



SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW™



SPECIAL BUMPER CHRISTMAS ISSUE

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To the top

I find myself alone in the upper library, Rogers has gone off to find more air freshener for the dog, leaving me to tackle a new bottle of Caol Ila, unassisted.

I failed on the removal of the tin capsule that protects us from the stopper below.

Have you tried to remove one of these things? Blazes! There is a small 'v' nick about the perforated circumference that the cap manufacturer must have told the bottler makes removal easy – absolute tosh! My nails, hardly manicured but adequate for most purposes, scratched ineffectively, so I resorted to the sommelier's trick of hacking at it with a safety knife.

This is another example (like Dysons or inflatable rubber dinghies) that a producer has almost made right but placed on the market before fixing the pitfalls, leaving us lot to identify the failures but grumble about them. Like fax rolls; the fax machine is bleeping and winking 'out of paper' while an all-important missive is nagging. The new fax roll is hermetically sealed but you manage that, the machine starts ringing again, damnation! The buggers have stuck an adhesive circle on the paper edge, impossible to remove without your waiter's friend. Someone should tell them.

And why are shop assistants incapable of giving you your change the right way? Can't shops find half-a-minute to train their staff? It's coins in the palm then notes for the closed hand and thumb.

Back to the top: I'm assured many capsules are fine, but there is a sizeable proportion that are particularly fiddly to

open and not in keeping with the care and attention-to-detail that is – or was – emblematic of the Scotch whisky industry. Could everyone check their capsules for consumer aggravation please.

Unfortunately this extraordinarily important issue has taken up the space I had planned to use to compliment the industry's efforts to overcome the UK duty-stamp-thing issue. Despite its increasingly evident crass pointlessness, there must have been many



poor, big-eyed moles in dark warehouses re-working cases (and more cases) of whisky – hand-applying stickers, what a job! And just in time before the Gangmasters Licensing Authority gets its teeth!

My fear that producers would just consign old stock to export seems generally to be unfounded and we are able to enjoy a continued stream

of the wide variety of whiskies that make our passion so important to us all. There have been many cock-ups and failures, inevitable in the face of such an inane, insane task, but the will is there.

Well done! ■



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SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW

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PRANCER Dave Broom
DANCER Marcin Miller
DASHER Jon Allen
DONNER Ian Buxton
BLITZEN John Haydock
VIXEN Emma Harvey



The True Scot Scotch ©

Like every thrusting new business, the SWR is imbued with the spirit of enterprise, innovation and diversification. We are, therefore, delighted to announce the creation of a series of small-batch, hand-crafted whiskies which have been specifically distilled by cherry-picked experts to show the story of whisky in liquid form.

The first offering from the SWR Cellar starts at the very beginning with The True Scot Scotch©. Always wishing to remain on the right side of the law, we have written to the SWA, outlining our intentions.

Dear SWA,

I have been conducting research into the works of the medieval alchemist Michael Scot (of the late 12th and early 13th century) who I believe can be shown to be the first Scottish distiller. He translated the scientific works of Arabic scholars such as Rhazes and Geber, both of whom describe the art of distillation.

There is a possibility that Scot himself brought the art north of the border as he is meant to have spent his last few years in

Scotland and is buried at Melrose Abbey.

Intrigued by this, I have been researching his early recipes for the production of spirit and would very much like to explore the possibilities that these would constitute the first examples of *acqua vitae*/usquebaugh production in Scotland, predating Friar Cor by some 300 years. As such, I would argue, they show the original and true face of whisky and demonstrate the historical precedent the SWA rightly insists upon.

The 'True Scot Scotch'© I would like to produce is taken from his *Liber Luminis Luminum* (the term 'transmutation' being used to denote the process of distillation). The significant passage is as follows: "Five toads are shut up in a vessel and made to drink the juices of various herbs with vinegar as the first step in the preparation of a marvellous powder for purposes of transmutation".

This, I believe, is the most practicable recipe, as some of the others call for "the blood of a ruddy man" and "dust of moles" both of which, I feel, which could give rise to legal problems.

My question is this. Since I can show that

there is historical precedent for using herb and vinegar toad powder in the production of usquebaugh, may I call the resulting alcohol Scotch whisky? It strikes me that there is greater historical weight behind this than the use of casks from 20th century wine producers.

I await your reply with interest.

Kind regards

The Editor

A spokesman for the SWA has replied:

"While Michael Scot may have used toads to give his spirit some body, consumers and toad lovers alike can be thankful that John Cor and other early whisky makers discovered how to make the most of their barley and that by the use of cereals alone they created the water of life."

Is that a "yes" then? ■

Takeover Thai-me

There's obviously something about downtown Airdrie which excites Thai businessmen as much as Bangkok excites Ian MacLeod. Inver House, formerly owned by one Thai firm (Pacific Spirits) now finds itself part of Thai drinks giant InterBev. The purchase also includes Best Spirits, Inver House's Hong Kong-based distributor.

The ownership change will not, apparently, result in any job losses, but will give the Airdrie-based firm a significantly better global network as InterBev (the export and international division of ThaiBev) has distribution hubs in Hong Kong, Singapore and New York. ThaiBev has already gone on the record as saying it aims to become the leading Asian international drinks company. With the Asian market for Scotch booming, Inver House, for many years the forgotten

distiller, is suddenly very well placed.

Whether Glasgow has a similar appeal to Vijay Mallya is, as we go to press, unclear. As we reported in the last issue, Whyte & Mackay has been in negotiation with Mallya's United Breweries. The talks now appear to have stalled over the purchase price with Mallya wanting to pay no more than £400m, while Whyte & Mackay is holding out for £600m – claiming that the Mallya's valuation doesn't cover stock. ■

Forger's delight

It is extraordinary how lax security can be on some Real Malt websites. Take, for example, a website brought to SWR's attention the other day. On it, not only can you download images of the many and various expressions from the distillery, you can also access very high-resolution artwork files.

Surely the producer considered the potential risk of counterfeiting. Perhaps it was decided that no forger in his right mind would bother... ■

Craigellachie cutbacks?

The tortured saga of the Craigellachie Hotel continues. Its previous owner took one look at the Quaich Bar and decided to impose severe cutbacks on the range and shaved close to 200 bottles from the list. In addition, all purchases are now being made through one supplier. Rumours that guests are being kept awake at night by the sound of persistent and loud guffawing from the Highlander Inn across the road are yet to be substantiated. ■

A tangled web

Which well-known (*in their dreams, Ed*) whisky website has as its webmaster the landlady of a Dufftown B&B who, rumour has it, is not paid a fee but has accepted a share of future profits for her skilful repackaging of various distillery press releases? Given that profits were far from the order of the day at a closely-related magazine title, now deceased, this offer must have been indeed finely expressed. ■

NEWS AND REVIEWS

Glenavon calling

As we went to press the news arrived that a bottle of whisky claimed to be “the oldest in the world” had been sold for £15,000 at auction. The 14oz bottle apparently contains ‘Glenavon Special Liqueur Whisky’ and, according to Bonhams the auctioneer, “is believed to have been bottled at the Glenavon distillery in Speyside sometime between 1851 and 1858.”

Sadly, there appears to be a problem with this exciting find. ‘Glenavon’, according to Bonhams, was otherwise known as the Delnabo distillery, which was founded in the 1830s by a John Gordon who went bankrupt in 1849. The only reference to it as Glenavon comes in 1851, by which time the distillery had been bought by George and John Gordon Smith (of Glenlivet fame) and renamed Cairngorm.

There is an issue here however. The **SWR** archivist confirms that while Cairngorm/Delnabo was near Tomintoul, there is no indication where a Glenavon distillery was located. The sole mention (in

Moss & Hume) posits it was another name for Cairngorm/Delnabo, but they place the distillery in Ballindalloch – which ain’t Tomintoul! This leaves two possibilities. Glenavon was a brand bottled by the Smiths from Cairngorm/Delnabo, or it was another distillery, owned by someone else and about which nothing is known.

According to Paul Pacult’s history of The Glenlivet, the Delnabo distillery “began working to supplement the volume of Drumin-Glenlivet” the Smith’s other site. (i.e. not selling whisky under its own name). In 1858, the Drumin distillery burnt down and, at the same time, Cairngorm/Delnabo closed. It may even have closed in 1853. The Smiths then built The Glenlivet distillery at Minmore.

