

# Scotch Malt Whisky

## Vital Water

---

T. S. Phillips



### Introduction

The spirit of Scotland is one of heartiness and wholesomeness, down to earth pragmatism mixed with romantic idealism, and steadfast individuality. That spirit, brought forth from the Scottish people and the rugged land they inhabit, has been quite literally distilled into a potent essence that can be imbibed from a drinking glass, and which is admired and emulated throughout the world.

The character of this potent potable has since been enriched by the influence of peoples in various other lands. Such historical international connections have helped create the modern version of this spirit, which has remained robust and singular enough its inherent Scottishness that it retains its national identity in the name we still call it today, Scotch malt whisky.

In its broadest definition, any alcoholic spirit distilled from grain is a form of whisky. This is as opposed to brandy, which is a distillation of wine, or other fruit-based beverages. So, technically, clear liquors like vodka and gin could be considered types of whisky. It is, however, generally accepted that a true whisky has been aged in wooden casks, which impart considerable influence upon the liquid that ends up in the taster's glass.

Scotch whisky was formerly made only from malted barley. Today, a bottle containing spirits from just about any common grain may be labeled as Scotch whisky, so long as it is all distilled, aged, and bottled in Scotland. The scope of this article is concerned only with traditional Scotch malt whisky.

**Contents**

Malt Whisky ..... 2

    Single Malt Whisky ..... 5

    The Components of Single Malt Whisky ..... 6

        Barleycorn ..... 6

        Water ..... 6

        Peat ..... 7

        Yeast..... 8

        Distillation ..... 9

        Pot Stills ..... 10

        Strength ..... 10

        Aging ..... 11

        Oak Barrels..... 13

The Terroir of Scotch Malt Whisky - By Land, Sea, and Air ..... 16

    The Water Source ..... 16

    The Regions ..... 16

The Art and Alchemy of Blending Scotch..... 18

Conclusion..... 20

Malts du Jour: suggested drinking ..... 21

    Heavy Hitters - for those ready to pay for the privilege: ..... 22

    Blended Malt Whisky Worth Seeking Out ..... 23

    Blended Scotch Whisky Worth Trying ..... 23



## Malt Whisky

Whisky has come a long way since the 1st of June, 1495, when the immortal Friar John Cor received a royal order from King James IV of Scotland for VIII bolls (48 bushels) of malted barley to be made into aqua vitae, which translates into modern English as "water of vitality." But in medieval Gaelic that translated into "uisge beatha."

That is the earliest historical reference we have concerning whisky, a Scottish word originally spelled uisge, and most likely pronounced "UHshk-yeh." By the 1760s, the English spelling of whisky had evolved into its present form. An e is added when referring to similar distilled spirits of Ireland and America, to spell whiskey.

Scotch malt whisky ranks high among the most popular beverages of all time. It is certainly one of the most flavorful. Flavor is derived through a combination of the senses of smell and taste. Modern-day scientists have identified hundreds of individual flavors in the malt whisky of Scotland, far more than in any other alcoholic beverage.

It can be enjoyed casually. But if one takes the time to focus on it intently, malt whisky can beguile the drinker with charming aromas that evoke sense memories of sumptuous feasts or gourmet confectionery, spring gardens or roaring fires, tropical islands or storms at sea, sometimes all from the same dram within a single glass.

"Complex" hardly does justice to the taste of a great whisky, with its myriad layers revealing themselves over time, as more arrive to mingle with or supplant those first on the scene. And it can leave behind a lingering aftertaste, opulent beyond that of the finest cognac, haunting the nose and tongue like the sensual imprint of a most marvelous event.

As with most distilled spirits, the making of whisky began in small, home-based operations, which developed over centuries, despite being outlawed at times, depending on the whim of the contemporary authorities. By the late eighteenth century there were many legal stills in operation across Scotland, and many more illegal ones. But it wasn't until the British Excise Act of 1823 that the modern distilling industry took shape.

Techniques used to make malt whisky in Scotland evolved since that time, and have involved all sorts of experimentation and innovation. But it remains such a phenomenally successful enterprise thanks to the stalwarts of tradition that use detailed regulations to keep Scotch whisky making from changing too much. They are acutely aware of how they are safeguarding their heritage by protecting the cherished traditional processes from those who would alter them for misguided and short-sighted reasons, usually involving the profit figures of major corporations that now own most of the whisky distilleries in Scotland.

For whisky to be called "scotch" today, it must be made at a licensed distillery in Scotland, and aged in an oak barrel, in Scotland, for at least 3 years. And while this guarantees a minimum level of quality and traditional methods, it still leaves considerable leeway for those concerned with the economics and commerce of the scotch industry. For example, there are now three official kinds of Scotch whisky: Single Malt Whisky, Blended Malt Whisky, and Blended Whisky.

## **The Three Categories of Scotch Malt Whisky**

**Single Malt Whisky** - A bottle of 100% malt whisky that all comes from the same distillery is known as "single malt whisky" or "single malt Scotch whisky," and may be labeled as such. The terms "pure malt" and "all malt" were once used with the same meaning. But "single malt" is now the official term.

As of 2021, there are currently 122 active distilleries in Scotland that make single malt whisky. While some are famous as single malts, most are virtually unknown to the general public, yet are prized within the industry for their contribution to blended whiskies.

**Blended Malt Whisky** - A bottle of 100% malt whisky produced at more than one distillery must be labeled "blended malt whisky" or "blended malt Scotch whisky."

This new and unfortunate designation has replaced "vatted whisky" in any official capacity. As a result, "blended malt whisky" shall henceforth and forever be confused with the term "blended whisky," which does not contain 100% malt whisky – which is what certain entities in the industry want to happen.

**Blended Whisky** - A bottle containing a combination of malt whisky blended with whisky distilled from other grain, such as wheat, rye, or corn (maize) must be labeled "blended whisky" or "blended Scotch whisky."

Whisky other than pure malt whisky is referred to as "grain whisky." In fact, grain whisky distilled in Scotland may contain barley, and even malted barley. But its chief ingredient is corn (maize,) which yields a more bountiful crop than the wheat used in previous eras, and results in a spirit that is sweeter and much less complex in flavor than malt whisky.

Grain whisky serves as the heart of a blended scotch, which is enhanced with small amounts of various single malts, from a few to a few dozen, and the mixture is married into a specific recipe. A blended scotch typically has a subtler taste and gentler character than most single malts. This which allows drinks companies to offer a uniform product that appeals to the widest possible audience. Popular blends include brands like Bell's, Dewar's, Chivas Brothers, Johnnie Walker, etc.

Most every blended scotch of historic pedigree was originally formulated for drinking in combination with a specific popular mixer, like ginger ale or club soda, which creates the classic highball. Drinking Scotch whisky without mixers is a relatively new practice, and one which has seen the popularity of single malt and blended malt whiskies soar around the globe. But blended scotch still outsells both by a very long way. Some 88% of scotch whisky sold worldwide is blended scotch.

Medieval distillers were considered to be alchemists. The same could be said of today's master blenders, because of how they combine elements of various origin and composition to create an entity different from and at times greater than the sum of its parts.

