already managed to embarrass myself with the above story, so that's that sorted. Which brings me to saying something valid and erudite on whisky.

What the bloody hell are Glenfiddich playing at? Apparently they're going to launch Glenfiddich whisky mince pies through Walkers, the Scottish shortbread manufacturer, this Christmas. "The whisky distilleries in Scotland are ten minutes away from the Walkers factory. It was a natural development for us to use another locally produced product," said James Walker, the company's managing director and grandson of its original founder. If you'll excuse my French, but bollocks. In my opinion it's a wholly unnatural alignment.

Now before anyone gets on their high horse and points out that whisky has been used in cooking for hundreds of years, I am not doubting whisky's benefit to a whole range of food products – amongst which I include mince pies. But for goodness sake, this is one of the all time great malt whisky brands. More importantly if what I hear from fellow writers who specialise in whisky the company's not got exactly the greatest reputation amongst malt whisky purists.

By sticking their brand on a mince pie – however well-made – I find it hard to believe that they're going to be reinforcing a "premium quality" image for the product. After all you can taste whisky in a mince pie, but can you really taste the finer attributes of a malt whisky? I doubt it. What it boils down to in my mind is that this is simply a licencing deal with some product thrown in for good measure. Anyone who remembers Gucci in the mid to late eighties, will remember that licencing their brand to products that did them no credit, did them... well, erm, no credit. Much as I love Walkers shortbread – I can't really see how being a basic ingredient in the company's mince pies will do much credit to the image of Glenfiddich.

But then, who knows. It's a funny old world – as I said to my mother whilst she took several layers of skin off my back in an effort to rid me of the large hand-drawn member that stretched the length of my back. She, didn't, you'll not be surprised to learn, actually agree. ■

# Loch Fyne Liqueur

Something for everyone; former Masterchef, Sue Lawrence, has created a cracking cranachan and cocktail creator Neil Berrie has adapted the classic Affinity for a festive restorer

**C**RANACHAN is so delicious, but only traditionally eaten at harvest time, so I decided to make a variation using dark chocolate and hazelnuts. The result is a rich, but luscious dessert: contrasting layers of cream, chocolate, raspberries, nuts and toasted oats. It looks best served in a large glass bowl, to show the different layers to their best advantage.

Remember to start this the day before you intend serving it, for all the flavours to combine well. These quantities serve 8-10.

200g / 7 oz whole rolled oats  
150g / 5 oz toasted hazelnuts, chopped  
100g / 3 oz light muscovado sugar  
(plus extra if necessary)  
250g / 9 oz quality dark chocolate, grated  
600ml / 1 pint double cream  
500 ml / 18 fl oz crème fraiche  
150 ml / 5 fl oz The Loch Fyne Liqueur  
450g / 1 lb raspberries (divided into three)

Toast the oats by spreading them onto a foil-lined baking tray and place this under a preheated grill, for 3-4 minutes, until golden brown. Stir them every 30 seconds or so, to ensure they do not burn.

Mix together the hazelnuts and sugar, add the grated chocolate then tip in the very hot oats, directly from the grill. Stir everything together well until the chocolate melts, then allow to cool.

In another bowl, whip the double cream until it is thick, but still slightly floppy. Gently fold in the Loch Fyne Liqueur and crème fraiche.

In a large glass dish, spoon in a third of the oat mixture, then layer a third of the Loch Fyne Liqueur cream on top. Lightly crush a third of the raspberries and sprinkle on top. (Sprinkle over a teaspoon or two of sugar if the berries are very tart.) Then spoon another third oats on top then another third cream. Crush another third of the raspberries (more sugar if necessary), sprinkle on top then



scatter on the last oats then a final layer of cream. Smooth over the surface, cover and refrigerate for at least 24 hours.

Next day, top with the remaining whole raspberries. Use dark chocolate (minimum 70% cocoa solid or, if you prefer, a good quality milk chocolate (minimum 30% cocoa solids)). ■

*Scots Cooking: The Best Traditional and Contemporary Scottish Recipes by Sue Lawrence is available from Headline Books*



**B**ack in February we held a cocktail party at the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre with the intention of coming up with a couple of recommendations for alternative ways of enjoying Loch Fyne Liqueur. For this season Neil Berrie has come up with a real belter.