There is no evidence that G&J.G. Smith ever bottled any of its own whiskies during this period. This suggests that the whisky, if a malt, would have to have come from the Smith’s own stock. The problem with this is (other than the fact that there is no record at Glenlivet to back this up) is the label. It’s a rather natty black, white, red and gold affair

which, the **SWR**’s paper expert attests, would be beyond the technology available to printers in the 1850s. Everything about this bottle points to the late 19th century.

This is compounded when the bottle is examined. The **SWR**’s glass expert is convinced that any whisky bottled in the 1850s (and there were precious few) would have used recycled wine bottles. This is clearly machine-made and, therefore, can be dated to the 1880s, which also rules out the chances that this comes from a previously unknown distillery of the 1850s.

Is it a fake? There was a whisky (probably a blend) called Glenavon registered as a trademark by J. Hopkins & Co (“distillers and blenders”) in 1882. There is also a label dating from the late 19th century from a David Laird & Co, Glasgow.

This bottle may be old, but was the whole package as genuine as Bonhams made out? We have our doubts. Maybe the auctioneer should have had theirs as well – especially since the **SWR** alerted Bonhams and the Scottish press to our misgivings. No contact was forthcoming. ■

Deluded numpties offer (part two)

No sooner had the stooshie over Ardbeg 1965 settled down than **SWR** received the following release about a Highland Park single cask which was filled on Boxing Day 1967. Those crafty guys at Edrington have decided to flout convention and split the bottling. According to the release, half of the cask has already been bottled (as a 38-year-old) and the other half will be bottled on Dec 26th 2006 (as a 39-year-old). This, and I quote; “will give collectors a unique opportunity to purchase bottles of two different ages from the same cask.” The genius of this idea is that as long as the whisky is bottled before midnight on Christmas day 2006 it can qualify as a 38-year-old. As soon as the bell chimes then it becomes 39! Same whisky, two ages. Needless to say, collectors of HP will be expected to buy both expressions. As for differences in taste? A maturation expert said: “After 38 years there won’t be much left in the cask anyway so taking half out won’t make much difference to the flavour.”

Although this is the first time (to our knowledge) that a distiller has done this with one of its brands, it would appear to be

common practice among some independent bottlers. One, let’s call it Baldrick, managed to bottle a puncheon of 1990 Clynelish as an 11, 12 and (as a sherry finish) a 13-year-old.

The **SWR** heartily approves of this fantastically innovative way of selling an identical whisky to the same people under different guises and in homage has accordingly launched its own scheme: The Dying Cask©. Every month for a year we will draw off and bottle a set amount from a perfectly-matured, bespoke-crafted single malt (of our choosing).

Signing up to this scheme (which commits you to purchasing a minimum of one bottle from every release) will guarantee you a bottle of each drawing from the Dying Cask©, which will build up into a fantastic collection for you and your grandchildren to marvel over. Should you wish to taste the whisky (though we wouldn’t advise this, as the value will diminish) you will notice that, amazingly, there is no difference in flavour from the first to the last bottling. Each bottle will cost £300. Subscribers to the **SWR** can get a complete set of 12 for a discounted rate of £3,590, though there will be an added administrative charge of £15. ■

Deluded numpties (part three)

Not to be outdone, our good friends at the award-winning Blackwood’s have found an innovative way of getting ‘Shetland’ on their whisky despite not having yet built their distillery at Unst. (Ever noticed how that’s just one letter away from a most appropriate anagram?) (*ENOUGH! Ed*)

12 casks of what the *Shetland News* describes as ‘Unst whisky’ are set to arrive there on 20th December. The casks are made of French oak and contain a vatted whisky (obviously not made by Blackwood’s).

According to CEO Caroline Whitfield, they will be stored at 10 different locations on Unst (one in every house one presumes) “while the buildings at [the proposed distillery site] at Saxa Vord are being converted.” The whisky will be ‘wintered’ on Unst and released next spring. Reading between the lines, this means that the distillery will be up and running by then. The motto of the *Shetland News* is “Great Is the Truth And It Will Prevail!” We concur. ■

NEWS AND REVIEWS

Oh Canada

The minuscule profits from our new bottlings will be put towards a third **SWR** project; building a distillery with other people's money on the island of Tiree. We have been monitoring this increasingly popular global pursuit and were drawn to a recent news piece, sent by one of our Canadian correspondents. It comes from *The Globe and Mail* and was written by Shannon Moneo:

Entrepreneur makes Scotch on the rocks of the Island

New distillery near Courtenay to produce continent's second single-malt whisky

Jay Oddleifson isn't partial to a nightcap of scotch. But one year from now, the 50-year-old Courtenay resident will be spending his days inhaling the heady aromas of barley mash and yeast as North America's second single-malt whisky distillery swirls into operation.

Mr. Oddleifson, and his Scottish partner, Andrew Currie, will operate Shelter Point Distillery, to be located on the former University of B.C. experimental farm, 20 kilometres north of Courtenay and a stone's throw away from the Strait of Georgia.

"You stand on the farm, and there's your barley, there's your water and there's your scotch," said Mr. Oddleifson, who spent a decade at nearby Mount Washington Alpine Resort as CFO and resort development director.

Specially grown barley for the whisky will be produced on the 700-hectare property, now owned by local farmer Patrick Evans. A mountain-fed aquifer will deliver unadulterated water, and pristine, salty sea air will bestow desirable characteristics on the brew, destined to sit in Shelter Point's American oak casks for anywhere from the required minimum three years to 20 or more.

"We're going to be a small, artisanal distillery," Mr. Oddleifson said.

Mr. Currie visited Comox Valley in 2004 after hearing through the barley-vine that the area was akin to rural Scotland before acid rain contaminated the once-virgin soil. In his mid-40s, Mr. Currie owns Scotland's Isle of

Arran distillery and is building his second distillery in England's Cumbria area.

Mr. Oddleifson, a director of the Comox Valley's economic development society and a former manager of a South African estate winery, met the kilt-wearing Scotsman in 2004. Plans for Shelter Point soon materialized.

Shelter Point's annual whisky production will not exceed 50,000 litres, which translates into roughly 65,000 750-millilitre bottles. Ten to 15 jobs will be created. In keeping with its exclusive, boutique feel, the whisky will be sold on the premises and at specialty liquor stores for an estimated \$80 a bottle – a cost similar to high-end scotches.

A special international blend will be ready just in time for the 2010 Vancouver-Whistler Winter Olympics, Mr. Oddleifson said.

According to the Scotch Whisky Association, Scottish friars began brewing single-malt whisky in the 15th century and... today, Scotland boasts more than 100 licensed scotch distilleries.

Mr. Oddleifson is fully aware of the Scots' obsessive protection of their centuries-old drink. Nevertheless, he'll soon be hop-scotching across the Atlantic to tour distilleries with Mr. Currie, seeking ideas for their Canuck-Scot operation. ■

The **SWR** is glad that they have chosen a site with the requisite salty sea air... so integral to quality for their 'concoction' and agrees that it is totally unfair that those nasty, obsessive, Scots won't allow them to call it "Scotch". They've probably been turned sour because of the continually falling acid rain. Shame too that Mr Oddliefsen doesn't even like whisky, but hell, why should he when there's money to be made?

Still, young Mr Currie should be able to guide him towards a guaranteed fortune, even though the permanently kilted one isn't the owner of Arran (apparently the owners of that distillery are talking to their lawyers about that alleged claim). He can always refer Mr Oddliefsen to his other projects; the much-postponed Ladybank, the unbuilt one in the Lakes, oh and not forgetting the other unbuilt one in Barra. ■

STOP PRESS STOP PRESS STOP PRESS

It would appear that Messrs Currie and Oddliefsen will be pipped at the post. A local winemaker has got a licence to distil and is aiming to be up and running by the end of this year (2006).

Sadly, he appears to have broken the rules and done so with his own money. ■

Christmas cracker

Welcome to Keepers' Wives, a sensational new spot in your super, soaraway **SWR**. Keep an eye out for those tasty trophy wives at the Keepers of the Quaich! Our Keeper crumpet for this issue is Kate Patrick – phwoar! Kate beat off some stiff competition from South America to be **SWR**'s favourite. No wonder Fred is fiddling with his sporran. ■



If you have anything for inclusion in these pages, please e-mail news@scotchwhiskyreview.com

Swede dreams are made of this

They love it, don't they? The Swedes adore Scotch whisky so much that the distillery-building business is thriving in Scandinavia. It's a wonder Andrew Currie hasn't pitched up there yet. Maybe he has.