The blender will employ certain whiskies to make up the body of a recipe, while others are added sparingly, like finishing herbs dropped across a savory dish. Flavors, complementary or offsetting, are balanced and unified. At times a blended scotch will conjure up flavors undetected in the individual casks brought together to create it. That is true whether one is talking about a blended whisky or a blended malt whisky. But it also happens with single malt whisky, as that is typically sold in a bottle that contains whisky from multiple casks of various ages, and often made from different species of oak.

## Single Malt Whisky

During the final decades of the twentieth century, more and more drinkers came to appreciate Scotch whisky from specific distilleries. In nations with a penchant for individualist endeavors, like Australia, Canada, and the United States, the idea of a small outfit creating spirits distinct from all others proved appealing.

Like craft beers and artisanal farming, single malt whiskies hark back to a time before industrialized mass production replaced the peerless master craftsman, and homogenization became the norm. While the industry is happy to promote this romantic image of whisky making, it still remains true in many respects when it comes to the individual distilleries.

Scotland's single malt whiskies are now appreciated for their individuality in much the same way as European wines, or the regional brandies made from them. They are frequently packaged and priced as deluxe, gourmet delicacies touted as superior to all but the most exclusive blends. As a result, paying large sums for untasted single malt is a bit of a gamble. Even the celebrated labels do not appeal to everyone. On the other hand, an obscure bottle from a modest, cardboard box may hold exceptionally rewarding malt whisky.

Single malts are typically named after their home distillery, but some are given marketing brand names. Many appeal to a wide audience and are hugely popular worldwide, while others have cults of devoted fans who acquired a taste for the eccentric flavor of that particular single malt.

## Single Malt vs Single Cask

One might assume the contents of a bottle of single malt all come from the same cask. In reality, the distiller's expert blenders will mix and marry the contents of multiple barrels, frequently adding older whisky to younger, to craft a final product that smooths off some of the rougher edges that result from the natural influence of the various oak casks.

When it comes to traditional single malt scotch that has an age statement, i.e. "12 years old" or "aged 18 years," it means the youngest whisky in the bottle is that old, as dictated by Scottish law. Almost always there will be older whisky involved, and sometimes much older whisky.

In recent years, bottles filled from only one barrel have become commonplace, but they tend to be marketed as "single cask" and priced at a premium.

Although many distilleries do not offer their product for sale in shops, there is a venerable tradition held by small companies known as independent bottlers, who buy casks of malt whisky from the distilleries with the express purpose of ultimately making it available to the public as aged single malt, and usually in single cask expressions.

Often, the indie bottlers provide the only way to sample the single malt of certain distilleries, or to experience well-known malts at unusual ages or from an individual cask. The unknowns involved in such bottles make for a greater gamble than an official distillery release, but the jackpots often compensate for occasional disappointments.

## **The Components of Single Malt Whisky**

It is often said that whisky is made from just three ingredients, malted barley, water, and yeast. If that were all there was to it, every whisky would taste basically like all the others. In reality, the product of every distillery tastes differently from even that of their nearest neighbor. For that matter, the contents of every whisky cask taste differently from any other cask filled from the same still run. There are countless factors that determine the character of a malt whisky, and there are many that make the single malts of Scotland stand apart from all the rest. Here are but a few essentials:

### **Barleycorn**

Barley was one of the first domesticated crops and a staple food from Ancient Egypt to Tibet, and throughout Europe, where it was the primary source of bread for the peasant class. It thrives in cool, temperate climates like Scotland, where the archaic two-row variety proved ideal for fermented beverages, as it is lower in protein and higher in carbohydrates than other cereal.

### **Water**

Water is used at all points in the process of whisky production. So, distilleries must have an abundant and uninterrupted supply of clean freshwater. All whisky producers consider the water source of prime importance to the taste of their final product.

A general rule is that water with pH values near but below that of pure water is desirable. Soft water is also preferred, but there are notable exceptions as some of the most popular brands are made from water with higher mineral content.

Water is at whisky's heart. It is also at its start. The raw barley grain is steeped in water and spread out upon a floor where it is frequently raked and exposed to warm air. Some distillers now employ machines called drums, which are filled with moistened barley and keep the grain moving and well aerated. In either case, it is all done to encourage the barley's germination.

Sprouting triggers the process where starches break down into sugars needed for fermentation. At a certain time, based on the season, the germination is halted by drying the grain in a kiln over increasing levels of high heat for up to two days. The overall process is known as malting.

The same malted barley sugars that provide the signature flavor of Ovaltine or your favorite malted milk balls also provides whisky distillers with the vital element needed to create single malt scotch. And it is at the heart of a malt whisky's flavor.

While many whisky makers acquire barley from a centralized malting facility, several distilleries continue to malt their own barley at their premises, because it gives them more control over the process that contributes considerably to the character of the finished whisky. This is partly because the exact type and combination of fuels used in the grain-drying kilns add phenolic flavors to the malted barley, which can remain all the way to the scotch served in the glass. It is how scotch gets its famous "smoky taste." Traditional malting fuels include wood, coal, anthracite, and peat.

**Peat**

Peat is the spongy, stratified remains of vegetable matter harvested from bogs and moorlands across Scotland, often containing considerable quantities of heather, a common wildflower. In a largely treeless environment, bricks of peat have been cut from the soil and burnt in household hearths for centuries, and used to heat boilers and ovens throughout the trades. Unlike wood, peat smolders rather than bursting into flame, while still producing prodigious amounts of heat and smoke.

While all whisky made from malted barley can have some smokiness in its flavor profile, a “peated whisky” is made from grain that was malted over smoldering peat, resulting in a particularly evocative scent and pungent taste. Some companies who converted to modern heating will operate a second furnace, just to add peat smoke for flavoring.

Even when a distillery never uses barley that was subjected to peat smoke, the water involved at all stages in the making of a whisky might come from wells or natural springs that provide conspicuous amounts of raw peat particles. It remains debatable as to how much peaty flavor comes through as a result.

While the terms smoky and peaty are used interchangeably when describing the aroma or taste of whisky, they are not always synonymous. When it comes to the scent or taste of actual smoke in a particular whisky, it is determined by the level of organic phenols absorbed into the barley during malting, regardless of what fuel is used. The taste can be similar to that of smoked cheese, smoked pheasant, and so forth. However, no one would ever say a scrumptious smoked cheddar tasted peaty.

There are many phenolic chemicals that can influence a whisky’s flavor. Here are just a few. Phenol is said to cause antiseptic taste, Cresols causes latex or Band-Aid aromas, Xylenol can smell like creosote or road tar, and Guaiacol gives the campfire aromas.

Peat smoke may be responsible for the smoke, but peat itself provides earthy notes of musty vegetation and damp soil. In addition, the actual plant life that formed the peat may offer its own ghostly contribution in the sense of grassy, mossy, or even honeyed notes.

The location where the peat was harvested matters, as it determines much of its flavor enhancement. For example, peat from the Speyside area of the Eastern Highlands contains the remnants of primeval pine forests, whereas the Hebridean island of Islay spent much of its distant past under the ocean waves, so Islay peat contains desiccated seaweed. Peat from the Orkney Islands north of the Scottish mainland is younger and has a high heather content, while peat from the Kintyre Peninsula in Southwest Scotland has its own maritime character mingled with a rich earthy quality, as well as mineral and vegetative notes. And peat from all such locations has been exported to distilleries in other regions, or contributed to the centralized grain treatment facilities of modern times.

