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All for one

LET'S RAISE A GLASS TO THE SINGLE CASK



THE SCOTCH MALT
WHISKY SOCIETY

ESTD THE VAULTS, LEITH, SCOTLAND

DO THE CHARLESTON

Hans Offringa samples true southern hospitality with a tour of three distilleries in one of America's oldest cities

Part of the year we live in the beautiful US city of Charleston, South Carolina. It is one of the oldest cities in North America, predating the formation of the United States itself. Charleston was founded in 1670 as part of the charter granted to the Lords Proprietor of Carolina by the English King Charles II. The heart of the city is situated on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper rivers, both running into, or as Charlestonians prefer to say, forming the Atlantic Ocean at its harbour. The city is steeped in literature and history. This is where *Porgy and Bess* played out, as well as some of *Gone with the Wind*. It is also the place where the first shots of the Civil War – still euphemistically referred to as ‘The Late Unpleasantness’ by some southerners – were fired upon Fort Sumter in the harbour. Charlestonians are aware of their chequered history, but have not let that keep them from moving forward to create a cosmopolitan, welcoming city.

Many Carolinians have Irish or Scottish forebears, as is the case with my wife Becky. She is a descendant of the clan Fraser of Lovat, which is where her maiden name Lovett is derived. When Scots and Irishmen emigrated to the US in the 18th and 19th centuries, some may have brought a small pot still with them; many certainly brought their distilling knowledge. As of today Charleston sports three craft distilleries. Let me introduce them to y’all.

King Street is one of the longest and most important streets on the peninsula and two craft distilleries have homes here, nestled



between the trendy restaurants and shops. The first can be found at number 652 and is called High Wire Distilling, founded by Scott Blackwell and Ann Marshall in 2013. Scott is something of a serial entrepreneur – High Wire is the fifth company he’s built from scratch. Among others he’s been a home brewer, a baker, a coffee manufacturer and coffee shop owner in South Carolina’s capital, Columbia.

About a mile further down King Street is the Charleston Distilling Co, founded by Steve Heilman, a former commodities trader on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. “I lost my appetite for it and wanted something different,” he says. He moved to Charleston and teamed up with local lawyer Brent Stephens, who had been distilling for almost eight years as a hobby.

The third is Striped Pig Distillery, which stands on the northern edge of the city in the ‘neck’ of the peninsula. It is the oldest of the three and we’ve been involved in the developments since the early planning.

Founder Todd Weiss approached me when he was toying with the idea of setting up a distillery back in December 2011.

Striped Pig did have a real pet in the distillery – a black hog with white stripes on his back, painted with an eco-friendly paint. His name was Jackson. Co-founder Jim Craig and I once did a whiskey tasting with Jackson at a local liquor store, much to the amusement of the customers. “Unfortunately he grew too big and became unmanageable,” Jim told me recently. “Now he lives in a large field and I go visit him each week. He still recognises me.”

You can easily visit the three distilleries in one day, but you may want to prolong your stay as Charleston has a lot to offer besides craft distillers. It is best known for its southern hospitality, but also for its performing arts festival Spoleto, food and wine festival, jazz festivals, splendid old world architecture, excellent restaurants, historic plantations, beaches, golf courses, museums, hotels and bars. *Condé Nast* named it the No.1 city in the US five years in a row and *Travel + Leisure* followed that by naming it the best city in the world in 2016. We wish the secret wasn’t out, but it is.

Of course, I needed to share a fine SMWS dram with a special friend whose family descends directly from one of the Pilgrim Fathers. Charles Waring III is the owner and publisher of the *Charleston Mercury*, a cosmopolitan newspaper I’ve had the pleasure to contribute whisky stories to for more than a decade. We cracked open a bottle of Cask No. 48.63: *Up all night editorial*. Here’s to all publishers, editors, drinks journalists and the like, wherever you are – and here’s to Charleston. ●

♥ *Hans Offringa is the SMWS ambassador for the Netherlands. He and his wife, Becky Lovett Offringa, are The Whisky Couple, known for their whisky-related books, articles, photography and presentations.*

As whisky production in Scotland took its tentative steps out of infancy, it did so hand in hand with the cask – a wooden, coopered vessel in which new spirit, over time, was found to be enriched, softened and improved to a point of almost miraculous palatability.