We all know about Mackmyra – nice touch the Mac bit, don't you think? But there are at least three – **SWR** has heard unsubstantiated rumours of a fourth – more distilleries being planned in Sweden. Soon the names Gammelstilla, Gotland and Hven will be tripping off the tongues of whisky enthusiasts the world over.

New manager at Edradour

Edradour has appointed its third manager in a year... a turnover rate which puts it up there with Lagavulin. He is James McGown formerly the brewer at Springbank. James surprisingly pipped the favourites for the job, Arthur Motley and Dominic Roskrow, both of whom it is believed failed during the interview process.

Edradour's former manager 'Big' Willie MacDougall has moved down the road to Blair Atholl distillery. It'll be interesting to see what happens when he and his former boss bump into each other at the bread counter of the Co-op. ■

Book launches

On the subject of modest Swedes, **SWR** was well-represented at the launch of Ulf Buxrud's *Rare Malts*. Rare is about right. Although there were plenty of copies of Ulf's book at the event it was impossible to get one on the evening. Presumably if one had offered £30 one could have taken home a signed copy but, dear reader, the **SWR** abides by the ancient code the drinks writer; *nunquam persolvo pro quisquam* (never pay for anything). Those of you who attended the launch of the new **SWR** at Spar, Prince of Wales Road, Norwich gratefully trousered your complimentary copy. Why is it any different for books? At a recent whisky book

SWR has it on very good authority that Scotland's favourite Swede is involved financially in one of these, ahem, schemes. Yes, it's good to know that the £13,000 per day he is still being paid by the Football Association is being put to good use. Step forward Sven Göran-Eriksson.

His haplessness, vacuous air and eye for the ladies suggest a glorious future as a whisky writer but, unlike his favourite former England captain, our Sven has never been one to shirk a challenge.

Doubtless an overpaid and arrogant team will be assembled to run the project... ■

Catted malt

According to research at St Andrews, as reported by *The Times*, cats can suffer from Alzheimer's disease. The disease manifests itself in cats in similar ways to human beings; they can get lost, forget to eat and behave erratically. For this breakthrough, we have to thank Danielle Gunn-Moore and her husband Frank who began the study when their pet Tabby, Cardhu, fell ill. Perhaps Diageo might wish to sponsor further research into the link between Cardhu and memory loss. ■



launch the publisher introduced the evening and offered the new book to a press audience at a discount on the evening – for cash!

As far as *Rare Malts* goes, it's a very nice book – well done Ulf – and I enjoyed my two glasses of Champagne and respectable measure of Brora. ■

Did you know?

The price of delivered malt is at an unheard of £350 per tonne due to a genuine shortage of good quality barley. A long, hot summer has done the industry no favours. Producers are being forced to use low yield varieties and it is estimated that two years or more of production capacity have been stripped from Scottish maltings.

With distillers stepping up production to cope with an anticipated increase in demand (see Editor's column page 6), prices are set to rise even further.

This is bad news for smaller producers as they don't have the buying power of the big boys, some of whom, lest we forget, have their own maltings...

It might be time to recall the 1987 Concordat, the agreement all the distillers on Islay came to in order to secure the future of Port Ellen's maltings.

Ultimately, this is bad news for the whisky consumer as, inevitably, increased costs are passed all the way down the supply line with no-one willing to sacrifice their margin. ■

Caption comps



Just what is Ian Wisniewski saying to Ronnie Cox in the battle of the bouffants? A prize is also offered for the best suggestion to accompany the picture of James Cosmo and Mike Keiller. ■



There was a real temptation (which came, if truth be told, in the form of an order from the self-appointed 'publisher') to follow my previous two rants about cheap and expensive whiskies by letting fly in this issue about the scandal of the mid-priced whiskies which are flooding the market. I can see his point. Can't these people make up their minds? Either you commit yourself to the bargain basement or to the ludicrously over-inflated. Let's have no more of this shilly-shallying about in the mid-market trying to give the consumer a great dram for a decent price. What kind of business model is that?

But no.

Instead, my thoughts turned back to the year just gone. Was this really, as Frank once sang, a very good year? It may seem strange to say this in the august pages of this scandal sheet, but it strikes me that it was.

Sales of malt are growing globally, there are even blends being drunk. I'm not long back from a lengthy and sleepless trip to South Africa. Two weeks of whisky fairs? There ought to be a medal struck for that. Still, it gave a hectic insight into what happens when a market suddenly switches on to flavour – sales rising at over 50% year-on-year, a place in the global top 10 and growth in blends, American whiskey (well... Jack) and Jameson. There is a real thirst for whisky – and for whisky knowledge.

When you stir in the Chinese phenomenon, the continuing Taiwanese boom, the very real revival in malt currently underway in Japan and the general buzz about the same category in the US, you can see why there appear to be some pretty pleased people about at the moment.

There is a genuine excitement about whisky in these new markets. It is only in the older ones, such as the UK, where weary cynicism takes over, surely as the result of peddling the same message to the same people for too long and to no avail. Learning from these new markets might be one way to go – and let's hear none of these excuses that the sole reason for their success is because of the allure of the import. The continuing growth in all of these markets is as a result of people liking the flavour of whisky, not just its image. You will not drink something on a regular basis if you don't appreciate its taste – no matter how cool it may be.

The major question for distillers in 2007 is how to cope with this growth. If China takes off, if the Indian import duty question is



resolved (which it will be), if Russia starts to grow, if America really takes to single malt then where is the whisky going to come from to guarantee long-term growth?

The industry may have sufficient stock to cope with a rise in blends, but the only way in which this may happen is if some distillers trim their malt portfolio. Yet can they afford to? Emerging markets such as China may be thirsty for blends, but everyone knows that if whisky is to raise its premium image then it also needs a flourishing single malt business. There is a tricky balancing act needed – especially since the old heads recall the over optimism of the late 70s... and what happened to Cognac in China when the Far East economy crashed.

It would appear that distillers are responding. Production levels are rising. Even Diageo appears to have finally got the message and is re-opening plants which were silent for long periods every year (though part of the reason for that was less to do with balancing inventory and more with manpower shortage thanks to the imposition of one-man operations). Chivas has reopened Allt-a-Bhainne – Braes cannot be far behind, – and its reluctance to sell Glendronach and Imperial might be more to do with belatedly realising that they may be important elements in their need to build up stocks.

The same story is repeated across the industry. Both of Glenfiddich's stillhouses are working, Macallan is increasing capacity, while smaller operations such as Bowmore appear to have turned a corner after a few years of drift. Inver House, meanwhile, under its new owner, has gone from the distiller everyone forgot about into a new confident whisky maker.

This confidence goes all the way through to the independent distillers. For me, the revelation of the year has been BenRiach. I

admit I dismissed it as an also-ran on the limited tasting of Seagram bottlings, but Billy Walker has shown a legion of cynics, myself included, that there are remarkable whiskies in those cellars.

This puts me in mind of a question I was posed last week: "Which distillery would you close down?" It was a sly way of finding out which still I didn't rate. It was also an absurd idea – who would close a distillery in the current climate? Jeez I'd even consider buying Glen Scotia. (*You always said you were no businessman. Ed.*) There are, however, some whiskies which could be improved, not because they're poorly distilled – with the knowledge at the industry's disposal no-one should be producing bad whisky – but because of the quality of the wood. Even this issue is being resolved. The three big Glens are all showing the benefits of serious investment in wood a dozen or so years ago.

The one little black cloud in this blue sky (hey... allow me one!) is the worry that upping production levels results in a further loss of individuality. There has been a slow stylistic drift over the past decade which has resulted in a convergence of character among too many malts. Whisky, we should never forget, sells because of its individuality.

Despite that, it would appear that it's not hard to make money in the whisky business at the moment – provided you have a brand and good distribution. That said, I wouldn't like to be starting as an independent bottler today. The big boys won't sell liquid, the stock of cult silent stills is running out. Stir in poor wood and there are as many misses as hits emerging from the IB sector. Only the best will survive... those with stock, a clear quality wood philosophy and, conceivably, a distillery as well.