In broad terms, whiskies smoked by mainland peat have the most overtly smoky flavor evocative of charcoal barbecue or a doused campfire. The seaweedy Islay peat provides the acquired taste of a "medicine cabinet" with noticeable iodine and ocean brine, as well as botanical notes similar to gin. Orkney peat has a greener tinge with honeyed notes, while the Kintyre peat used in whisky from Campbeltown imparts an eccentric combination of sod, sea, and machine oil.

Lovers of smoke in whisky may be surprised to learn that the longer a whisky is aged, the less smoky it becomes. While peaty notes may remain, smoke phenols begin to break down in a barreled whisky as it reaches a certain point in time, known to some veteran distillery employees as “crossing the Rubicon.” Whiskies made from grain exposed to peat smoke for longer time periods, like Ardbeg, do not reach this point until around 30 years of age. But most peated whiskies reach their own unique Rubicon between age 21 and 25, if not sooner.

### **Yeast**

An overlooked but vital contributor to the flavor of malt whisky is the yeast introduced at the beginning of the whisky making process. Strains of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* are used by brewers and distillers throughout the world, but many can only survive in a certain climate, and each contributes unique flavors. Differences in yeast is the one reason many American craft beers have citrus flavors like grapefruit, while traditional English ales tend toward non-citrus fruity flavors, like black current.

The exact strains of *S. cerevisiae* used to make Scotch whisky exist nowhere else, and it is a major suspect in why scotch tastes differently from malt whisky made exactly the same way in other parts of the world. Although the yeast specifics are part of the formulaic secrets of the various distilleries, by the advent of the twenty-first century almost all scotch distillers were employing only one or two strains of commercially produced yeast, with Macallan dropping a third strain only quite recently.

All single malt Scotch whisky starts off as a sugary weak ale called “wort,” made from water and malted barley that was ground to grist and brewed repeatedly at sub-boiling temperatures in a large mash tun. Sometimes yeast is introduced in the mash tun, but it is typically added after the wort is transferred to a washback, a containment vessel of wood or stainless steel, which varies in size depending upon the distillery, and can hold as little as 6,000 litres to as much as 80,000 litres.

The wort cools in the washback as the yeast feeds on the maltose and other sugars, converting them to ethyl alcohol in what is now called “wash,” the tumultuous solution teeming with organic life that is distilled to make whisky.

Fermentation is the name given to the overall process where the sugars from the malted barley are converted to ethanol. While the term may bring to mind apple cider growing a bit fizzy over time, the process is actually so volatile that the washback will start to rumble and quake as if it might burst at its seams. Wild yeasts and bacteria native to the specific location will also come on board during fermentation and add to the many chemical compounds that are perceived later on as aromas or tastes in the final product.

The wash is fermented for about two days, but some distilleries exceed over 100 hours, and consider the long fermentation a vital requirement in realizing their whisky's unique flavor characteristics. With a final alcoholic strength of between 5 to 10%, the wash could be brewed into a drinkable beer at this point. But the primitive ale in the washback at a whisky distillery is destined for greater refinement and a higher spiritual purpose.

## Distillation

On its way to becoming scotch, single malt whisky went through a system of at least two connected pot stills made of copper.

The fermented wash is boiled in the larger of the stills, sensibly known as the wash still. As steam rises up the still's neck, some of it passes out through a slanted, copper tube called the lyne arm, which channels the vapor to cooling condensers, where it liquefies and ultimately drips into a collection vessel called a receiver. That resulting distillate, named the "low wines," is then transferred to the spirit still, also called the low wines still, where it is boiled a second time.

Less than half of this second distillation makes its way into a liquor bottle. As heat is applied to the pot, the most unstable chemical compounds vaporize and are the first to leave the spirit still. These are the foreshots, deemed unsuitable for human consumption. The final portion of the stills' output, the feints, only vaporize under high heat and contain complex molecular compounds including those with the most intense odors and tastes.

Known as "the tails" to American distillers, the term feints appears in early Scottish-English lexicons as meaning "devils." Its use in making whisky could refer to the sulfurous quality of the still's final output or the high heat required to vaporize the heavier compounds at that point in the still run. Or perhaps the feints are named for the pointy tails of the fiery impish spirits conjured through the alchemy that changed Old John Barleycorn into such a potent elixir.

In any case, between the foreshots and the feints is found the precious "middle cut," which is taken and stored for aging. It will contain a small amount of foreshots and a larger portion of feints based upon the skill and preference of the still master. The goal is not to include too much of either.

Just where in the foreshots one decides to begin the middle cut and where to end it in the feints has a lot to do with the amount of various flavor-producing congeners that ends up in the whisky barrel. Not two distilleries do it the same way. And those that produce more than one brand of single malt will change this and other practices to individualize their different recipes.

While based upon the level of alcohol, some distillers make their cuts by timing the run. Others choose to do it the old fashioned way, by sipping samples. Whatever the method, about two and one half hours after the foreshots, the middle cut is ended.

The remaining feints make up nearly half of the spirit still's output, and they are mixed with the foreshots and diluted with 99% water before being added to new batches of low wines for further distillation. This recycling of the foreshots and feints is one more reason why every batch of whisky destined for bottling ends up unique from all others, even under the same label.

A small number of malt distilleries have employed three stills, similar to the process used in Ireland, or combine twice and thrice distilled portions. And some even distill their whisky two and a half times, meaning a substantial measure of the distillate is channeled back through the spirit still for further refinement. Each distillation results in an increase in alcohol content, and typically a decrease in both the heavier and more volatile chemical compounds.

Many other considerations are taken into account by the distillers, such as the amount of wash put in the first still, and how much heat is applied to the second still and at what point in time, to regulate when certain compounds reach their boiling points. It is fair to say that long ago the art of malt whisky distilling reached the level of sophisticated trial and error deemed on par with that of engineering and science.

### **Pot Stills**

Scotch malt whisky must be created in pot stills made of copper, each being handmade and unique to its distillery in terms of size and shape. Copper reacts with many chemicals and nullifies some of the sulfurous compounds inherent in the fermented malt, particularly in the wash still, and it continues to affect the spirit's composition throughout the distilling process.

The shape of the stills is also significant. Basically large kettles with swan-like necks, some have the shape of onions, and others resemble an upside down golf tee. In general, stills with short necks produce heavy, robust whisky, while those with tall, narrow necks produce whisky typically smoother and lighter.

Alcoholic steam rising in the still contains ingredients of varying density. The longer the neck the greater the percentage of material that falls back into the pot for further boiling, known as reflux, while the lighter, purer vapors escape from the neck and enter the lyne arm.

Many stills include exclusive features, like bulbous or constricted sections in the neck, to further influence what combination of pure ethanol and flavorful impurities makes its way into the fledgling whisky, known as new make spirit. New make spirit is then aged in oak casks to create single malt scotch.

### **Strength**

By law, Scotch malt whisky must be distilled at strengths below 94.8% alcohol by volume (ABV), but 72.5% is typical. It is then diluted with water before aging. A trend has developed where most new make spirit is cut to 63.5%. Modern science determined this to be the optimum strength to get the maximum benefit from the cask, wherein a whisky interacts with the wood's chemical compounds, greatly increasing the congeners and enhancing those most responsible for the finished flavor. As the contents age, the alcohol is reduced due to the "angels' share" evaporating through the porous oak, leading to a strength around 60% by the time the mature single malt leaves the cask for bottling or blending.