The process of discovery is often romantically thought of as an evolution of serendipitous pragmatism, whereby casks used for transport were left, for whatever reason, only to yield an improved content. In reality it was almost certainly an inevitability, as the beneficial nature of cask maturation was already known by wine makers in Europe since at least 500BC. That knowledge was certain to eventually spread north to the fermenters and distillers of grain.

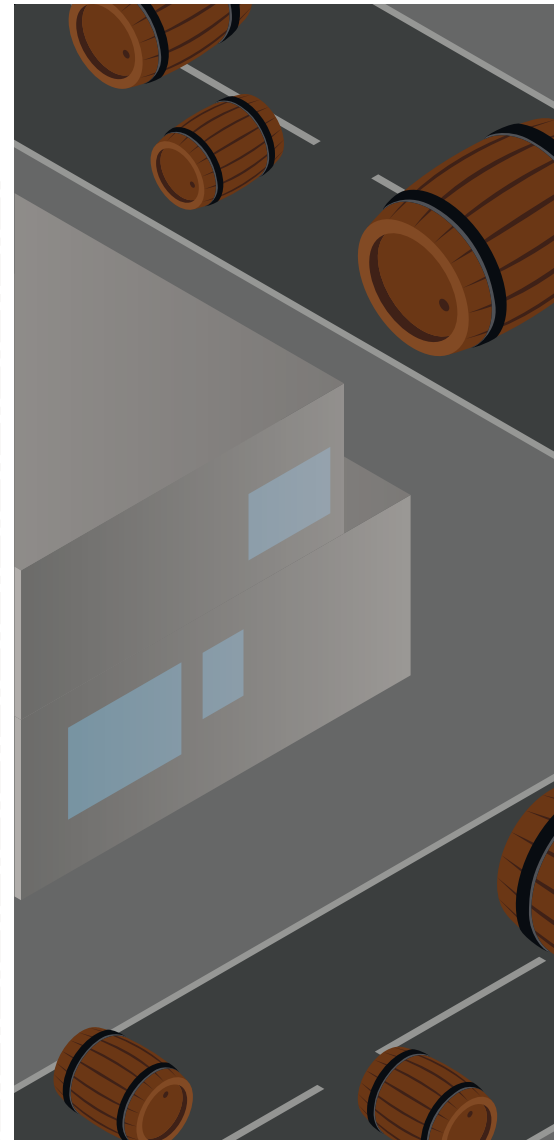
Whisky owes the wooden cask a great deal. However, it is only in recent decades that there has been a tightening of the laws surrounding what wood you can fill and why. The basic principles were defined in the Scotch Whisky Act of 1988, which stated Scotch whisky must be matured in a wooden cask not exceeding 700 litres in capacity. This was further refined by the Scotch Whisky Order of 1990 where the ‘wood’ was specified as oak. These decisions were arrived at as a result of consultation with the industry and research by the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA) into what could reasonably be

The cask makes the whisky, with the vessel’s previous contents playing a vital role in the quality of the spirit that ends up going into the bottle. Angus MacRaidl casts his eye over what kind of casks distillers can legally green light for use

defined as ‘traditional’ cask types based on historical industry practice. Further to this are sub-categories of cask which are deemed acceptable for use in maturation or finishing. These guidelines were arrived at by the SWA in the early 2000s after they noticed a rise in the prevalence of finishing a whisky in different casks that would have formerly held a variety of different spirits and wines. Their research and consultation in the early 2000s yielded the following guidelines on permissible cask types under existing UK law:

“Bourbon and other whisky, grape brandy (including Armagnac and Cognac although they are technically wine spirits), rum, fortified wine (including Sherry, Madeira, Port and Malaga), still wine (of whatever type or origin) and beer/ale. If members wish to use any other type of cask for the maturation or ‘finishing’ of Scotch Whisky, the onus would be on them to establish that that type of cask had been traditionally used in the industry and to provide evidence to that effect. It is unlikely that a court would accept a particular type of cask as traditional unless there was evidence of significant use of that type of cask in the industry over a number of years. For example, Counsel did not believe the Association had found sufficient evidence of the use of Calvados casks in the past to justify their use for the maturation or ‘finishing’ of Scotch Whisky”

These very guidelines were recently quoted back to the SMWS when one of our bottlings – 35.178 – was released after a period of extra maturation in an ex-gin hogshead. The SWA in this instance disputed the historical use of gin casks (or indeed the maturation of gin full stop) and