Have a guid new year! ■

The whisky virgin

Jonathan Ray is
Wine Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*

I blush to tell you that I am a whisky virgin. At least I was, for I have finally lost my cherry. It is still early days in our relationship and we are taking it slowly, but I have succumbed at last to uisge beatha's silky, seductive, flirtatious charms. And me an old man of 46.

It was becoming a bit of a standing joke among my mates (and Scottish mother-in-law), the way I would always turn up my hooter at whatever glass of whisky was wafted under it. Thanks to the memory of cheap, back-of-the-school-bike-shed blends, passed around in quarter bottles, I wouldn't go near it. They say you can never eat an oyster again after having been sick on one, and having once splattered my shoes in violent fashion after a break-time slug of supermarket Scotch, that, as far as I was concerned, was that.

As I grew older, I fell happily into the embrace of both cognac and armagnac, even rum, grappa and – my particular weakness – kummel, but as for Scotland's pride and joy, it was definitely Whisky a No No.

I hadn't reckoned, though, on the persistence of Ronnie Cox, director of The Glenrothes. He badgered and cajoled me about visiting Speyside until I could bear his whining no longer. And he had a point: after having visited and written about distilleries in France, Italy, Venezuela and Brazil, it was daft that I had never been to a Scottish one.

"No pressure," said Ronnie, once I had finally accepted his invitation. "We'll show you how whisky is made, lay on a bit of tasting, and simply let nature take its course. I think that you'll be enjoyably surprised."

He even offered to take me to Glenfiddich afterwards for a compare 'n' contrast exercise, which I thought was pretty magnanimous. I met Ronnie and distillery manager, John Sutherland, at Glenrothes a few months ago. Under their expert tutelage we went through the distillation process: we chatted about 'wort', 'wash' and 'low wines' and about the importance of water quality, oak casks and dunnage warehouses.

We tasted Glenrothes straight from the still. It was fruity and lively, floral and fragrant, and faintly reminiscent of pears and liquorice. John then led me gently through a tasting of their Select Reserve, the 1985 and the 1991 and I remember being astounded at how different they all were and how complex and intricate their flavours. I never knew that whisky could be so apricotty, so citrusy and so downright tasty.

At dinner that night whisky accompanied most of the courses, and things got predictably fuzzy. But I do remember my eureka moment: I swigged some 1973 Glenrothes with my coffee and bingo! So soft and creamy was it, and so utterly bewitching that this, if nothing else, converted me to the delights of single malt whisky. John and Ronnie were thrilled at my reaction. "Aye, it's a fine dram," said John. "It'll put some Ross into your Cromarty all right."

The following morning I pitched up at Glenfiddich to be shown round by David Mair, their chief guide. It was awfully early to be talking whisky, but I soon got into the swing of things, and after an in-depth tour round the distillery, I was more than happy to



sit by their roaring log fire and go through the card. We tried the light, fresh and fragrant 12-year-old Special Reserve, the honeyed 15-year-old Solera Reserve (my favourite), the smooth, creamy 18-year-old Ancient Reserve, the spicy 21-year-old Gran Reserva (finished in rum casks) and finally, the honeyed, chocolatey and sweet-edged Glenfiddich 30-year-old. They were fascinating, delicious and all so different.

Thanks to Ronnie Cox, during that day-and-a-half in Speyside, I nosed, sampled and – let's be frank – knocked back more malt whisky than I had done in the previous 30 years. Of course, now that I have got a taste

for it I can't stay away.

A few weeks later and I was back in Speyside visiting Gordon & Macphail. I spent an age in their treasure trove of a shop in Elgin and then headed to their distillery, Benromach. I tasted my way through the whisky's various beguiling expressions – the peppery and floral Traditional, the smooth, mellow Organic, the cinnamon 22-year-old Port Wood finish and (my favourite) the toffee and creamy 21-year-old Tokaji finish – and then, rather unsteadily, drew off my own unique bottle of Benromach's 2000 vintage straight from the cask. What a treat!

The trouble is that now I am no longer a whisky virgin, I have become a whisky tart. I even heard Kentucky's siren call and off I popped to visit Buffalo Trace – named 2005 Distiller of the Year by *Whisky Magazine* and 2005 Distillery of the Year by *Malt Advocate*. (These are, apparently, two other "whisky" "magazines", Ed.)

Uniquely among Kentucky distilleries, Buffalo Trace was given special permission to continue distillation 'for medicinal purposes' during the daftness that was Prohibition. And there can surely be no better medicine than its celebrated 10-year-old Elmer T. Lee Single Barrel Bourbon; with warming, sweet, complex flavours of mint, toffee, molasses, vanilla and brown sugar it certainly puts Benylin Expectorant in the shade.

It's no surprise to learn that Buffalo Trace claims uniqueness. It tickles me how the various adverts, brochures, pamphlets and PR releases try to highlight one eye-catching difference between them all. Back in Scotland, Old Pulteney, for example, is unique because it is "the most northerly distillery on the mainland," The Glenlivet is unique because it was "the first Highland distillery to be licensed to make Scotch whisky", Cardhu is unique because it was "the only malt distillery pioneered by a woman," Benromach is unique because it is "the smallest working distillery in Speyside," Glen Grant is unique because it is "the only distillery named after its owners," Dallas Dhu is unique because it was "the last distillery to be built in the nineteenth century". Glenfiddich is unique because it is the best-selling malt whisky in the world (which really is something to crow about).

The point, surely, is that they're all unique, all special and all blooming delicious. Which begs the question: why the hell did I leave it so long? ■



Christmas turkeys



It's the eagerly-anticipated, highly-prestigious, inaugural Oscars of the industry! Welcome to the Annual Scotch Whisky Review Awards – the John Cors...

The Cors will be presented at the SWR annual dinner at the George Hotel, Inveraray. Tickets £1,000 excluding wine.

Dave, did you ensure every advertiser won something?

The Most Literally Unique Press Release Trophy

BIG Partnership:
"Highland Park is one of the most remote Scotch malt distilleries in the world"

The Hyperbole Cup

Blackwood Distillers. "Worthy winners, head and shoulders above the rest" said the judges.

The Dominic Roskrow Award for Diplomacy

Andrew Symington

Overpriced Award sponsored by SWR

Ardbeg 1965 OB

Overhyped Award sponsored by Blackwood Distillers

Ardbeg 1965 OB

Slater's Menswear Award for Sartorial Elegance

Reverend Richard Paterson

Annual Gong

Jim McEwan

The Paul Walsh Cardhu Pure Malt Trophy for Innovation

Spice Tree

The Lloyds TSB "Oh thanks, is that cheque for me?" World's Best Whisky Award

Bidding still open (hint)



The Arthur Daley Fairtrade Award

Damian Riley-Smith

The Jon, Mark and Robbo Award for Pushing Water Up Hill Not Sponsored by Oddbins

Jon and Mark

Best Whisky Cocktail sponsored by Buckfast

The Rusty Bus-Shelter

1 part Laphroaig,
2.5 parts Buckfast,
1 teaspoon of chilli-oil,
capers to garnish
"Good but a bit bland." Charles MacLean

The Fred Laing Memorial Leather Harness for Tasting Note of the Year

"Quite possibly the most coastal whisky I have ever nosed: it is as if the peat has only been diluted by seawater. This smells of rotting distilleries and malt kilns. It is unique and unquestionably the most evocative thing I have ever sniffed. I close my eyes and I am on undiscovered Islay, before I ever wrote about the place; when I could wander around barely-known distilleries alone. No matter how it tastes, it cannot paint a picture so vividly, or bring back such a lost joy as the nose, or even a sense of loss of how things used to be... I don't know if you believe this or not, but it has actually brought a lump to my throat and a slight moistened eye. I think I should pause before tasting."

Jim Murray

The Annual Turnbull Hutton Chairman's Vote of Confidence Award

Glenmorangie management team
(on behalf of LVMH)

The "We own that? Are you sure?" Award

Chivas Bros for
Imperial and Glendronach

Alfred Barnard is unwell

as told to Jon Allen

To Auchentoshan by 100 horses

I was invited by an entrepreneur who'd put up a large tent in the centre of Glasgow to attend a gathering therein called Whisky Live! There, a constant stream of rather odd people with interesting clothes wanted to stand alongside me and have their photographs taken as if they were members of my family. For a while, I took a leaf out of my new friend Michael Jackson's textbook on handling such attention and struck a pose as if I were in a different photograph altogether, slumping or looking in the opposite direction to the camera. This means that when these people show the photo to friends it will look as if they have inserted themselves into the picture by modern electronic means. Mr Jackson is an inspiration.