Scotch is diluted again at the time of bottling. Legal requirements limit this to a minimum strength of 40%, but 43% is often used for the U.S. market. Many single malts, however, are bottled at 46% on upwards to over 50%. Others are bottled at natural cask strength, which can be nearly 60% ABV for younger whisky and closer to 50% for casks around twenty years old. It is assumed that Scotch whisky of higher ABV will have a splash of water added to it at the time of drinking.

Almost every whisky can benefit from the addition of water in the glass. It breaks the surface tension, allowing more of the bouquet to open up and rise from the whisky, and brings forth otherwise hidden flavors. But the addition of water also begins an immediate oxidation that breaks down various long-

chain molecules, transforming the chemical composition in certain sugars and alcohol esters present in the spirit, like those responsible for the fruitiest aromas.

The amount of added water is a personal preference. It was not unusual to find a stately Scottish laird cutting his whisky down to 50/50, saving on expensive scotch while reducing the heady effect of the alcohol to tamer levels. But most people add a small amount of water, and some even use eyedroppers to avoid over dilution.

Many of us longtime malt drinkers enjoy experimenting with taking our whisky neat, with varying measures of water, or on the rocks. Malt whisky purists may frown upon the use of ice, or even chilled water, as both inhibit the malt's aroma and alter the flavors.

While suggestions may be welcome, never let someone else tell you how not to enjoy your whisky. I have found several malts to be refreshing and delicious on the rocks, particularly during the summer months.

If one is accustomed to the major labels at 40% or 43%, cask strength whisky might be deemed too hot and high-octane. But we who seek out labels with higher ABV lament that 40% is set as the standard dilution (in the UK.) While 40% works quite well for the better blends, too often is the case when a bottle of otherwise outstanding single malt is excessively cut, leaving only a faint impression of its true body and soul.

One can always add water, and professional nosers tend to prefer a dilution between 35% and 50% water. But it cannot be removed to return a whisky to its original character. Then again, I would rather buy single malt at 40% from a small distillery that needs to stretch out its availability, than not be able to buy it at all.

### **Aging**

For much of its history, the whisky of Scotland was consumed soon after it left the still. Over the centuries it became obvious that keeping scotch in its oak barrel for many years had a profound effect upon the smoothness and the complexity of the whisky's flavor. But only the very wealthy could afford stocks large enough for an untapped cask to reach the ages routinely found in the commercially bottled scotch of modern times.

Unlike wine, the positive effects of aging on whisky only apply to the oak cask. After scotch is bottled, any changes will be negligible for many years, so long as the bottle is never opened. Once air is introduced into an opened bottle, whisky can go a little flat after several months, but it takes decades for it to spoil.

Aging scotch is a tricky business. The longer it remains in the cask, the mellower and more complex it becomes, losing the harshness that ordinarily characterize younger whiskies. But the longer it ages, the more influence the oak barrel has on its contents. The oak adds depth and dryness to the many flavors within the scotch, but eventually a woody bitterness emerges that is relished by some connoisseurs, yet avoided by others. Barreled whisky reaches its peak at different ages, and that can vary from cask to cask, even within the same distillery. Using multiple casks of the same whisky allows a distiller to smooth out the "off notes" when creating their single malt offerings.

While there are always exceptions, some broad assessments can be made a whisky's age in relation to flavor and quality.

**Nose** - Younger whisky tends to burst out of the glass and right up the nose, with fresh, lively flavors. Old whisky sets down inside the glass and needs to be sought out, because it takes time to emerge. Some say a whisky needs to decant in the glass for one minute per year on the label. While that can be fun to try, it is not really necessary.

**Palate** - Very young whisky will exhibit a lot of resinous oaky tannins that may have an abrasive or harsh quality. It is not unlike the way a lumber room can infest one's mouth and sinus with the prickly dust from freshly sawn raw boards.

Conversely, while very old whisky will have mellowed and lost its harsh edges and raw wood impact, it will have absorbed so much in the way of oak influence that very different kinds of tannic qualities take hold. I often liken to black tea that has been left to steep far longer than intended. And older casks can also infuse musty or moldy notes, reminiscent of a manor house library full of ancient books.

While the over-steeped tea can be detected in most whiskies older than 21 years of age, the musty, moldy stuff is usually blended out of distillery bottlings, but remains as a common off note in single cask expressions from the independent bottlers.

**Finish** - Young whisky, below 10 years of age, can have a bold taste, which drops off almost immediately into a very short finish, even if that improves a bit in terms of aftertaste if one drinks a lot of it. But older whisky will have an initial finish that retains considerable mouth-filling presence. And the older the whisky gets in the cask, the longer the finish lasts. A single wee dram of a malt over twenty years-old can haunt the senses for many worthwhile hours.

Whisky 25 or 30 years old costs considerably more than younger scotch, but that does not mean it is suited to every taste. One finds many whiskies around age 18 that have attained a level of advanced complexity, but before the mature oaky bitterness from the cask begins to assert itself. However, when the opportunity arises to indulge in the sheer depth and grownup palate of a malt whisky aged over 20 or 30 years, it should not be passed up.

Blended whisky with no age statement will often contain immature spirits of five years or younger, but single malts rarely appear in shops younger than 8 years of age. In either case, if a scotch bottle displays an age statement, for example "12 years old," it is a "guaranteed age" whisky. This means, by law, the youngest whisky in the bottle remained in the cask for that long.

Unless the label expressly states it is a single cask whisky, a bottle will almost always contain quantities of whisky that is older than its age statement. There is also a growing trend for single malt whisky to be sold with no age statement at all, and often with catchy names like "Storm" or "Dark Origins." This allows for the blending of younger and older malt that can be priced based on the value of the latter while bypassing the legal restrictions that would require an age statement considerably younger than the mature malt providing most of the expression's character.

On the other hand, it is also an opportunity for the seller to disguise immature single malt with older malt and sell it at a price beyond its merits. So drinkers are wise to read some reviews or buy a dram at a

bar, before forking over their hard earned cash for a bottle of No Age Statement single malt whisky. However, there are certain bottlers of certain brands of No Age Statement malts that are truly wonderful. So again, use the internet whenever possible to read what others have to say about NAS scotch.

### **Oak Barrels**

To be labeled as Scotch whisky, the spirit must be aged in oak barrels for at least three years, and the species of oak can influence the taste, due to its chemical composition and how porous its physical structure. The most common type of oak used in the production of Scotch whisky is white oak from America (*Qercus alba*.) But European pedunculate oak (*Q. robur*,) also known as Spanish oak, continues to play a significant role, albeit a diminished one since the end of the Second World War. Even the size of the barrel matters, as the larger the vessel, the smaller the percentage of aging spirit that will be in direct contact with the oak.

While malt whisky is a uniquely Scottish invention, it has been greatly enhanced by wine and spirit makers around the world on its way to becoming one of the most popular drinks on the planet. When a tax was levied on new barrels in the nineteenth century, the thrifty Scots started buying used barrels. It was discovered that whisky aged in barrels that had previously contained Spanish sherry took on color and flavors unlike other scotch.