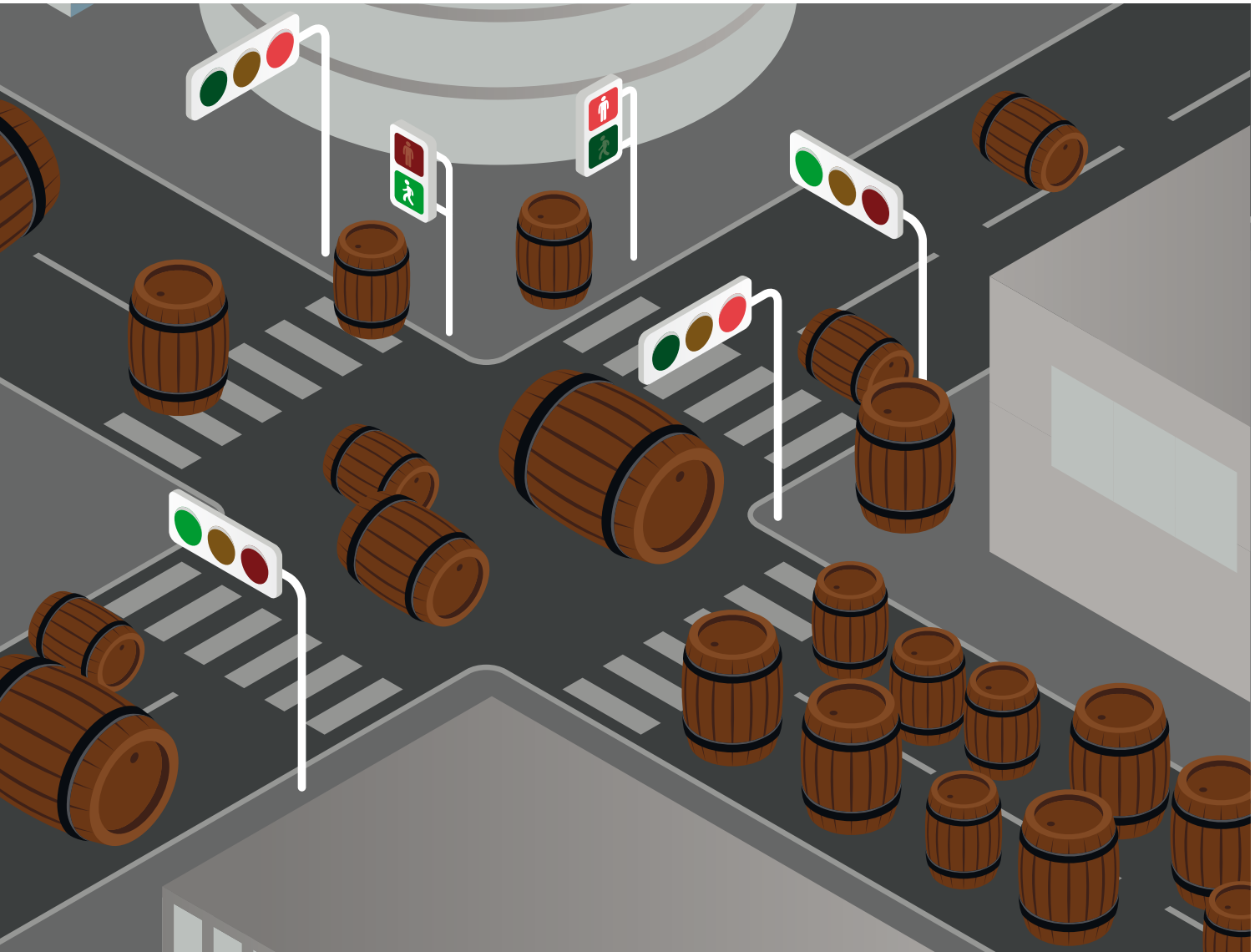


suggested it wouldn’t be wise for the SMWS to make a habit of using gin casks. There is indeed historical precedence for the use of chestnut casks in whisky maturation so a distiller might make arguments for its use again today – although, not being oak, it is unlikely to get very far.

Perhaps the most notorious story in recent years that illustrates the tension and necessary dialogue between the SWA and whisky producers is that of Compass Box and The Spice Tree. The Spice Tree was a blended malt whisky which spent time in casks with ‘inner’ staves of toasted French oak, which John Glaser of Compass Box intended to add a herbal, spicy quality to the finished whisky.