But after a while, even this simple prank was not enough to dull the irritation I couldn't help feeling and I simply had to get away.

When I was in the City on my Grand Tour of the United Kingdom, certain distilleries got the full A.B. treatment. I visited seven in Glasgow which featured as No.1 to No. 7 in my magnum opus. To Port Dundas I devoted six pages; a full eight to its neighbour Dundashill; two to Adelphi, four each to Yoker and to Loch Katrine, a page to Provanmill and just 13 lines containing a mere 162 words to Auchentoshan. In fact, it is obvious re-reading what I wrote,

that I was treating the distillery as little more than a stopover on my way to Littlemill.

But in Whisky Live's big top, only Auchentoshan's single malts were represented. When I asked what had happened to the other distilleries, a helpful visitor overheard my question. He explained, in what I took to be a German accent, that Port Dundas is making exclusively grain whisky. The site of Dundashill – when I was there arguably the largest Pure Malt (apologies, single malt) distillery in Scotland – is largely covered with housing. The Adelphi name lives on only as an independent bottler, the last of its buildings demolished in the 1970s. A school now stands where Provanmill once did. Loch Katrine has disappeared leaving no trace and

Yoker closed down in 1927. (It seems the Patent "Ageing Apparatus" I was shown in the No. 7 warehouse – and wrote about – which applied the immense pressure of heat to new-make spirit and turned it into a mature whisky of three to five years old didn't have quite the hoped-for impact on the industry. Yoker was only the fifth distillery I had visited and, thinking back, I have a ghastly dream of a small group of workers standing in a corner sniggering as I was diligently taking notes.)

Just as I was wondering if it was possible to revisit Auchentoshan, a friend from



Kilmacolm – the redoubtable inventor, engineer and yachtsman Captain Robertson – kindly offered to chauffeur me there. He said he had 100 horses waiting. I was intrigued and accepted the position of pillion.

We made excellent time on a bright September day, following signs for Port Greenock and passing Glasgow Airport on our right on the much improved highway that is the M8. At Junction 30 we took the slip road to cross the Erskine Bridge, recently freed of its punitive tolls. On to the A82 and the distillery hove into view. Following the dual carriageway... (*Alf, That's quite enough travel details – you're not writing your book now. Ed.*)

To be honest, I didn't see much on the journey since I was clinging to the Captain,

my eyes tightly shut, as he sped along on his BMW R1200 GS motorbike. But it was a most efficacious, if not commodious, means of arriving at the distillery.

How the place had changed. Last time the harvest was in full swing and the works all but abandoned. In 2006, we received a wonderful welcome and a private guided tour by a young lady from Malaysia called Mehja. I explained that I was there to right the wrong I did with so few lines in my seminal text. Mehja really knew her stuff and – this was particularly wonderful – almost all the equipment was labelled with details of the

capacities. I was in heaven. This Lowland malt is triple distilled these days which is the one thing every drinker knows. But there is altogether so much more to learn.

The distillery produces four times a week using 6.825 tonnes of bought in malted barley. On-site malting ceased in 1921. The mash is prepared in a Porteus mill for the 35,000 litre tun which takes 8 hours. 63.5 degrees... (*Alf, I'm warning you. Ed.*)

In 1918, the year of my supposed death, our country was still at war with Germany. I was astonished to discover on my return that we went through the whole process

again. During that conflict, our airborne foe bombed Auchentoshan (a fact not mentioned by my informant in the Big Top!). One part of the housing destroyed has never been fully restored to its former glory, perhaps as a reminder of man's folly. But the distillery is amongst the best maintained I have ever seen. Michael Jackson surmises it's because of Japanese owners who cherish their sites. Japan was allied to Germany, as was Italy. Now, the major whisky collectors in the world are, I'm told, Italians. Malt whisky truly can bring the world together.

With that thought, we re-mounted our 100 horses (that's at 7,250 rpm). The 1170cc GS's compression ratio is 11.0:1, and... (*Alf, stop. It's a motorbike, not a distillery. Ed.*) ■

Desert island distillery

with Mike Nicolson



Where is your distillery?

Kelty, Fife.

How near are you to the nearest pub/shop?

You haven't been to Kelty have you?

What can you see from your window?

No, you obviously haven't or you would know that there ain't too many windows in Kelty.

What can you smell when you stick your nose out the window?

I keep telling you, this is KELTY!

Describe the set-up of your plant.

The water will be special, magic, Scottish water, blessed by the water fairy. The malt will be brown and will have come from a maltings but will have been lovingly tended by an entire family of malt pixies, dressed in primary colours.

The mash tun is gonna be square, USP - see? Don't talk to me about marketing!

Ferment will be quick, look you missed two already! For a man who took two shots to get O-level arithmetic, it is essential that there be four stills, so that I can count them on the fingers of both hands. We're gonna have worms, on account of them being so easy to maintain but, they are gonna be pretty revolutionary 'cause they will be anti-clockwise!

So, will there be computers?

Computers don't bring pheasants to the back door, or wash cars, do they now?

Who will be your preferred manufacturers?

The Acme Rubber Co., Fender, Lotus, BAT, and Jimmy the Whizz.

A balanced distillation?

As balanced as its Manager.

Long or short conversation?

Short, man.

What's the new make character?

This will be a previously undefined character that I have been working on for some time now and whose current working descriptor is "Blindin".

A mix of wood?

Oh yes.

What about finishes?

Funny you should mention that, I've been having good feelings lately about lemon sorbet.

What soundtrack will be played?

Monday; Steely Dan (Well it's Monday)

Tuesday; Stax day (with a Sam & Dave hour from 10am until 11am)

Wednesday; Vivaldi (filling day Wednesday)

Thursday; Mickey Jupp (with Switchboard Susan every hour on the hour).

Friday; we'll have them whale noises you get on relaxation tapes, just to set us up for the weekend with half an hour of Kathy Kirby, about lunch time, to help us keep a grasp on reality.

You can have anyone as your staff. Name them.

Lots of them.

Mash House; Catherine Zeta Jones, Angelina Jolie, Halle Berry, Winona Ryder (as long as she keeps her hands in her pockets).

Stillhouse; The Great Houdini, Angus McAffer, Proust (for the night shift chats), and Vlad the Impaler.

The warehouse squad will be five of the seven dwarfs led by Ian McArthur (for his shy, retiring, submissive attitude).

Robert the Bruce will sweep the yard and sign autographs.

Uniform will be classic French waitress for the wimmins and leopardskin leotards for the guys, you know, something tasteful.

Who is the postman/odd job man?

Jack Nicholson is gonna job share as he only rings twice and is pretty handy with an axe.

Are you independent / corporate?

This is no place to discuss my politics or my weight.

Is there a human resources department?

Yes there will be a human resources department but the distillery staff will be issued with a clove of garlic each and instructed to wear it at all times.

What is the distillery pet?

An armadillo called Eric.

Is there a visitor centre?

Of course there's a Visitor Centre, everybody's got one, you really must keep up darling. Naturally we will accept bus parties, where else are we going to get our intellectual stimulus, variety and excitement?

What's for sale in the shop?

The product lines will be fairly restricted and will focus, essentially, around the complete recorded works of Big Mama Jay, a selection of handy household ironmongery and a small scale model of Sir Harry Lauder with a wooden stake driven through his heart.

Visitors presenting empty glass slippers, thermos flasks or buckets for that matter, will have them lovingly filled by distillery staff, with our 80-year-old, after which they will be certified. No, wait a minute, I don't think I wrote that down right.

Will you have a website?

There will be no website, remember about all that stimulus we will be getting already.

Will the staff wear kilts?

Yeah, you're right, things could be worse, we could be Dutch.

Will you bring back dramming?

Yes, but only for the Manager.

Single malt or fillings?

You betcha, we are (confidentially) currently having discussions with Vick as well. (Bit of innovation there then.)

Age / strength

Ages will be nine, 13, 23^{1/2} and, of course, the aforementioned 80-year-old. Strength is yet to be decided as we currently await the results of our "let's see what it does to a penny in the glass" research.

Chill Filtered? Caramel adjusted?

Definitely! With perhaps a little extra (as a special treat) in our German consignments. The 80-year-old will not be colour adjusted it will be filtered, however, but only through a piece of brown bread. (Traditional, ethnic's good.)