By 1900, “sherried” scotch was most popular. Sherried whiskies may offer lush flavors of stone fruit and toffee, while some take on a sulfurous aroma and a sharp, drier palate, and others possess intricate combinations of all such attributes. Barrels that held rich Oloroso sherry are most commonly used, but varieties from dry Fino to the sugary Pedro Ximenez are employed as well.

In the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War caused such a disruption in the availability of sherry barrels that scotch distillers turned to the use of American oak barrels that had previously held bourbon from Kentucky or similar spirits made in Tennessee. Following the Second World War, the British Empire’s clout as a trading power was greatly diminished, and Spain rebuffed the Anglo insistence on importing sherry in bulk and bottling it in the UK, further reducing the number of available barrels. Finally, public consumption of sherry declined dramatically in recent decades, and American bourbon barrels were adopted as the standard container for aging Scotch whisky.

Since American law dictates that whiskey makers may only use a barrel once, long-term agreements exist between the American distillers and their Scottish counterparts. Whereas the interiors of Spanish sherry barrels are toasted, Americans torch the insides of their barrels to charcoal before aging bourbon in them, and then ship the used barrels to Scotland where they may age multiple batches of whisky. Scotch aged in American barrels tends to have perfumy wood spices and the frequent notes of tropical fruit, like banana, mango, and coconut. The bourbon itself imparts flavors of creamy vanilla taffy, white pepper, and a caramel sweetness different from the burnt brown sugars, toasted marshmallow, and baking spices and bitter cooking chocolate of European oak sherry casks.

Sherry barrels made of American oak retain the tropical profile of coconut, banana, lemon-lime citrus, and sandalwood spice, while taking on the fruitiness of the sherry. European oak is recognizable by its

flavoring of figs, raisins, cherries, and stewed prunes, or what I sometimes refer to as that "Vicks Formula 44 cough syrup flavor" that does not show up in American oak sherry barrels.

And where flavors of a sherried whisky is sometimes reminiscent of fruitcake (aka Christmas cake in England and Scotland,) the whisky aged in European oak will smell or taste like the sweet yet spicy cake itself, while sherried whisky from American oak casks may taste more like the candied fruit bits inside such a cake. Interestingly enough, both types of oak can provide orange flavor notes, with the American more juicy and the European more zesty.

Most single malt Scotch whisky solid in bottles these days was either aged entirely in American bourbon barrels, or is a combination of malt from bourbon and sherry barrels. And sometimes it is aged in the former and then spends a little time in the latter.

A small number of distilleries continue to offer single malt scotch that was aged entirely in sherry barrels, including Glenfarclas, GlenDronach, and Macallan. But most Spanish sherry is aged in American oak, since there simply isn't much cask-worthy Spanish oak available due to the deforestation of Western Europe and the intense demand for sherry casks in which to age whisky.

Macallan contracts sherry makers in Spain to season barrels of Spanish oak that help give their classic Speyside whisky its signature fruitiness, just as Glenmorangie owns a forest in the Ozark Mountains of America, to make white oak barrels that are leased to American distillers like Heaven Hill on their way to aging that vanilla-rich highland single malt. And Highland Park has their own American oak forest, but those barrels end up in Spain, where they are saturated with sherry rather than bourbon, before making the trip to the northernmost distillery in Scotland, where their core range of single malts are dominated by sherried whisky aged in barrels made from both American and Spanish oak.

Throughout Scotland it is now typical to find single malts aged in bourbon barrels that are then "finished" in sherry barrels for a year or longer. And over the last couple of decades, scotch distilleries began offering single malts finished in barrels that originally contained all sorts of wine and spirits, from Italian Marsala to Jamaican rum.

### **From First Fill to Last**

The term "first fill" means the malt whisky is being aged in a barrel that came fresh from the bourbon or sherry maker, so it will absorb considerable flavor from the previous contents. It is often used for younger whisky.

"Second fill" barrels have been used once before. They are preferred for older whisky, which has longer to absorb flavors from the cask. Whisky left in a first fill cask for too many years may become inundated with sherry or bourbon flavor, overwhelming the "distillery character."

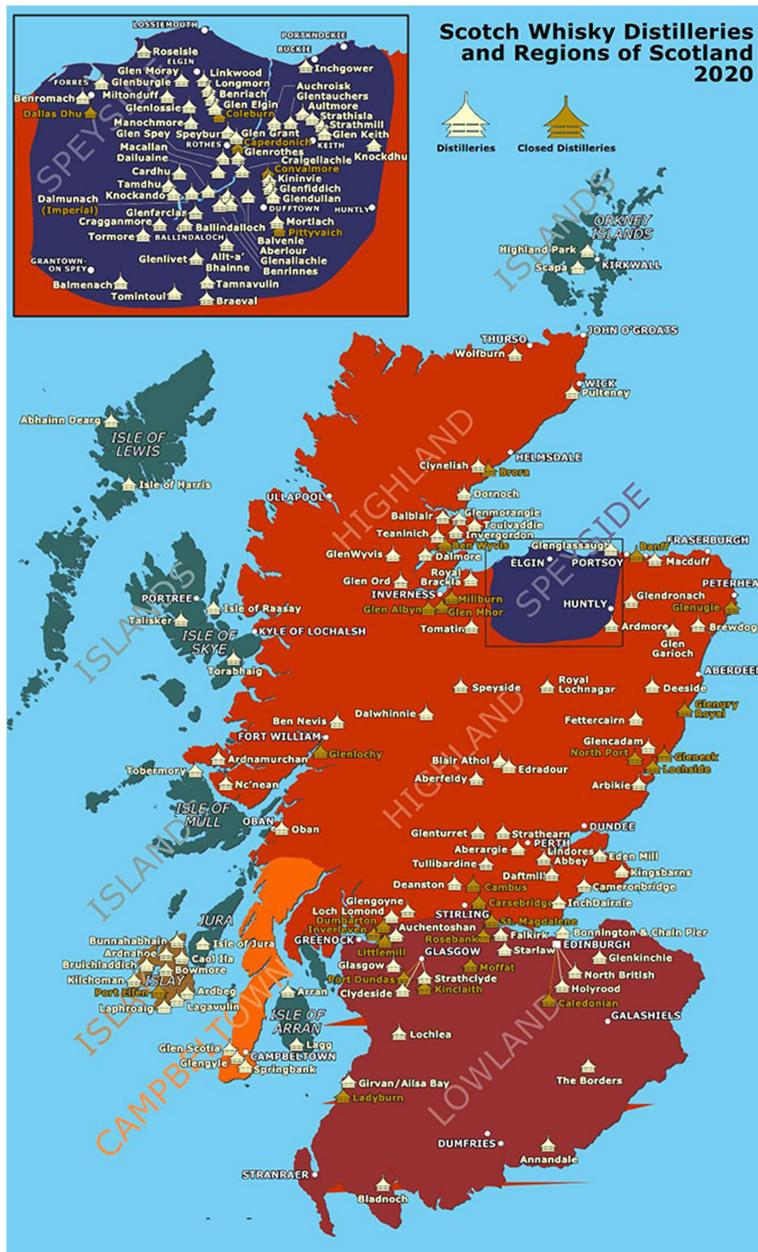
"Refill cask" implies the barrel has been used until its original contents provide a subtler influence. It can also mean it has already aged single malt from some other distillery.