The SWA objected to this practice on the grounds that it wasn’t traditional. Glaser’s solution, after consultation with the SWA, was to have specially coopered American oak casks produced with ends made of heavily toasted French oak. It’s a neat illustration of how there can often be creative solutions to problems or disagreements which arise. It’s also

RIGHTS OF WAY



important to point out that the SWA do not seek confrontation, nor do they desire to get embroiled in legal battles. They want a producer to be able to sell products that everyone is happy with as much as they are tasked with protecting the 'traditions' and character of Scotch whisky.

Oak has overwhelmingly been the main wood type in which Scotch whisky has historically matured. And while there are varying species of oak, they all broadly possess similar, necessary properties. It doesn't easily leak once coopered; it allows for even evaporation; it doesn't impart unpleasant flavours to the distillate; and it is prevalent enough to meet the demands of a large scale industry.

Indeed, distillers such as Bill Lumsden of Glenmorangie have experimented with other wood types such as Brazilian cherry wood and found it sorely lacking. The fact that the SWA does not mind distillers experimenting with other wood types

THERE REMAINS A SMALL GREY AREA WHERE PRODUCERS OF SCOTCH WHISKY MAY EXPERIMENT WITH CASK TYPE, PROVIDED THEY CAN PROVE THAT IT HAS HISTORICAL PRECEDENT IN THE INDUSTRY

says a lot about the unshakable confidence people have in oak. If a distiller discovers a new wood type that suits their distillate – which well they might, as the new Dornoch distillery plans to mature some spirit and gin in juniper wood casks – and wishes to bottle the results, the SWA is happy to work with them to see that the product can be released as a 'spirit drink'. That's provided the labelling, imagery and language do not infringe upon those of Scotch whisky.

So, there remains a grey area where Scotch producers may experiment with cask type, provided they can prove that it has historical precedent in the industry. The guidelines exist to ensure minimum

deviation from the established character and colour of Scotch.

While modern, small-scale bottlers and distillers will no doubt see this as a stifling of creativity, larger companies see it as a protection of Scotch.

Perhaps debates about wood are a distraction though. Ultimately, from the consumer's perspective, producers already have the means to make incredible whisky within the existing legal framework.

Rather than attempting to deviate from that, why not push for the most distinctive and exemplary whiskies possible within existing definitions? Experimentation is only a success if it delivers true quality. ●

WORDS
TOM BRUCE-GARDYNE



FOOL'S GOLD



Get-rich-quick schemes involving whisky might sound tempting – but for some unlucky investors, it's money down the drain



Auction houses are being urged to watch out for rogue bottles

David Robertson, of Rare Whisky 101 and the planned Holyrood Park distillery in Edinburgh, has some simple, homespun advice for anyone planning to invest in bottles or casks of Scotch whisky for profit: “If it looks too good to be true, it will be.”

Yet amid the slick patter of the salesmen and the glossy brochures full of graphs and charts, not to mention the lure of a quick buck, how often are such warnings ignored? In this unregulated world of alternative investments it truly is *caveat emptor* – buyer beware.

One recent whisky heist to hit the headlines involved a sophisticated fraudster in London. Isabel Graham-Yooll, director at Whisky.Auction, had become suspicious of a particular seller and arranged to visit an address in Finchley, posing as a whisky collector. Seeing hundreds of supposedly rare bottles, she doubted the contents could all be genuine on such a scale. The police were tipped off and when they raided the premises they discovered an array of bottling equipment. In February a 41-year-old man was arrested, and thanks to Graham-Yooll’s diligence around £200,000 of counterfeit booze was drained from the auction market.

A month later another scam surfaced

from the other side of the world involving casks. Nant distillery in Tasmania had been seeking to finance production by persuading people to buy a pair of newly-filled barrels for A\$25,000 (£14,200). After around four years in wood, Nant would buy back the whisky for A\$36,000 (£20,500), the equivalent of 9.55 per cent compound interest. What could go wrong? Well, the distillery’s founder, property tycoon Keith Batt, declared bankruptcy in December, and this March the new owners, Australian Whisky Heritage, revealed that more than 700 casks had never been filled.