Based on the classic Affinity, this will restore the most jaded of palates mid-afternoon and prepare you for the onset of bird flu as you tuck into thirds of turkey...

In cocktail shaker add;

50ml Loch Fyne Liqueur  
25ml Port  
25ml Dry Sherry  
2 drops of Angosture Bitters

Shake with lots of ice, double strain, serve either straight up in a Martini glass (see left) or on the rocks. Garnish with an orange twist.

Delicious. ■

# When Scotch lies down with vodka

The Professor, our cocktailian bartender, learns that when presented with a cocktail recipe that defies most of the rules of classic mixology, he should not judge a drink by its ingredients

By Gary Regan

The Professor rings the old ship's bell to signal the beginning of class, and the four other bartenders sitting across the mahogany stop gossiping about who went home with whom at their various bars last night, and settle down, ready for their lesson.

They gather at the bar every week to swap recipes, talk about recently released bottlings of various spirits and liqueurs, and try a few new drinks. Nobody is the teacher here. The object of the class is to listen and learn from everyone who is passionate enough to be involved in the group.

"OK," says Robert, who runs one of the best cocktail bars in the city. "I've got a doozy of a new drink for us to try this week. It's called the Dreamy Dorini Smoking Martini." A collective groan issues from the group.

"If you think the name's weird, wait till you get a load of the ingredients: vodka, Laphroaig single-malt Scotch and Pernod."

"My God. That sounds awful." The Professor is speaking. "Who the heck thought of this one?"

The drink is the brainchild of Audrey Saunders, director of beverages at Manhattan's Cafe Carlyle in the Carlyle Hotel, where the famous Bemelmans Bar boasts Bobby Short tinkling the ivories on a regular basis. Saunders is known in cocktailian circles as the Libation Goddess.

"I've heard great things about Libation Goddess' drinks, but I think she might have stuck her neck out too far on this one," The Professor says. "Let me see that recipe."

The recipe calls for two ounces of Grey Goose vodka, but because it's mixed with a very powerful single-malt Scotch, the assembled mass agrees that, although they'd stick to a fairly high-end bottling, the brand didn't much matter in this cocktail, just as long as the vodka had a sturdy body. You can pretty much count on that if you don't buy the cheapest brands.

Now what about the Scotch?

The Professor pours a half ounce of the 10-year-old Laphroaig into a shot glass, and by dipping the end of a short straw into the glass, then placing his finger on the top of the straw, he captures a few drops of Scotch and drizzles it over his tongue. The glass is passed through the bartenders, each of them



mimicking The Professor, until everyone has sampled the whisky.

"My, but that's a powerful dram; peppery, smoky, oily and intense," says Jen.

Jen is a relative newcomer to the group. She works at a neighborhood joint but has aspirations of improving her skills and getting a job in a tonier cocktail lounge. She's in the right place.

"If this drink works, we could try it with Ardbeg or Lagavulin. They're heavily peated, incredibly smoky malts from the Isle of Islay, too. We might even try it with Talisker."

The bartenders taste the Pernod — fairly sweet, intense with anise flavors, just like most absinthe substitutes. They agree that they might want to experiment with other bottlings such as Herbsaint or Ricard, but Absente might not be sweet enough to achieve the balance that Saunders envisioned.

"You gotta be really careful with this stuff. A tad too much and it can control the whole drink. This recipe calls for only two or three drops, but if you keep some Pernod in a bitters bottle, you can be precise when fixing drinks such as this one," says The Professor. He keeps an array of old bitters bottles behind the bar, each one filled with highly flavored liqueurs such as Pernod, Benedictine, Chartreuse and the like.

"Enough talking, let's taste this drink," says another bartender, John. The bartender on duty goes to work, while John tells the crowd about Saunders' thoughts on this concoction. "She sees the vodka in the drink as a blank canvas that she 'paints' with the scotch and Pernod."