Ad campaigns

The campaign will feature wimmins largely, as there are quite a lot of them you know, and there ain't nobody selling them fine malt whisky at the moment, other than to the bald ones with wings, apparently.

What's the biggest market?

Sutherland, well to be more precise, a little house near Melvich wherein resides a ghillie of my aquaint, by the name of Makay. He's a big, big, fan. Where wouldn't it be sold? To

Makay's brother, he's bad news after a couple of sherbets.

Will you be your own brand ambassador?

Regrettably no, I'm not qualified, I don't know a single folk singer, I hate white shirts, I look ridiculous in tartan, tweed gives me a rash and then there's my speech impediment...

Would you let journalists in?

Hell yes, if they make it over the razor wire, past the dogs and through the minefield, they deserve a look round. There is no bloody "h" in Nicolson, okay?

Will there be any additional facilities?

This is a hard one. Current thinking surrounds a re-hab facility for people who would like to "do up" a house on Islay. The proposed construction will be very suitable, well staffed, wheelchair friendly, lots of warm, Black Watch blankets, shuffleboard, there's even a little garden. The inhabitants could continue mumbling to themselves but,



in a safe and secure environment, where they can come to no harm.

And finally, what's the name of your distillery?

The distillery will be called Glenda. ■

Lust in translation

Martine Nouet,
Whisky Magazine UK contributor and
Whisky Magazine France Editor

It is rather challenging to be a woman in a man's world. Very stimulating but not always easy. As a spirit writer, I meet more men than women in France as well as abroad. My work as a contributor for *Whisky Magazine UK* has led me to do more presentations in front of an English-speaking audience. I feel quite comfortable with the language as well as with the people and the atmosphere. But using a foreign language can make you feel a stranger and even a strange person in some circumstances.

I have accumulated quite a number of embarrassing situations caused by language misunderstandings or even mistakes. A lost in translation moment as well as a blonde one! Like when inviting some friends on Islay for a whisky dinner, one friend asked what she could bring. I suggested "these little things we eat for apéritif". You mean nibbles, she said. Yes, I replied, pleased to have learned a new word. When my friend appeared on the day, I cheerfully came with "Have you brought your nipples?" "Yes but they are not for you!" she retorted.

But this is worse when the boob is

performed in a professional environment. At that moment, you wish you could disappear 10 feet underground (*Shouldn't that be 3m? Ed*). That happened to me at Whisky Live Glasgow in September. I attended the event as a visitor but could not resist my friend and colleague Dave Broom's invitation to join him on the podium for a Live Tasting in the way we conduct our magazine tastings.

On the menu, the new releases. Dave picked up a few bottles on the stands and we both commented the tastings. Fine. Most of these I had never tasted before. So it was a complete improvisation. Among the new releases, we had Glenmorangie Speakeasy, a bottling only available at the distillery. The only one I had experienced a few hours before. I was not much impressed, finding it pretty harsh. So I whispered to Dave just before we started the tasting "I would rather call it 'spiteasy'". The bastard jumped on the word and released it to the audience holding out the microphone to me. I felt puzzled for a second, not knowing what to reply. Then I thought it would be a good opportunity to explain how we conduct our

tastings. So I went along with that concern of not inhaling and drinking too much alcohol in the numerous tastings our whisky writer life offers us. Dropping in that "People often ask me do you spit or do you swallow?"

The reaction in the audience was immediate. All these Glaswegians shaking with laughter, Dave with a large smile... what was so funny? I found the reaction pretty odd, thinking to myself Glaswegians are good-humoured lads, I am glad they are enjoying the tasting. We carried on presenting the new releases. The smile did not leave the faces. At the end, a few lads came to me and thanked me for the good moment they had spent. So I felt perfectly happy. In the evening, Dave asked me with a cheeky twinkle in the eye "Do you remember what you said this afternoon while we were tasting Spiteasy?" Oh, yes I replied and I repeated what I had told the audience. Then the penny dropped. I am still blushing. By the way, I do spit though I swallow a few drops of the stuff as it is necessary to evaluate the finish and the aftertaste.

What about you? ■

It is ever **SWR's** sacred mission to uncover the innermost workings of the whisky industry, regardless of expense, inconvenience or personal danger.

Our intrepid undercover reporter Caleb Bann was disguised as a cabin boy and smuggled aboard the luxury yacht *Deadly Ernest* to report on the orgiastic shenanigans of the infamous *Marvellous Malts Island Cruise*. *Celebrity Love Island* pales by comparison to the off-shore antics of industry leaders “confined” two to a bunk when they believe themselves far from a camera. It is time the sordid truth was exposed. But, like his fellow sailors, our mole was uncovered – then cast adrift in an open boat with only a portion of draff and a cupful of cask strength *Glen Gloaming* to sustain him. After days of exposure to the elements a violent tempest drove him far to the west of Scotland where he was cast up, rambling and incoherent (*no change there, then. Ed*) on an enchanted island.

Strangely the islanders welcomed him and appointed one Prospero as his guide. A primitive distilling industry caught his attention.

Now read on...

Prospero took me to the Ladybrook Distillery which generously allowed me unprecedented access to its operations.

As I am now becalmed on the island, with little prospect of rescue until the monthly longboat to St Kilda, my first bulletin concerns the spectacular range of Ladybrook bottlings which were unveiled at an all-expense spared event held in the public bar of the island's sole hostelry, *The Politician*. Interestingly, this is named after a shipwreck notorious in the island's history for introducing the unsuspecting inhabitants to whisky, a spirit of which they were previously delightfully innocent.

It is just as well that both of *The Politician's* tables were bolted to the floor as they were groaning under the accumulated weight of the incredible number of bottlings. In a radical break with convention we were told we could look but not taste, but don't tell the Scotch whisky industry, as this might catch on!

After an animated rendering of the company song “No-one understands us, no-one loves us” the remarkably named A. Spokesman addressed the expectant throng of three eager scribes: “We're breaking with the convention of the large monolithic giant companies which have strangled the industry over the past 200 years,” he (or it might have been she) said.

“We intend to release every single barrel as a separate bottling, thus achieving saturation coverage of all the independent off-licences in the entire world. Whisky bars will have to

build a separate Ladybrook annexe to ensure full stock coverage.”

Basing its marketing strategy on a washed-up copy of *Vogue* dropped from a passing cruise ship the firm has taken its lead from the fashion industry and plans a release of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter collections. Additional special bottlings will be issued to commemorate significant events – such as, for example, the rising of the sun and high and low tide.

Chief amongst these is the brand new TCP55, a recreation of a whisky which never existed and already awarded *Whisky Magazine's* coveted award in the hotly-contested “most over-priced single malt probably ready for bottling (just)” category.

In deference to my ‘Colossus of Whisky’ status (*surely “Colossal wanker”?* Ed) I was grudgingly permitted a thimbleful of this “ambrosial nectar” and concurred with the opinion of Ladybrook's brand ambassador, Angus McSporrán an 85-year-old seafarer who scoured his ageing memories to recall the lost, semi-mythical inspiration behind TCP55.

“I recall the first time I had the 1929 Port Ariel,” he croaked, almost inaudibly. “I was drifting off Rockall with a raging thirst. The only reason I drank it was because it was the only thing available.”

“It was peaty, very peaty,” the ancient mariner went on controversially, suggesting that TCP55 has “the same peatiness right enough, right enough (sic). Och, it's just as smooth as when I drank the milk straight from a goat's udders when I was adrift in the

Sargasso Sea with the Duke of Johannesburg.”

However, this peatiness is nothing on the provocatively named *Oh God! Not More?* which features malt that was peated for a year and a day, distilled by Ladybrook's legendary Peat Master, Master Peter ‘Pete’ Peterson in peat-fired kilns and aged in casks which had previously had peat fires lit inside them. The bottles, dug from pre-historic peat bogs, are to contain a peat widget which explodes when the cork is twisted off.

“Och it's peaty, very peaty,” said the elderly sage. “It reminds me of when...” Sadly, space does not permit more of Angus's demented warbling, nor is there room to discuss every one of these 37 remarkable drams. However, a vatting of malts from Islay and Ireland may already have been anticipated by the *Slowly Sinking Whisky Company*.