Sometimes a distillery will vat together single malt that came from a combination of what may have been first, second and refill barrels that originally contained bourbon, sherry, or other wine, and then the entire batch will be left to marry in a large cask for several months before bottling. A few single malt whiskies are made with the solera method, originally developed in Spain for sherry making. Basically, a

very large cask is never entirely emptied of its contents, as younger spirit is added to it from other casks for further aging, so that some portion of the solera barrel continues to get ever older.

And successful single malt expressions have recently appeared that were aged in barrels of virgin oak, which had not held any other liquid. This was a common practice in the earliest days of Scotch whisky production that was a long time in returning.

At no time since scotch distilleries first received legal sanctions to make whisky has there been so much innovation and experimentation, and with such good results. What began as an adaptation out of economic necessity has evolved into a specialized and highly valued process where raw materials from divergent climates and even different continents meet and coalesce in Scotland, to help make some of the finest liquor ever created.



## The Terroir of Scotch Malt Whisky - By Land, Sea, and Air

The region of Scotland where a whisky is distilled matters a great deal. The small nation is surrounded by the sea and composed of micro climates separated by mountainous terrain. The finer details of why a specific whisky tastes like it does can have less to do with how it was made, than where it was made.

### The Water Source

Scotland's limestone, sandstone, and pervasive granite mineralize freshwater to varying degrees, so the hardness differs across the country. The composition of the water is central to the chemistry of distilling, and the exact location of the water source is of prime importance when it comes to making a unique whisky.

For example, freshwater of the Lowlands is least acidic and contributes to the production of whisky with a delicate complexity. Springs and burns in the Highlands contain micro amounts of salts and organic matter that can vary from one glen to the next. Island whisky is often made with freshwater that has high peat content, and is further influenced by seawater saturating the briny air that nourished the peat used for malting, and later permeates the oak casks as they age in a seaside warehouse.

### The Regions

The single malt from a particular distillery will have its own distinct characteristics, yet it may exhibit qualities similar to whisky from nearby distilleries within the same geographic region of Scotland. The primary regions are as follows. These style assessments are broad, and there are exceptions in every case.

**Highlands:** Flavors of wood spice and heather characterize the highland malts, be they the fresh and flowery ones from the eastern Highlands or the full-bodied varieties from the western Highlands. Renowned scotch from the Highlands includes the smoky tang of Oban from the west coast, and the vanillin spice of Glenmorangie from the northeast (the last g is pronounced like j so that it rhymes with orange, as in "orange-ee".)

Recommended Exploration: the old-school sherry of Ben Nevis from the West, best in indie bottlings, Clynelish's tropical fruit and wood spice from the Northeast coast (pronounced KLINE-leash,) and the honeyed fruit and nuts of Glen Garioch from the fertile farmlands of the Doric East south of Speyside (pronounced Glen Geery.)

**Speyside:** More than half of all malt distilleries in Scotland reside within this compact region, found in the eastern Highlands along the Spey River and its tributaries such as the rivers Livet, Fiddich and Elgin. Speysiders tend to be elegant, civilized spirits. Some have a fruity palate, while others have toffee-like flavor, or a crisp and spicy taste. Definitive labels representing Speyside scotch include the Macallan, the Glenlivet, the Balvenie, and Glenfiddich.

Recommended Exploration: Oakey, sherried Glenfarclas, malty, meaty Mortlach, and the peated, pre-Prohibition style of Benromach.

**Lowlands:** Only a few malt whisky distilleries remain in the southern Lowlands, and their whisky is delicate, lemony, and floral. The most famous single malt from the Lowlands is the triple-distilled Auchentoshan, traditionally light, fresh and zesty, while the gently peated Glenkinchie has recently gained popularity in the U.S.

**Campbeltown:** In southwest Scotland near the bottom of the Kintyre Peninsula, Campbeltown was once home to so many different whisky makers that it was considered to be its own region. For a time, they were reduced to one distillery, Springbank. But now, there are three distilleries, producing whisky under five labels, enough to retain the official regional designation. This out-of-the-way peninsula is but a narrow glacier slice from being the Isle of Kintyre of the Inner Hebrides. As such, the hearty Campbeltown style with its distinctive combination of herbal peat, spiced fruits and whispering sea salt has more in common with the island distilleries than those from the nearby lowlands.

Recommended Exploration: Anything from peaty Springbank, including their even smokier Longrow brand, and their unpeated, Lowland-style Hazelburn brand will be unique and top-notch.

**Islands:** Many coastal distilleries benefit from their proximity to the ocean, and a pinch of sea salt is often the reward. But scotch of the Isles has the sea in its soul, be it a tangy trace along the edge of the finish, or a downright briny emulsion deep within its heart.

The same governing body that brought you “blended malt whisky” has also failed to designate the islands as a separate whisky producing region. Instead, they are lumped in with the Highlands, except the Isle of Islay (pronounced “EYE-luh”), which has eight active distilleries. Their vigorous character lends Islay whiskies the opportunity to absorb high amounts of peat smoke without it overwhelming other flavors. Popular examples include Lagavulin, Laphroaig, and Ardbeg. Islay scotch is an acquired taste if ever there was one, but it has an earthy intensity embraced by a notably seaward pull that many find irresistible.

Recommended Exploration: Serenely, uniquely Islay, Caol Ila does not have the robust fireworks of those mentioned above, but is consistently of the highest quality bourbon barrel, peated Scotch whisky made today. Bunnahabhain is lovely unpeated Islay whisky, while newcomer Kilchoman is a “craft distilling” operation, making small batches of single malt that is a must-try for lovers of intensely peated Islay whisky

Other island whiskies of stellar reputation include Talisker, from the Isle of Skye, a peaty malt with a sumptuous character that falls somewhere between an Islay scotch and some highland varieties. And from the Orkney Islands comes Highland Park with its complex yet balanced flavor that is prized by single malt drinkers and master blenders alike.

Recommended Exploration: In addition to the two champs above, Tobermory from the Isle of Mull makes a mild, bourbon barrel 10 year-old, as well as the peaty Ledaig (pronounced L'chaig) with a maritime personality falling uniquely between Caol Ila and Taliskier.

## The Art and Alchemy of Blending Scotch

Of all the factors that can alter the flavor of a whisky, none are as complicated as the art of blending. Scientists have identified over 400 separate flavors in Scotch whisky. Not all of them are compatible. The slightest variation in the ratios of the contributing spirits, as well as the influence of age and environment upon each, can alter the taste of a blended whisky, for good or ill.

The master blender holds a most highly respected position in the business, one that requires a vast knowledge, strong intuition, and an exceptionally nuanced sensory perception. There is a craft developed through apprenticeship, experimentation, and lucky accidents. The panache of each new blender adds to the collected wisdom handed down through generations of Scotch whisky makers, and is embodied in the results of their labor, whether it be the vatting of pure malts, or blending them with grain whisky.

The grain whisky of Scotland begins as a neutral spirit produced at around 98% ABV in continuous column stills. This is substantially higher an ethanol content than the bourbons and ryes of America and Canada. The grain distilleries that contribute to blended scotch number less than 10, yet they make almost twice as much whisky in a year as the combined output of the nearly 120 distilleries producing single malt. However, unlike much of the world's grain alcohol, such as American moonshine, Scotch grain whisky is aged for years in oak casks that add considerable flavor, albeit lighter, softer and sweeter than pure malt whisky.