"It's also going to act as a diluting agent in this drink. It'll soothe the soul of that malt a little," Jen says.

The drink is divine.

Sure enough, the vodka does its job. It doesn't put the Laphroaig to sleep, but it thoroughly calms the storm in the whisky.

The sweet anise flavors of the Pernod make a perfect foil for the Scotch, adding an extra dimension to the cocktail and mingling perfectly with the iodine flavors in the Scottish nectar.

The group insisted on trying different versions of the cocktail using the Scotches that Jen has suggested. They all work fairly well, but Laphroaig and Ardbeg, the most intense whiskies of the group, win the day for this recipe.

"I've seen grown men cry when I use single malts in mixed drinks," The Professor tells the crowd, "but most of these whiskies have so much more character than their blended cousins, they're perfect for the cocktail shaker." The group agrees. They always used top-quality ingredients.

"Garbage in. Garbage out," they chant in unison. It's one of their many mottoes. ■

## Dreamy Dorini Smoking Martini

### Ingredients

2 ounces Grey Goose vodka  
1/2 ounce Laphroaig 10-year-old  
2 to 3 drops Pernod  
1 lemon twist, for garnish

### Instructions

Stir all of the ingredients over ice for 20 to 30 seconds.  
Strain into a chilled cocktail glass and add the garnish.

Serves 1

### Per Serving:

170 calories, 0 protein,  
1 g carbohydrate, 0 fat, 0 mg cholesterol,  
1 mg sodium, 0 fiber.

*The Cocktailian is reprinted with the kind permission of The San Francisco Chronicle. Gary Regan is the author of The Joy of Mixology (Clarkson Potter, 2003) among other cocktail- and spirits-related books. He has a website at [www.ardentspirits.com](http://www.ardentspirits.com) and while you're there sign up for the free Ardent Spirits newsletter. You can contact Gary at [gary@ardentspirits.com](mailto:gary@ardentspirits.com).*

# Mr Ballantine's

An interview with Robert Hicks

## What is/was your job?

*I was Master Blender for Allied Distillers Ltd, the Scotch Whisky production unit of Allied Domecq until the beginning of September when I was made redundant. This meant I was in charge of the quality and continuity of all their newly distilled and maturing whiskies as well as the finished products (i.e Ballantine's, Teacher's and Laphroaig to name just a few). A blender's job is not just nosing whisky but also laying down the recipes for the next 10 or 15 years, making new blends for markets and giving seminars all over the world.*

## How did you get into whisky?

*I had come back from a six-month spell as a redcoat at Butlin's and needed a job. I didn't really know what I wanted to do but needed to earn some cash so when I was offered the position of stock clerk at a local warehousing and distilling company I took it until I found something better. When I was made redundant 41 years later I was still looking for something better.*

## What is the biggest change you have seen since you started work in the industry?

*There have been many, many changes over the past 40 years that could be called major; the drop in the number of people directly employed, the number of distilleries that have closed, the many changes and methods in production cycle, whether it's in distilleries, the type of warehousing, the use of steel racking for casks or even in bottling with superspeed lines compared to the hand-labelling of the 60s and 70s. I suppose the biggest change is with massive increase in the sales of single malt whisky. Back when I started in the 1960s there were possibly 12 or 14 recognised single malt brands and even then the sales were quite small.*

## How do you feel about the end of Allied?

*I was one of a lot of people who were really surprised that a company of the size of Allied Domecq could be taken over so easily and so quickly, especially when not that long ago it appeared that AD would be the one buying. In the end I feel that it was much*

*better for everyone left in the company that it wasn't a long drawn-out process with counter offers.*

## Any gripes?

*I suppose if you'd have asked me that same question over the years I'd guarantee there would have been many. Looking back from my current position I guess that they were the typical gripes that anybody would have; underpaid, overworked, not appreciated, I've never heard anyone complaining of being underworked and overpaid but there was nothing that was ever major. If I'd ever stopped enjoying being a blender I would have changed jobs; work takes up too much of your life to continue in a job you don't like.*