“That's innovation for you!” the MD said puckishly. Also look out for what is claimed to be the first wine finish from a Buckfast cask, a malt aged in 200 different species of oak and a revolutionary *Irn Bru ‘evolution’*. As the “*pièce de resistance*” the distillery's flagship *Jumping The Shark* was revealed. “We've taken our corporate strategy and bottled it,” said the MD.

Trees must die for this stuff. Are there enough casks anywhere to maintain such a hectic pace? Find out next issue as Fearless Caleb Bann, the man who cannot be silenced, reports. ■

Sukhinder Singh has one of the most impressive single malt whisky collections in the world as well as a highly-respected international spirits retail business.

Why did you start collecting?

My parents used to collect miniatures. On family holidays we'd pick up a miniature here and a miniature there. My parents had a shop and I was doing a lot of the ordering when I was young. My interest really grew from these miniatures. I joined The Miniature Bottle Club and met some really interesting people – a lot of these guys take this thing very, very seriously – so all I did was look, listen and learn. At the age of 18 I was offered a collection of 8,000 miniatures – I put in an offer and luckily got them.

Going through the collection there was whisky, rum, liqueurs and cognac. I spoke to friends in the club and said "look, this collection is all too much" and they suggested I only collect whisky.

But with about 3,000 whiskies it was still too much. I thought it would be interesting to specialise in single malts. I got rid of the rest of the stuff over two years and just started collecting malts. The more I learnt the more interested I got. I was buying miniatures all over the country and I was about the most active person then; 20 years ago every weekend I was up and down the country looking at collections of miniatures. I went to buy a collection of 500 minis in Scotland and I remember it very well; there was a beautiful bottle of malt sitting on his mantelpiece. I asked what it was and he said it was from the old Kirkliston distillery. I thought "Wow, that's interesting." I tried to persuade him to sell it to me and he wouldn't. So after one hour I got the bottle! That was the start of my whisky collection – the big bottle collection; the first bottle I bought was from the 1880s and it's still one of my favourites. I paid about £500 – a hell of a lot of money then!

I decided I was going to collect one bottle from each distillery and I would only collect old stuff pre-1950. Little by little I found I couldn't get some distillery bottlings so I built up relationships with Gordon & MacPhail. Neil Clapperton had just bought Cadenhead and we became really good pals. I started speaking to other people who were collecting whisky and because my parents had a business I was able to order whisky

and sell it to them, to friends. They used to say "if something new comes out let us know", so I starting ordering by the case, and by the two cases. Black Bowmore was the point at which passion overtook the rational. I've got one of each of the Black Bowmores in my collection. The second edition. They only made about 2000 of each and I've got the bottles numbered 2000. I've probably got the best bottle numbers: I tend to go for weird things. I like the number eight (it's a Chinese thing) and I might have number 88 or 888. Sometimes I'll go for the last number or the first number so I've got a mixture of things...

How many bottles in the collection now?

Honestly I haven't counted but I think it's about 4,000 full bottles. I lost interest in miniatures after collecting full-size bottles especially when the manufacturers started make miniatures for collectors – I thought that was really awful.

Aren't companies doing that with full-sized bottles too?

They certainly are so I am really choosy. What I collect now is to do with the quality of the whisky. Whereas before I might like the look of a bottle or be attracted by bottles with low numbers, today it's just about what's inside the bottle. My feeling is, being in the business so long, whisky will only become a collectors' item if the whisky is outstanding. Simple as ABC. Back to basics.

Are there any recent releases whose quality doesn't match up to the status as "collectable"?

I was very disappointed with Macallan; they have started a new series called Seasonal Cask Selection and it's only sold at the distillery in the shop, one every quarter. The summer one was an 8-year-old and I didn't like that whisky at all. But being Macallan, and a single cask bottling – 500 bottles – it's a sort of "must have". But I was very, very disappointed. It's not what I'd



expect from Macallan and people I know who've tried it are really upset. And these are all the serious Macallan boys. They have said it's not good enough.

When you buy a bottle do you just buy the one? Or do you buy one to drink?

I have two or three different collecting profiles. I collect old and rare stuff, stuff I like, certain distilleries where I have to have pretty much everything from that distillery; Springbank and Ardbeg for example. I guess Macallan because I've collected it from day one so have just about everything. It would be silly to stop now – although I was tempted not to keep the 8-year-old. I also specialise in Port Ellen. I believe I've got one of the largest collections in the world; over 400 Port Ellens. There are two or three of us. But we're in friendly competition – we help each other; sell to each other; swap with each other so it's not like a battle. My first collection whenever I find a whisky I can drink again and again I always keep either two or three bottles of that. I've always had an idea to open a bar in the future so that's one of the reasons I keep two or three bottles back of some of the finest whisky.

What's your most treasured bottle?

The old stuff. Not the new 60-year-olds that are going for silly prices these days but the old bottles from the turn of the last century. I've got a big soft spot for the Kirkliston – my first ever bottle and probably one of my oldest bottles. I've got some beautiful old bottles – for me it's that challenge of getting that old bottle – I've got the challenge of the getting a couple at the moment and I'll get them and then for me the challenge is over and I'll look for something else. I've got a beautiful old bottle of Lagavulin from around 1890. The only other

bottle of this I know belongs to Diageo and I was bidding against them on this bottle. Again, I've got old bottles from Talisker, Macallan, Laphroaig, Tobermory and Craigellachie.

Which whisky companies impress you at the moment?

Chivas principally. They have got Chivas as a deluxe blend, Ballantine's as a premium blend is way above Teacher's and Bell's. They really care. The next big thing is Scapa; the same company that's doing Longmorn is now doing Scapa. So they're going to do something good with it. I'm surprised they're not doing anything with Glendronach. It has been traditionally filled into sherry casks so I see it as a massive opportunity for taking on Macallan. I heard they're opening Glendronach visitor centre; it will be totally different to anything already in Scotland, state of the art. I think it's great that they're doing it in a distillery that people know very little about. It's a great malt so it's good they're doing something with it. Great company... In Aberlour they have THE most underrated malt and in Longmorn a real connoisseurs' whisky.

Diageo shows great leadership – the malts team are absolutely passionate. I think maybe the only problem is that they have too many brands. So they try to prioritise and say we'd better concentrate on this specific brand and forget about other brands. It's a shame sometimes to see things like distilleries lost but, saying that, it's nice to see them doing something special with Glen Ord, Glen Elgin and Caol Ila which is doing really well. It's one of my favourite Islay whiskies; I think its being discovered still. My favourite is the 25 year old – I like it a lot.

Who else is doing a good job out there?

It's nice to see a lot of independent distillers, single family run small distilleries, e.g. Benriach. It's nice to see these people being in the industry a long time. They've identified certain distilleries out there with something special. The previous distillers never really showed the whisky off very well. They've bought the distilleries and are turning out some really amazing stuff. Benriach is a great example with some fantastic stuff. Arran is doing some interesting stuff though I wish they'd do less finishing and more whisky. We could see some interesting things from Bladnoch but they've got a long way to go.

Benriach is one of a few distilleries that have changed hands recently.

Andrew Symington's doing some fantastic stuff at Edradour. He's done an amazing job with Ballechin and I think their first release is really, really good – proper farmyard distillery whisky – really good stuff.



Mackie's Ancient Scotch from the Malt Mill Distillery

I think Benromach's new organic single malt is excellent.

The small companies are doing well as are the big ones – my feeling is the ones in the middle get lost and are having a tough time

The guys in the middle are either going to be buying other people or be bought. Whyte & Mackay is a classic example, as is Edrington but they've got two or three amazing distilleries: Macallan is a beast on its own and they are trying to take Highland Park to the same level. Glenrothes is sort of the same stable. Edrington should have grown; I don't think they should've sold Bunnahabhain. I don't understand it. It's the same with Whyte & Mackay – why did they sell Bruichladdich?

Are there any distillers you think should be doing a better job?

I'd have to say Springbank – we know what Springbank is capable of... the standard of

products is getting better but I don't think that they are what Springbank used to be. I know no distillery is what it used to be but I think Springbank is far off it.

What is your favourite recently released whisky?

Glengoyne Mashman's Selection, some of the most amazing whiskies I've had in the last two years – absolutely fantastic – sensible prices too, at around £100 a bottle. Believe me, these two whiskies – wow!

I think generally most people are doing a pretty good job.

As a retailer what gets your goat?

