

Whisky galore

BY ANTHONY MANIFOLD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM RETTIG



Glenmorangie's Quinta Ruban, a single malt Scotch whisky, sells for \$66 at Austin Liquors in Worcester.

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When your host enquires — “Will ye lift a wee dram afore ye gang away?” — you know you’re in Scotch whisky country and being invited to partake of Scotland’s best-known beverage before you leave.

For the Scots, whisky is the obligatory complement to every hatching, matching and dispatching occasion. It’s used to celebrate the arrival of a newborn, to toast the health and happiness of newlyweds, and to bid farewell to the departed. But the best reward is the warm inner glow it offers to withstand the dank, bone-chilling days of winter.

The history of Scotch whisky dates back to the 15th century, when enterprising farmers began to distill usquebaugh — Gaelic for the water of life — from malted barley. Today, Scotch is not only a multibillion-dollar industry worldwide, but has diversified into a spectrum of sophisticated spirits that only whisky worshippers fully understand.

Two kinds of spirits are used as a basis for producing Scotch whisky. Single malt whisky is made from malted barley that is soaked to germinate, then dried in a peat furnace and processed in a pot still. This is Scotland’s most sought-after spirit. Each single malt has a character of its own and can only be distilled by makers in the specified Scottish regions of Lowland, Speyside, Highland, Campbeltown and Islay. The taste and smell characteristics are fashioned by the malt, the peat, the water and the casks in which the whisky has been matured for at least three years.

Grain whisky is distilled in a continuous column still, usually from maize with a little malted barley and occasionally unmalted barley. The result is a light whisky that is quick to mature and has no peat flavor.

After maturation, it is blended with single malts to produce Scotch whiskies such as J and B Rare (\$22) and Johnny Walker Red Label (\$25). Deluxe iterations of these whiskies, such as Chivas Regal (\$35) and Haig Pinch (\$36), are smoother and mellower as a result of aging for up to 12 years.

Surprisingly, although most blends contain 85 percent grain whisky, there are only eight grain distilleries in Scotland. This compares with more than 90 single malt producers. These numbers reflect the surging success of single malts versus blended whiskies.

In recent years, the scope of single malts has undergone a seismic transformation. The producers — and their marketing mavens — have utilized every trick in the whisky-making book to achieve this. Originally, only barrels used for bourbon or sherry were used to mature single malts. Now, anything from Bordeaux wine to cognac barrels goes.

Glenmorangie’s Quinta Ruban (\$66), for example, is finished in port casks to develop the amber liquid into “a voluptuously smooth spirit with a complex balance of sweet and dry flavors that engages the entire palate.” Bruichladdich Distillery has diversified by reverting to the production methods used in the early 20th century. It restored a distillery closed in 1929 because of Prohibition in the Islay village of Port Charlotte. Each year it releases a limited-edition single malt suffused with peaty flavors and boasting a whopping 61.6 percent alcohol by volume. Its most recent bottling, known as PC6, is priced at \$135. While Scotch is the standard-bearer, there are variations on the whisky theme. Scotland’s Celtic neighbor, Ireland, was the first to distill the distinctive



People gather at Julio's Liquors in Westboro for a whiskey tasting.

brew. References to the "ball of malt," as the Irish quaintly call it, date back to the 12th century. Like Scotch, Irish whiskey, (note the "e"), is made in a pot still, but with unmalted grain as well as malted barley. It's triple distilled and notable for the absence of a smoky nose, since peat is rarely used.

Powers Gold Label and Jameson are good buys at \$22 and \$28, respectively. Single malts such as Bushmills Rare Aged 21 years (\$110) are the cream of the Irish crop. And there's a newcomer to the clan: Penderyn, known as the best little — and only — distillery in Wales, was commissioned in 2004. Penderyn Single Malt (\$70) is matured in bourbon and madeira barrels imparting "an exceptionally balanced taste with aromas of cream toffee and fresh new leather."

The Japanese market for whisky has grown to an astonishing \$5 billion annually, so it's not surprising that the locals have tried their hand at producing the libation.

Suntory has been particularly successful, carrying off top awards in international taste tests for its single malts. Generally considered softer and somewhat sweeter than traditional single malts, Suntory's Yamakazi 12 year old (\$50) is a pleasantly quaffable alternative

to its Scotch rivals. Suntory also owns Islay's oldest distillery, Bowmore, so it's not lacking in whisky know-how.

North America is home to a wide selection of whiskeys with marked differences to their overseas counterparts. Bourbon whiskey (also with an "e") originated in Kentucky, but today you can find bourbons from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Missouri and even California. Bourbon derives its distinctive creamy vanilla, sweet caramel and spicy nuances from a distillation of fermented grain mash of which at least 51 percent has to be corn.

The production volume dictates its character. Jim Beam Black (\$22) is a large batch production where the maker strives to deliver consistent flavors in every bottle by blending. In small batch production, makers such as Michter (\$38) use only 15 or 20 barrels per bottling to enhance the individual character. Bourbons that use only one barrel for each bottling, such as Eagle Rare 10 Years (\$30), offer the ultimate flavor fix for bourbon buffs.

There are bourbons that use wheat in the corn mash for sweeter, nuttier flavor and a fuller mouth feel. Wheated bourbons such as Makers Mark (\$29) are for everyday drinking

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while premium examples like Pappy Van Winkle 23 years old Family Reserve (\$225) compete with fine cognacs as the ideal after-dinner digestif. There's also bourbon from Tennessee, but correctly speaking it's called Tennessee whiskey. It's filtered through maple charcoal for a mellower taste. Jack Daniels (\$26) is one of only two brands of Tennessee whiskey.

Canadian whiskey is lighter and smoother than most other whiskeys. Also known as rye whiskey, since rye is the principal ingredient used to distill the spirit, it must be made in Canada and aged in small wooden casks for at least three years. Flavorful examples are Canadian Club Aged 6 Years (\$17) and Crown Royal (\$29).

Not yet ready to venture into straight whisky or whiskey? Then try a Scotch-based cocktail to tune up your taste buds. Among the more colorful concoctions are Old Moorhen's Shredded Sporan, Pearl Harbor Revisited, Trouser Rouser and Warm Woolly Sheep. But that's another story. **W**

Whisky Wisdom from the Whiz

Annabel Meikle is Glenmorangie's whisky creator and sensory expert. We asked her for advice on how best to enjoy Scotch whisky.

With or without water?

I think you should always use a small amount of water because that helps to reduce the alcohol strength and allows your nose to detect the aromas better.

And ice?

Whisky with ice is also good – maybe two or three cubes – especially as an aperitif on a warm evening.

What about club soda?

That's a good idea – or ginger ale – if you're trying whisky for the first time. Again, it takes the heat out of the alcohol.

What kind of glasses?

When we taste whisky, we use small copita or tulip shaped glasses. At home, I drink whisky from a tumbler so I can swirl it around to bring out the aromas.

How long can you keep whisky once you've opened it?

You can keep it in a cool, dry, dark place for up to a year. If it's very good whisky, transfer it to a smaller bottle so there's no headspace between the level of the whisky and the top of the bottle.

Can you pair whisky with food?

That's a real passion of mine as I have a lot of experience in the food industry. Two of my favorites are Glenmorangie Original 10 year old single malt with shellfish and Glenmorangie Quinta Ruban paired with gamy venison or beef.

What do you look for in a good whisky?

Interesting character, balance and integration of flavors. I like peaty whisky with some sweetness but the dram I choose will depend on my mood and who I'm with at that moment.