## What was the best part of your job?

*It was the delight I saw in eyes of the many customers who I spoke to at my seminars abroad. It really brought home the pleasure that Scotch Whisky brings to so many people worldwide. They were always so keen and so full of questions about something that far too many appear to have taken for granted. Their enjoyment was something I could relate and respond to and, over the years, I made many friends.*

## What was the worst part?

*Going down to a warehouse at 8 o'clock on a cold winter morning with the temperature just above freezing and nosing 200 or 300 casks... It would take about an hour to 90 minutes to test them; my hands would be soaked with water and whisky and be freezing. That's one of the low points in any blender's life*

## How did you feel about all the distillery closures?

*Back when I started there were 128 malt and 14 grain distilleries, currently are 86 or so malt distilleries and eight grain. That seems like a major loss of distilleries but, if you look back to pre-Prohibition days, there were roughly 160 malt distilleries and at least 21 grain so there was already a major drop by the time I started.*



*The early 1980s were a problem time for all whisky companies with the large over-production of the 60s and 70s and the whisky lake that was the result. Only a few stayed open as nearly every distillery was either mothballed for some years or worked just a couple of months a year. As a result, some of those mothballed were closed and never opened again. Looking at the closures from a blender's point of view, and how the different malt flavours work together, none of the important makes were lost.*

## And then all the re-openings?

*The closures were staggered, depending on how large the surplus of stock each company had and, as it happened, so were the start-ups. They started reopening about 1985 and, memory says, the last was in 1989. Those years were a period of concern rather than worry, waiting for each reopening. I was personally really pleased when we at last re-opened Ardbeg in 1989.*

## How did you manage to maintain consistency of blends with less (ie fewer whiskies) to work with?

*I feel it was more by luck than judgement and for three main reasons; first, Hiram Walker [who then owned Ballantine's] always had a policy of trying to fill 100% of the whiskies needed for future sales. This meant we had a nice surplus of stock that*

covered the lean years when the distilleries were closed. Remember a distillery closing doesn't impact on a standard blend until five to eight years in the future so there was ample time for planning.

Second, that at that time we were filling around 55 different single malts. One of the questions I was always asked was "Why use so many makes?" It's really down to a simple answer; "spread the makes to minimise the risk". If you've only five or 10 makes to work with and you lose one, it could make a noticeable difference in the finished blend. But of you lose one of 55 it's not really that noticeable. It's the same as replacing a violinist in a string quartet and replacing one in an orchestra – where would you notice the substitution? And where would he blend in without noticing? I'll leave that to you to decide.

The third reason is one of the unsung heroes of the industry – the inventory controller. One of the most important responsibilities a blender has is the continuity of the brands he produces and that's down to working with the inventory controller to set up recipes for the next 10 to 15 years. In this way he can make certain that there are no surprises a couple of years down the line.

### Is blended whisky dumbing down?

I actually feel the opposite is true; back in 1962, when I first started to have a dram, most of the whiskies at the back of the bar were blends. There didn't seem to be nearly as many then as there are now. Over the years, as companies have increased the variations of their major brands, they have created their own family of styles of flavour. Just think of some of the variations that have been launched over the past year or two as an example. That was one of the big problems when trying to decide which dram to take on the desert island with me.

### Which other blenders do you admire?

The funny thing is that there aren't that many of us and, as we all know each other quite well, it would be very difficult to single anyone out. We're like a family in a way and, like any family, we each have our different styles and character. So I'd rather say that I admire the whole family. Having known many blenders past and present, I know that the industry is in safe hands with the current blenders.

### What's the future for blended whisky?

I can only see a bright future for blends and fully expect to be drinking them for many years to come. Why? Well, if you don't mind me paraphrasing an American president; "a good blend should please most of the people most of the time." You'll never please everyone but I always felt the best thing that anyone could say to me about one of my blends was that "he could quite happily drink it". Not that it was the best or the smoothest or the most particular but that it was easy drinking. I think that's the secret of a good blend and that's something that will always be wanted. Just think, if it wasn't for blends over the past 100 years then Scotch would still be a cottage industry and not the world famous product it is.



