

FOR MEMBERS OF THE SCOTCH MALT WHISKY SOCIETY

UNFILTERED

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DR JIM SWAN TRIBUTE + INSIDE THE SCOTCH WHISKY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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NO. 38

FEBRUARY 2018

Twist & shout
SAMPLING THE OLD AND NEW IN SPEYSIDE



THE SCOTCH MALT
WHISKY SOCIETY

ESTD THE VAULTS, LEITH, SCOTLAND

Angus Bryce-McVay, head bartender at the Quaiich partner bar, the Craiggellachie Hotel

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WHISKY SOCIETY

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THE COLUMNISTS

ANDREW DERBIDGE & IAN BUXTON
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UNFILTERED MAGAZINE



THE SCOTCH MALT WHISKY SOCIETY

ESTD THE VAULTS, LEITH, SCOTLAND

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COVER IMAGE

Inside Glentauchers distillery on Speyside, by Peter Sandground

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GLOBAL SOCIETY JOINS SWRI

THE Society has kicked off our 35th anniversary by becoming a member of the industry's leading research and technology organisation, The Scotch Whisky Research Institute (SWRI).

SWRI is funded by the Scotch whisky industry and now represents more than 90 per cent of the producers in Scotland, carrying out research across the entire process of Scotch whisky production, maturation, flavour analysis and product protection.

"We're delighted to become a member of SWRI, which will benefit our own members through our investment in quality and the ability

to take greater control and have more involvement in every stage of the process leading to us bottling our whisky," said SMWS spirits director Kai Ivalo.

James Brosnan, director of The Scotch Whisky Research Institute, said: "I am delighted to welcome The Scotch Malt Whisky Society as a new member to the SWRI 'research club', and look forward to exploring how our research can benefit your Society and your members."

Discover more about The Scotch Whisky Research Institute and how we'll be working together in our feature on pages 22 and 23.



2

AUSTRALIA WESTLAND'S SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

AUSTRALIA hosted the most comprehensive Westland distillery vertical tasting in the southern hemisphere in December, featuring the Seattle distiller's core range, Peat Week, Garryana 2017, and our own Cask No. 133.1: Speakeasy sneaky peeky. The tasting took place at Melbourne Whisky Room to a packed-out room of enthusiastic members.

3

COMPETITION PRIZE OFFERING FROM HANS

OUR illustrious SMWS ambassador Hans Offringa has kindly made 10 signed copies of his book *A Taste of Whisky* available as a prize to members of the SMWS.

The coffee table book takes a comprehensive look at the whisky-making process and describes whisky and food pairings with contributions from famous chefs in Scotland, the Netherlands, Belgium and France.

To win a copy, simply tell us: *What country does Hans Offringa represent as an ambassador for the SMWS?*

To enter the draw, email your answer, with the subject line 'Offringa competition', to unfiltered@smws.com by 29 March.



ABOVE: Hans Offringa

4 AWARDS IBC AWARD TOPS OFF YEAR OF SUCCESS

THE SMWS wrapped up a wonderful year of recognition for its single cask, single malts by winning the title of Independent Bottler of the Year in *Whisky Magazine's* Independent Bottlers'

Challenge competition. The Society also won the awards for Independent Bottler of the Year for Campbeltown, Speyside and Grain whiskies.

"2017 was one of the busiest and most successful

in The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's history, and winning the overall title of Independent Bottler of the Year is fantastic recognition for members," said Kai Ivalo, spirits director at the SMWS.



SMWS spirits director Kai Ivalo collects one of our IBC awards



5

COMPETITION YOUR CHANCE TO WIN AN EXCLUSIVE COURSE IN THE ART OF BALLINDALLOCH

Terms and conditions apply
- see www.smws.com/blog/unfiltered/ballindalloch

THE Society is delighted to offer the prize for one lucky member and their guest to take part in Ballindalloch distillery's Art of Whisky Making course in Speyside on Thursday, 26 April.

The day-long course will involve a hands-on introduction to every part of the process, from milling to filling casks and working alongside the distillery team. The lucky winner and guest will also receive accommodation at the nearby Craigellachie Hotel for the nights of Wednesday 25 and Thursday 26 April.

To enter, send an email with your name and Society member

number and the subject line 'Ballindalloch competition' to unfiltered@smws.com by 29 March. The competition is open to members only and the guest of their choice.



The winners will have to make their own way to and from Speyside and the prize only includes the Art of Whisky Making course and accommodation in the Craigellachie Hotel. Participants should come with robust shoes but will be provided with overalls and a light lunch at the distillery.

Read more about our visit to Ballindalloch distillery starting on page 24.