There are too many products on the market and too many companies releasing too many products. I guess this is one of the reasons that we've run out of space. All that says to us is that we've got to be more careful, more selective about what we chose. I think generally a whisky brand needs to have three or four expressions, a balance of ages and maybe one limited edition a year.

Any more than that and you confuse the consumer. The consumer wants to learn but there's a lot out there to learn. If there are 10 expressions from each distiller and there are 80 different distilleries that's 800 plus products. Remember each company's releasing two, three, even four products per year. It's too much. Look at Morrison Bowmore; they are revamping their whole range. The basic range is now going to be 12-year-old, 18-year-old and 25-year-old and one young and one aged limited edition per year. I think that's perfect because it gives you a year to sell it and have a bit of a break and get ready for the next one. I think that's the way ahead. Look at Arran, how many products? Bruichladdich? Way, way too many products.

Which Independents are doing a good job?

Signatory is damned good. I think with independents it's getting more difficult but you find good stuff, a few gems with everyone. I like Douglas Laing – they've had some gems but some pretty awful whiskies, sad to say. Cooper's Choice have had some really amazing whiskies but do very little in the UK. Everyone finds something good.

Have you had any mentors in whisky?

The usual suspects – when I was a wee lad

I would have to say Jim McEwan made a big impression on me. He's a fantastic guy in a very difficult situation at Bruichladdich. Also Richard Paterson. On distillery trips I speak to the distillery managers – most of them are friends – and ask them to introduce me to some staff. So I meet stillmen, mash men, talk with them, possibly go for a drink after work. That's what it's all about; it's so cool to meet these people. Douglas Callander is a great bloke; he is what you call a whisky man. Whisky is all about learning; I have been doing it nearly 20 years and I meet people every day who say I must be an expert. No I'm still learning.

Where do you stand on finishes?

I don't think they are a bad thing per se; the fact is that wood finishes have been done for that last 100 years but no-one ever used to put it on the label. Do it to improve or enhance the whisky. If you do that then it's your secret. Why write about it? Why advertise the fact on the label? I think it should be the blender's art. The master distiller's secret.

Have you found any finishes that appeal to you?

Glenmorangie have done so many, of course, some of them have to be good. You have to get it right sometimes – it's a statistical certainty. I think the Sauternes is very good. We recommend it to a lot of hotels and restaurants to pour with dessert instead of a sweet wine; we did very well with that product. The other one which worked very well was the Burgundy finish. They actually released Glenmorangie Burgundy finish as a standard product because they saw how well it did. Port generally does well. I find it more interesting and challenging when the whisky has been fully matured in a certain type of cask. Yes, I know the flavours can mask the house style of the distillery, but I think that is what makes a special whisky. A unique flavour, something which is not quite balanced is what makes great whisky. Everything is in perfect harmony, beautifully balanced, that's great. But what makes a fantastic whisky? An extremity of sherry or peat – an extreme within that balance.

When Glenmorangie started doing wood finishes, the first one they did was Port wood at 46.5% and, from what I remember, it was finished in casks for a longer period – two years longer than they'd do now. The flavours were very intense. The strength was higher to bring those flavours across better. The first bottlings of Port at 46.8% and 46.5% were

absolutely great. Why they had to change it to 43% I don't know.

Are you a fan of sherry casks?

Sometimes whiskies are slightly over-sherried but as long as they're balanced they can work. If you look at tasting notes of the top-notch journalists like Michael Jackson, the whiskies that are highest rated are usually sherry wood. The first one he ever gave 99 or 100 points to was a Springbank 1966 single sherry cask. Michael loves Macallan, real Macallan, not today's

could give Macallan a run for their money, Glenfarclas could. In reality, you can find an outstanding whisky from any distillery if you look back. The biggest challenge today for the connoisseur is to find the really outstanding whisky from a distillery that no one talks about. Glenlossie? Brora? I love Brora. Clynelish?

Of this year's Special Releases from Diageo, I was hoping for a bit more from the Lagavulin 30-year-old; it didn't really do it for me. But the Talisker 30 was amazing. And the Brora 30. The Port Ellen was a bit old. Talisker is amazing – the first premium release from Talisker, 25-years-old. Wow. Then the first 20-year-old, 62% sherry cask. I've got an old bottling of Talisker from the 1940s...

Does new Talisker taste like old Talisker?

No it doesn't. There's something about old whisky; they're so well-balanced that the peat or the smoke hits you afterwards. They're delicate, flavoursome, complex but after that goes away the smoke hits you. Incredible – to die for. The person who likes Talisker 10 today and is looking for that real power would possibly be a little disappointed. But someone who likes that aged Talisker with a bit more complexity... Talisker is one of the all-time greats and there is a sensible number of expressions. A really nice whisky in the Classic Malts is Cragganmore; you really need to take your time with it. I went to an eye-opening tasting and we had Cragganmore in deep Burgundy glasses. We were told that because Cragganmore is such a complex whisky, a big glass would help get these complexities opening out. It's an excellent whisky as it's got everything in it.

What is your desert island dram?

I don't have a favourite whisky because when I try so much different stuff there are just too many whiskies! But, if I had to choose, it'd not be an obvious one like Ardbeg or Macallan. It would have to be a Longmorn; I'm not sure which one, maybe the 25-year-old centenary bottling. Yeah, an independent bottling of Longmorn. ■



The Ardbeg was made as a test product exclusively for the US market

Macallan. They released Gran Reserva and made a big song and dance about it but that's what Macallan used to taste like 10 years ago. It was all first fill Oloroso. The thing about sherry casks today is that when they transport wood sherry casks they put sulphur into them and we lose that Christmas cake fruitiness.

Another excellent whisky is Balblair. Glenfarclas is a fantastic whisky but those boys seriously need to spend a bit of money and they don't realise it. They're too old fashioned. I think they have the best ambassador in the world. George is a whisky man; he can drink anyone under the table. What else could you ask for? They've got more aged stock than most distillers. I've just bought a 50-year-old Glenfarclas. If anyone

Letters

Marcin,

I'm surprised that you took offence at my mention of "self-publicising parasites feeding on the twitching corpse of a dying dinosaur" in my last letter. Whilst the remark was indeed intended as a jibe at those inferior pen-pushers who besmirch the good name of whisky writing it was certainly not directed personally at yourself for, as I'm sure you will agree, your pathetic efforts in this field hardly merit mention, let alone insult. No Martin, I was more concerned with those clubbable "make mine a quick weekend at the Craigellachie" chaps who seem to think that a few tasting notes ("sweet herbal essences of thyme and marjoram make me think that this Blair Atholl is a real winner") and a distillery profile in *Whisky Magazine* make them some sort of expert commentator.

And it's not as if life isn't hard enough as it is for us industry elder statesmen, what with the apparently irresistible rise of the self-appointed whisky expert. And by this I don't mean the burgeoning number of half-witted hacks who fight like hounds at a

table for the few crumbs that fall from the plates of the big, in-between and small guys (the size of the crumbs, by the way, are often in inverse proportions to the size of the guys). More pages means more pens, just like more TV programmes mean more production companies. And we all know what happens to quality in the process. No – I mean those shadowy gollum-like creatures of the night (unrecognisable but for their briny lips and salty circumventions of reality) who inhabit a virtual world of whisky fact, fiction and fantasy (mostly the latter) that was barely dreamed of five years ago. Gone are the days when only those such as I, the professional peddlers of improbable probability, ruled the metropolis of misinformation that is 'Scotch opinion forming'. Now opinions are held, and shared, by anyone. There are, as the common and rather vulgar saying goes, 'new kids on the block', thanks to the so-called democratising powers of internet technology. And some of them are even writing books, making it appear that any simpleton can regurgitate a mixture of poorly researched factual errors and inaccuracies and present it as whisky

literature, rather than leaving it to the likes of myself and my esteemed fellow hacks. After all, we've been doing it for years. That, Martian, is a disgrace and one that I hope you will seek to rectify in the pages of your new magazine.

No Marco, we've got to pull the plug on this before it gets out of hand, before all of us have our livelihoods threatened by these meddling amateurs, before people start taking them more seriously than us. And what better way than through the pages of your *Scotch Whisky Reveille*? Threadbare of content, feeble in imagination and positively devoid of talent in its contributors, I put it to you that your only hope is to hand it over the editorial reins to Haydock, and let it become the mouthpiece of the *ne plus ultra* of the world of Scotch whisky scribes.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours aye,

John D Haydock ■

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