### To what would you ascribe the appeal of Ballantine's?

That's a difficult question as I don't think it's down to any one specific reason. It might be that it's an easy drinking whisky or it could be that it's always produced a family of standard, premium and super premium whiskies since the 1930s with Ballantine's 12, 17 and 30 year-old blends. It could be that the brand identity, the distinctive bottle and label shape, is still more or less the same as in the 1920s and easily recognised or –and here's my little plug – it could just be down to its quality and flavour.

Looking back, over just the past seven or eight years, it's won numerous trophies and awards for its quality and, as you know, I was in London just five weeks ago to collect the Trophy for The Best Blended Scotch Whisky from the International Spirits Challenge for Ballantine's for the third year running.

### What were you most proud of?

That's an easy one, I came back from holiday in August 1998 to the normal pile of work only to be told that I was going to the ISC dinner in London that Thursday. I arrived completely unaware of what was to happen, had a nice dinner and a few drams by the time it came to the presentations. I was sitting chatting when I was told to look at the screen and there was a photograph of me, I was completely taken aback – especially when I was called up to be awarded Distiller of the Year. To be awarded this by my peers in the industry was something of which I am really proud. If you see the photograph taken that night (left), you'll see the size of the smile on my face. I thought that it could never be topped but it was when I was awarded it again the following year.

### What were your most memorable moments?

There are hundreds over the years in the industry but my most memorable was being at my youngest son's birth. Rules meant I wasn't allowed in when my first two children were born but by the time the third came along I was. All I can say is that it's something I'll never forget.

### How are you filling your time now?

I've decided to set up as a consultant; I still want to be involved in the industry that has been a massive part of my life and I feel that I still have some knowledge and expertise that could be useful. The other thing that's going to take up a good part of my time is my label collection. Jack Goudy, Ballantine's previous master blender, and I started it about 1975 and over the years it's grown to around 6000 different brand names with about 1500 variations some dating back to the late 1800s. I've not managed to work on it for about five years so I've ended up with boxes and boxes of labels that are still to be categorised.

### What is your desert island dram?

I've always been a blender so for me it must be a blended whisky, although there are many great blends I'd be delighted to take with me I suppose I would have to settle on Ballantine's 12 year-old, after drinking it for 35 years it would be a friendship that I'd find hard to break. ■

# Viscimity: New connections

In his *Miscellany*, Charles MacLean includes an essay entitled 'Awakening the Serpent'. It is an account of 'viscimetric whorls', the oily threads and spirals, observable when water is added to whisky and giving rise to a pseudo-science called 'viscimity'.

Here his former colleague, Henri Dubois, reports on further investigations

The fact that the study of viscimity was deemed 'occult' has two clear corollaries. First, it is altogether unrecognised by modern science, and second, it is difficult to research, being shrouded in secrecy.

As Charles MacLean has observed, scientists place it in the same category as dowsing or divination: dubious practices which, if they work at all, work only by chance. The word 'viscimity' does not even appear in the Oxford English Dictionary.

connection with Celtic spiral decoration is evidence for the existence of aqua vitae much earlier than is generally accepted. I would not go so far, although the word's root in ixos, the (sacred) oak, with all its Druidical associations, cannot be denied.

We tread warily. Some contemporary viscimitrists deliberately obfuscate, others – the fanatics or anoraki – have even threatened us with defamation. I would rather not follow the mystic path.

## Viscimity and smell

The first stage in the sensory evaluation of potable spirits is to consider the liquid's colour and viscimetric potential, manifested by its capacity to bead when shaken, by the 'legs' which form when the spirit is swirled in the glass [It may be noted that these are sometimes termed 'church windows', an interesting spiritual reference], and by the actual observation of viscimetric whorls when water is added.

The second, and most important, stage is to nose the spirit.