A modern-day blend may contain only 10% single malts and still qualify as "Scotch whisky," so long as it is distilled and aged in Scotland. This is one reason it has a reputation in America as a coarse, hard drink. The lower-priced well scotch can have a harsh burn, as there is less pure malt whisky in it, and what is there is usually quite young in age. And the grain component is equally as young, and can smell not unlike rubbing alcohol. But blended scotch of higher quality and reputation is made up of around 40% aged malt whisky, while some high-end blends tip the scales at 60%. The remainder consists of quality grain whisky aged as long as the malts, if not longer.

Blending became popular in the late 1800s, when scotch was being consumed around the world for the first time. The original distillers were farmers who converted their excess barley to whisky. The original bottlers were grocers who acquired casks of whisky as trade goods from local farms, and then combined them.

These grocers had considerable experience blending tea, to compensate for the uneven quality in shipments coming from the Far East. So, they eventually developed their own house recipes. They applied the same principal to blending malt whisky.

Single malts can have strong, individual characteristics, and taste somewhat different from one barrel to the next. And since some stills produced robust whisky while others produced lighter varieties, formulas were invented that take advantage of the best qualities found in any number of complimentary malts.

Patriarchal names like Dewar, Johnnie Walker, and the Chivas brothers each developed a distinctive and consistent collection of house blends, to create products with broad appeal and regional character that survives to this day. Dewar's blended whiskies have the honeyed spice of the Highland malts; Chivas offers the sherried fruit flavors of Speyside; while the blends of Johnnie Walker reflect the smoldering peat fires of tree-less Western Scotland.

Indeed, as the grocers advanced the art of blending, they inspired their local farmers to perfect their individual products so that each offered a desirable taste found nowhere else. It is therefore with some irony that the blending houses gave rise to the single malt industry.

It was common to find blends of 100% malt whisky prior to 1900. Over time, more blenders included grain whisky to take the rougher edges off their mixture, and provide a pleasant, underlying canvas for the more colorful malts. Or, to use a different metaphor, one could look at the various whiskies in a blend as separate bands on an electronic stereo equalizer, and it is the skill of the master blender that brings into line the extreme peaks of the malts employed, to end up with a smooth and unified arc that flows easily from the first taste to the lingering finish. But even when including grain whisky in the solution, it is the specific malts present that determine a blend's exclusive flavor profile and brand identity. Many such formulas are considered trade secrets to this day.

To illustrate the blender's craft, let's take a look at some commercial offerings from one of Scotland's esteemed whisky makers, Johnnie Walker.

Red Label reputedly contains 35 malt and grain whiskies and is intended for use in mixed drinks. The formula was specifically invented to be mixed with dry ginger ale, the most popular gentleman's drink in the UK during the last decades of the 1800s.

Black Label is a blend of approximately 40 whiskies, the youngest being aged 12 years. It was invented to be used for the classic high ball, i.e. whisky and soda (or club soda as Americans call it.) Although tis said Mr. Churchill preferred Red Label for his whisky and soda, Black Label is less spicy and has a velvety-malty caramel palate with a discreet peaty influence.

Double Black is a new, smokier version of Black Label. Made from the same cast of characters, but featuring the peatiest whiskies - noticeably Caol Ila. At least some of the components were aged in freshly charred casks.

Green Label is Johnnie Walker's only blended malt whisky. It is comprised of just four ingredients, representing the two most popular styles of single malt scotch – Cragganmore and Linkwood of the Speyside region, and Caol Ila and Talisker from the islands. The youngest whisky in Green Label is aged 15 years. Rich, yet, balanced, this fusion of malty sweets, toasted nuts, dried fruit, and honeyed heather has a touch of peat in its smoky depths.

Blue Label is the paramount Johnnie Walker blend. It contains no age statement, but is likely created with spirits of considerable maturity. While the contents of this luxuriously smooth potion are a highly guarded secret, it is accepted that the many malts used include some from Islay, like Lagavulin and Caol Ila, as well as two of the smallest distilleries in Scotland, Royal Lochnagar in the eastern highlands, and Speyside's Cardhu, along with its neighbor Mortlach. Those last two, in younger form, create the nucleus of Black Label.

New premium blends have recently come to market from Johnnie Walker, and other venerable names like Douglas Laing, and Chivas Brothers, as well as newcomers like Compass Box. New single malts and blended malts arrive as well, from new distillers and those who have been in business a century or more. It is a most fortuitous time to be a whisky drinker.

## Conclusion

However it was spelled or translated across Europe and Scandinavia, aqua vitae was the distilled essence of the local berry or farmable grain. In Scotland, that meant barley.

But in no other place on Earth is found the same combination of environmental factors that contributed to the evolution of the look, smell, feel, and taste of Scotch malt whisky. It is the bedrock through which the water rises, and the organic matter over which it courses. It is the air washing across the rugged land from sea to sea. It is the soil so conducive to growing barleycorn and sweet, fragrant heather. It is the peat bed slowly accumulating a foot each thousand years. It is the isolation of small farming communities, where illicit distillers could set up operations long enough to develop tradition and expertise. And it is even the political climate that granted them licensed legitimacy just in time for the Industrial Revolution, opening up far-flung markets, leading to the capital necessary to reserve large quantities of whisky for 10, or 20, or even 50 years, and introducing used, but flavorful casks from foreign lands in which to age the spirit that could have come from nowhere else. It is the spirit of Scotland, which may now be savored, enjoyed, and raised in celebratory toasts around the globe.



### *About the Author*

*T. S. Phillips currently resides in New York City, where he writes on many different topics for a variety of publications and websites. The following section includes recommendations that are based entirely on his personal opinion.*

Originally commissioned for *Singular Malts*, used with permission.

CONTACT: [tsphillips@protonmail.com](mailto:tsphillips@protonmail.com)

## Malts du Jour: suggested drinking

List of Recommended Single Malts for newcomers and explorers seeking good examples of the craft at reasonable prices:

**Best All Rounders:** While it is less impressive than it once was, **Highland Park 12** remains a balanced combination European and American oak, with malty sweetness, fruity sherry, and a touch of Orkney peat smoke, while **Talisker 10** is always satisfying, but with bourbon-derived spice and American oak notes nestled in a blanket of prominent peat.

But in 2021, **Springbank 10** is currently better than both and one of the few single malts that has not lost anything in terms of quality and character in recent years. If anything, it is actually better than it was a several years back, when it was re-introduced into the American Market. It remains among the very few worth the modern-day prices.

**Sherried refinement: Macallan 12, Glenfarclas 12, GlenDronach 12**, none of these distillers currently use peated malt for their core product line, and all use sherry casks for their entry level single malts. Like Guinness or Murphy's, Coke or Pepsi, any one of these classics could become your personal favorite. GlenDronach is the most desserty, Glenfarclas has the most oak while always having outstanding cask quality, and Macallan 12 Sherry Cask is an emulsion of sweet and savory, cereal and fruit, ginger and spice that makes it all so nice.

\* Current Personal Favorite Sherry: **Glenfarclas 12** - a splash of water polishes the younger, rougher edges and opens up this classic Speyside single malt into a sumptuous delight.

