

Whisky

Scotch whisky has a wide variety of tastes, flavours and noses, and is a major export of Scotland. In fact, demand is so high from China and India for premium brands that supply and selection is diminishing in North America. The distillers are charging higher prices and shipping more and more of the top-end goods to these two markets.

The first written record of whisky distilling was 1495, with initial taxation in 1644. Today, there are over 200 distillers, in five different regions of Scotland: Speyside; Highland, Lowland, Islay and Campbeltown. Speyside has 105 of these distilleries.

Scotch whisky comes in five types, with the predominant being blended and Single Malt, and should never be confused with Irish whiskey, which is triple rather than double distilled, and the word is even spelled differently.

To qualify as Scotch, the whisky must be made from malted barley and be aged in oak casks for a minimum of three years, and have alcohol content between 40% and 94.8%. If the label indicates an age, it must be the age of the youngest whisky used. Taste is derived primarily from the water used and the fuel burned to malt the barley. Most distilleries sell significant numbers of their casks for blending, with blended Scotch accounting for approximately 90% of sales. Major blended whisky brands include Johnnie Walker, Famous Grouse, Ballantines, Dewars, Bells and Chivas Regal. The list of Single Malts is extremely long, but some favourites are Glenmorangie, Balvenie, Auchentoshan, Ardbeg and Bowmore. In decades past, North America was flooded with Glenfiddich and Glenlivet through early advertising, but now the selection is much more diverse. Distillers sell predominantly 10, 12, 15 and 25 year old whiskies, with ascending prices. The longer the whisky is aged, supposedly the better it tastes. The best I have had was a 25 year old Ardbeg Provenance, which retailed for £250 about five years ago.

Scotch whisky is an acquired taste for most people, but the proper way to sample a Single Malt is as follows: first, pour about an ounce (roughly a dram) into a fine glass, crystal is best in my view; second, nose the whisky, taking in the flavours by smell; then take a small sip and roll the liquid around on your tongue; fourth, add a few drops of water to open up the whisky; nose it again; and lastly, sip and enjoy the bouquet of flavours. Adding ice to Single Malts is a major faux pas, never do so in sight of a Malt connoisseur. Whiskies from Islay tend to be big, hearty and peat flavoured, what some would describe as smoky. Good starter Single Malts, in my view, are Balvenie and Auchentoshan, both light tasting and easy to enjoy.



I am not an expert on Scotch Whisky, but I have visited distilleries in all five regions, have about 30 different whiskies in my possession, and enjoy tasting a wide variety. On three separate occasions, I have experienced whisky dinners, where whiskies were paired with different parts of the meal. The most memorable one was on Islay, with a five-course dinner paired with five different Islay Single Malts. A meal to remember!

I have not found a bad Scotch yet, but I will keep searching!

Walt Lemon – January 22, 2015 (549 words)