Until recently, the two stages remained distinct for me, then I re-read the opening paragraph of Jill Purce's book, *The Mystic Spiral: Journey of the Soul* (London, 1974):

"In a second, the faintest perfume may send us plummeting to the roots of our being, our whole life verticalised by a fleeting sensation: we have been connected by a mere smell to another place and another time. The amount we have changed in the recognition of this moment – this is the spiral: the path we have followed to reach the same point on another winding"

Far from being 'verticalised' (another word that does not appear in the dictionary!), I was 'horizontalised'! Of course! Smell is our most primitive sense, and unlike our other senses it is unmediated: the organ which collects aromas plugs directly into the limbic system of the cortex, which is also the seat of

our emotions and our memories. No wonder that smells are so powerfully evocative.

Here is Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York, 1990): "Smells detonate softly in our memory like poignant landmines hidden under the weedy mass of the years. Hit a tripwire of smell and memories explode at once. A complex vision leaps out of the undergrowth".

And Lyall Watson in *Jacobson's Organ* (New York), 2000):

"Smell is our most seductive and provocative sense, invading every domain of our lives, providing the single most powerful link to our distant origins... But it is also mute, almost unspeakable, defying description and collection, challenging the imagination".

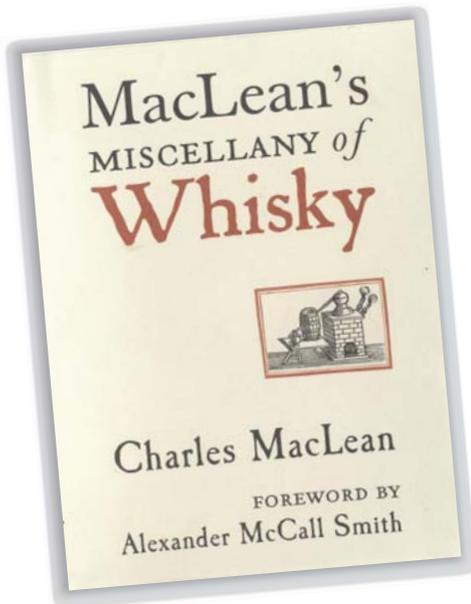
(Those who write tasting notes will sympathise with the last part of this statement!)

Memory is what connects us to time, and time itself is cyclic. By the spiral of its seasons we review our experience and our understanding; the familiarity of our memories curl round and protect us from life's continuous outpouring, which would otherwise be an unchecked flow of the unknown, filled with fear.

Observing the viscimetric whorls in a glass of whisky, then allowing its scent to trigger memories, are powerful reminders of the sacred mysteries of our world and of ourselves. ■



The last known picture of Henri Dubois



The difficulties we have encountered in investigating the subject remind me of research I once did into the Masonic symbolism in the dollar bill (met by double-entendre and polite evasion), and into the Q'abala (complex symbolism, quintessential mysticism). It was the latter study that led me to viscimity, by the way, which some maintain to be a manifestation of the spiral convolutions of the Serpent of Wisdom.

I have long felt uncomfortable about reading too much into viscimetric whorls. I have met people in the Highlands whose grandparents foretold events by considering the eddies, or so they say; just what events, or how they did it has been forgotten. Others maintain that the phenomenon's clear

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Headings here reflect the left-hand navigation frame. *Tip: if you lose the frame click on the logo in the top right hand corner.*

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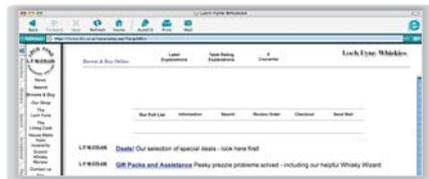
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'high regard' regarding distilleries  
'limited' or 'collectable'  
'closed' or 'mothballed'  
Dates, such as '1966' or '34yo'  
Specifics, such as '46%' or 'single cask'

All our distillery profiles include our unique taste scores as explained on the back of our Stock List. *Tip: These can be searched by entering colon+the score you seek – eg to*

*view a list of our taste score 2 suggestions then enter :2 (no space).*

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#### House Malts from Inverarity

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