**Bourbon sugar and spice: Glenmorangie 10, Balvenie Doublewood 12, Glenfiddich 12.** With little or no peat influences, the standard Glenmorangie is aged only in American bourbon barrels, while the Balvenie Doublewood is further aged in sherry barrels, and Glenfiddich is single malt aged in bourbon vatted together with a portion aged in sherry. I believe gentle Glenmorangie remains the most popular single malt in Scotland, while the very-lightly peated Glenfiddich is the most popular single malt in the world.

\* Current Personal Favorite Low-Smoke Bourbon Barrel Malt: **Clynelish 14** is eccentric yet appealing in its complex tropical fruit and wood spice profile, making it one of the true greats.

**Peat and re-peat:** Not all smoky whisky is peated, and some that are have more of a peaty character while others have more of a charcoal smoke flavor. The following are all peated single malts, listing their approximate phenolic rating, as parts per million.

**Springbank 10 or 12** (20-22ppm,) for when you are ready to dive into the Campbeltown style. It is slightly less peaty than Talisker, but with many other differences in character. But if you like one you will also like the other. But neither is as pronounced in peat as Ledaig or the Islay whiskies.

**Islay Adventure:** In order of peat smoke, **Lagavulin 16** (35-40ppm) is robust and tarry, maltier than some other Islay whiskies and with sherry influence, while these next two or mainly bourbon cask-influenced. **Laphroig 10** (45ppm) has a simple syrup sweetness balanced by medicinal smoked seaweed, and **Ardbeg 10** (55ppm) is smokiest of all yet wonderfully balanced with a vanilla sweetness.

\* Current Personal Favorites Islay Malt: **Caol Ila 12** (32ppm,) which has all the classic Islay characteristics, in such a civilized, well-crafted tableau of flavors and as stated above, the most serene

and sophisticated. But now there is newcomer **Kilchoman**, who makes small batch whisky usually at 5 or 7 years of age at bottling that is absolutely outstanding! Their Machir Bay and Sanaig (50ppm) are so dense, rich, licoriced, and deeply peaty, it is a marvel it could be so young and of such high quality. It is a must-try for anyone who wants old-fashioned peated scotch. And it only gets better as one moves up their price list.

**Steals** - remarkably good whisky for the least amount of money - Aberfeldy 12 and Glenmorangie 10 are often found for less than \$50 in the States, and are head and shoulders above all the other bargain malts out there. They are not bargain malts at all really, but are using a lower price point to get themselves better known in the American Market. But if what you seek is peat, look for Ledaig 10, from the Tobermory distillery on the Isle of Mull. It is less refined than Caol Ila, but very much in the same style for a lot less money.

Otherwise, **Ardbeg 10**, **Glenfarclas 12**, **Highland Park 12**, **Macallan 12** cost \$10 - \$20 more than entry-level single malts, but are simply superior to them, and to many single malts or blends costing considerably more still.

**Aerstone Sea Cask** is the only true "budget single malt" I can recommend with a good conscious. This is a new brand owned by William Grant & Sons (Glenfiddich, Balvenie, etc.) that is made at the Ailsa Bay distillery in the Lowlands (where they make Hendrick's Gin.) But it is in a style that is closer to something from Campbeltown, although much lighter in character, yet still "maritime" and nicely sea-peaty. And you can find it some places for less than \$25 in 2021! They also make a Land Cask, which is distilled there but aged inland, and is both smoky and sherried. But I do not like that nearly as much as the Sea Cask.

#### **Heavy Hitters - for those ready to pay for the privilege:**

**Speyside Sherry: Glenfarclas 17** is better than many other distilleries older offerings, and has a complex heart of plump fruit and spicy dry oak that embodies the essence of traditional distilling and sherry cask aging, perfected by one of the original and still independent family businesses that invented the art form. And **GlenDronach 18** is as dense and Christmasy as it is superb.

**Bourbony pedigree: Talisker 18** is one of the best peated whiskies of all time. **Balvenie Single Barrel 15** is limited to 350 bottles per barrel; each batch is unique while retaining the peat-less Balvenie style of sweet vanilla, dry, clean oak, and a sprinkling of spice and tropical fruit.

Sherry and Bourbon Harmony: **Glenlivet 18** is so well crafted, so mellow yet with such lovely honey, wood spice, and autumnal fruit, that it is a revelation compared to the lower-end Glenlivet expressions, and good enough that it is ample compensation for us mortals who cannot afford the glorious sensual feast that is **Glenlivet 25**.

**Lush Sherry and Smokey Peat Together: Ardbeg Uigeadail, Springbank 15, Talisker Distillers Edition.** Aging notably peated scotch in sherry barrels does not always result in an integrated and cohesive flavor profile. But these particular whiskies are hugely successful in this regard.

**Angels and Demons: Highland Park 18** is heavenly and a superb introduction to Premiere League sherried scotch. **Lagavulin 12 Cask Strength** is magnificent in its purity. Made without sherried casks involved, it is an explosive heavyweight of a maritime Islay beast that will smack you in the chops, but make you ask for more.

And on the bourbony side of things, **Springbank 12 Cask Strength**, although not every release makes it to American market.

### Blended Malt Whisky Worth Seeking Out

**Naked Grouse**, like the bargain blend Famous Grouse, this all-malt blend is made by Edrington at the Glenturret distillery, and features along with that highlands single malt, Macallan and Glenrothes from Speyside, and Highland Park from the Orkney Islands. It is far superior to its more famous sibling, and is made entirely of sherry-cask, and finished for 6 months in a fresh Oloroso sherry cask. It is a little tight and straight up, with a bitter edge, but turns quite delicious on the rocks or with soda water. The important thing is the price, which is less than many blends containing 60% grain alcohol.

**Monkey Shoulder** features single malts owned William Grant & Sons, including Balvenie, Kininvie, and Glenfiddich. It has a dominant bourbon character and is marketed as being designed for mixing, in cocktails and highballs. But I know many people who drink it neat or on the rocks.

### Blended Scotch Whisky Worth Trying

This is a very short list, because life is too short to not drink single malt whenever possible. So I will only list the following:

**Great King Street Glasgow Blend** Compass Box, who defy the pressure to keep companies from divulging their recipes. It is made from 64.8% single malt in the current formula.

- 29% - Aberlour, first-fill sherry butt
- 18.2% - Laphroaig, refill bourbon barrel
- 9.9% - Clynelish, first fill bourbon barrel
- 5.1% - Aberlour, revatted sherry butt
- 2.6% - "Highland malt blend, heavily toasted French oak cask  
(60% Glen Moray, 25% Tomatin, 15% Balmenach)
- 35.2% - Single grain whisky from the Cameronbridge distillery

**Great King Street Artists Blend** uses a different formula that is not as smoky or as sherried in its character.

- 16% - Clynelish from a first-fill bourbon barrel
- 14% - Clynelish from a refill bourbon hogshead
- 12% - "Highland malts blending" from a heavily toasted French oak cask
- 8% - from a different Clynelish first-fill bourbon barrel
- 2% - Linkwood from a first-fill sherry butt
- 48% - Single grain whisky from the Cameronbridge distillery

*Slàinte mhath!*



*28 yo Mortlach, first fill sherry cask*