The tale echoes that of Grandtully single malt which saw former trader Stephen Jupe convicted of fraudulent trading in 2004. A decade earlier he was offering hogsheads named after the long defunct Perthshire

This March the new owners, Australian Whisky Heritage, revealed that more than 700 casks had never been filled

distillery for £930 each, describing them as “liquid gold” with “growth potentials of 18 per cent per annum”. The true value was just £425 and the whisky inside came from the Speyside distillery.

Jupe’s trading company Marshall Wineries was also involved in a pre-millennium champagne scam, which illustrates how the sharks of the wine world have swum across to whisky. And when it comes to counterfeiting rare bottles, there is no real difference between the two. The aim is to slip one through the net into the auction world where the bottle will be traded, collected, occasionally fondled and rarely if ever drunk because pulling the cork destroys the intrinsic value.

Unlike art forgery, fake bottles keep their secrets on the inside and, even if the contents are drunk it is always tempting to swallow the evidence rather than admit you’ve been had.

At Rare Whisky 101, which acts as an analyst, broker and investment advisor, David Robertson says: “We categorise these things as replicas, refills or relics. There are bottles that are passed off as being a replica of something else, and others that may have been consumed by the original owner and then refilled with something else and re-corked and re-capsuled. Relics are those very old-looking bottles on the market that we’re very nervous about.”

An example of the latter was a 1903 Laphroaig that Rare Whisky 101 found at auction last year. “The glass looked good, the paper looked good, but we decided to buy the bottle and have it analysed,” says Robertson. “We were disappointed, but not surprised, to find the liquid was contemporary and not from 1903.”

The bottle was sent to Oxford University’s Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit which found it was a blend with “a 75 per cent chance of being distilled between 2007 and 2009”. Robertson added: “The forgeries we’ve uncovered could be the tip of the iceberg.”

The head of auction house Sotheby’s wine department was once quoted as saying the market was awash with fakes, while there have long been suspicions around the so-called Thomas Jefferson claret that Christie’s auction house sold for a record-breaking £105,000 in 1985.

It makes you wonder whether all auctioneers are as diligent as they might be? The fact that Whisky.Auction has a clear anti-forgery policy and waits at least 10 days between receipt of bottles and a sale sounds good. Others may be more trigger-happy with their auction hammers. Robertson won’t name names but says: “Some are absolutely whiter than white, while there may be some who have allowed one or two bottles to slip through the net in the past.”

He has urged the Scotch Whisky Association and brand owners to get to grips with the issue. “They obviously can’t change what’s out there already,” he says. “But they

“They could put checks and balances in place now for any rare bottles released onto the market”

could put checks and balances in place now for any rare bottles released onto the market going forward.”

With the number of whisky auction sites growing to meet the burgeoning supply of rare bottles, the number of fakes is surely growing as well, and sometimes the distillers themselves are stung. The Macallan acquired 100 antique bottles of its single malt in around 2001, which led Dave Broom to question their authenticity in *Whisky Magazine*. A number of bottles were eventually opened and found to be forgeries. It was highly embarrassing for The Macallan and a clear wake-up call for the industry.

The mantra of Rare Whisky 101 on its website is: ‘Drink, collect, invest – enjoy’ and anyone tempted to join in should ponder those words very carefully, for

motives can become confused. Buying a cask from one of the new boutique distilleries should be an innocent pleasure for those who can afford it. You wait for it to slowly mature into whisky in a bonded warehouse while the distillers receive much-needed funds during those long, lean years of maturation. Then, when the time is right, you pay HMRC a fortune in excise duty and finally get to taste the whisky.

So long as you are confident the distillery will survive as a going concern, there seems little risk. You will be part of its history and part of the club, but Annandale distillery in the Borders points to other motives. “Even if you are no whisky connoisseur, you may purchase a cask as a shrewd investment,” says its website, before mentioning a “once in a lifetime opportunity to own Cask No.1”. Now it might prove to be the sweetest nectar ever distilled in Scotland, but that “shrewd investment” comes with a £1 million price tag.

Investing in maturing stocks of malt and grain through a platform like WhiskyInvestDirect, which seems to offer reasonable rates of return and has the backing of the whisky industry, is totally different from rare whisky. Here, the proliferation of auction sites and headlines about records smashed has sucked in a new breed of ‘investor’, often slightly naive. In its wake has come a shadowy shoal of fraudsters. So maybe it is simpler to forget about profit and just drink the stuff – now that really would be radical. ●

PHOTO MIKE WILKINSON