8

OBITUARY DOUGLAS McKAY 1927-2018

WE were very sorry to hear about the passing of SMWS founding member, past chairman and non-executive director Douglas McKay, who passed away at his nursing home in Edinburgh on Monday 8 January, aged 90.

Long-term members will recall Douglas's entertaining tastings and his passion for both whisky and life.

He also kindly donated his entire collection of #1 bottlings to The Vaults, where the bottles remain on display.



ABOVE: Douglas McKay



6

GERMANY FRANKFURT WHISKY FESTIVAL FUN

GERMAN members of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society were out in force at the Frankfurt Intercity Whisky Festival from 1-3 December. Our stand had 17 whiskies to share with both existing and nearly 50 new German members.



Jan-Willem Damen and Francois Guillemet from the SMWS collect the award from the AA

7

QUEEN STREET DINING ROOM DEDICATION REWARDED

28 Queen Street has been named Restaurant of the Year Scotland by the AA, one of the highest accolades in the catering industry. The AA said the Dining Room "offers a dining experience steeped in French classicism". Jan-Willem Damen, UK operations director for the SMWS, said: "We are extremely proud. It is a recognition of 14 years of unwavering dedication by a kitchen team led throughout by executive chef James Freeman, to create stunning dishes with locally sourced Scottish ingredients."

9

GLOBAL
BRANCHING OUT
ACROSS ASIA

FANS of the finest single cask, single malts across Singapore, South East Asia and China now have access to bottlings from The Scotch Malt Whisky Society, following the official launch of our new branches and partner bars.

China opened in November, with a new member hub and

e-commerce store on WeChat, the country's biggest social media platform, and new partner bars at Huan Bar in Beijing and The PEAT Cocktail and Whisky Bar in Shenzhen. Already, 120 SMWS fans have started their flavour journey in seven tasting events held in four cities.

The Society's bottlings

are now also available for the first time in Singapore at new partner bars The Single Cask at Chijmes and The Wall Whisky and Sumiyaki Bar, as well as The Cohiba Atmosphere and The P&L Club at the Grand Hyatt Erawan in Bangkok, Thailand and Whisky Bar KL in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

"As we enter our 35th anniversary year, we are delighted to launch The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's new branches in China and Singapore, and share our love for the finest single cask, single malt whiskies," said Neil Aitken, international director at the SMWS.



The SMWS
China branch

Spirit of DISCOVERY

As we celebrate the Society's 35th anniversary, our passion for sharing new flavours and experiences is as strong as ever

Have you ever returned from a whisky-related journey, bowled over by your experience and trying to sum it up for those who haven't had the chance to visit yet?

Maybe it was the first time you set foot on Islay and realised why it's such a place of pilgrimage for whisky fans all over the world.

It could be Kentucky, winding your

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN

way along the bourbon trail (even better when done in a convertible car).

Or a trip to share the love for single cask whisky with kindred spirits in Scandinavia, Australia or Japan.

The list goes on, and we've tried to do justice to all of those experiences here in the pages of *Unfiltered* over the years.

In this issue, we bring you a new discovery – but an ancient spirit – with our trip to the Armagnac region in south-west France.

It's not whisky, but for anyone who appreciates variety, complexity and depth of flavour in their glass, we can't recommend it enough – and we hope the feature starting on page 16 is enough to whet your appetite both for armagnac and

the region that produces it. Talking about liquid history, in 2018 the Society celebrates the 35th anniversary of our birth here at The Vaults in Leith, with our branches in both Japan and the US also marking 25 years of bringing the world's best whiskies to members around the world.

Whether you're a recent convert to the single cask, or a long-standing Society supporter, we hope your year ahead is full of good times – and that you're able to find the right words to share your passion. ●

Remember, if you have any stories of your own to share, don't hesitate to email me at richard.goslan@smws.com and be sure to follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Unfilteredmagazine for regular updates and much more whisky knowledge.

Back to the FUTURE

Andrew Derbidge, director, cellarmaster and NSW manager, SMWS Australia, savours a nip of nostalgia

The whisky landscape – particularly in the last 10 to 15 years – must be one of the most dynamic and changing scenes of any drinks category. We have distilleries changing hands or being brought back to life; new distilleries being planned and established; endless new expressions and releases emerging almost every week; new territory being explored with different cask types, varieties of barley, and finishing regimes; and – in the last few years – wonderful malt whiskies being produced from non-traditional countries around the world.

It's a landscape and an industry that naturally encourages most whisky drinkers to always be looking forward. "What will the future hold and what will happen next?" is the eager query in our subconscious as we yearn for the next new release from our favourite distillery.

Unless you're one for nostalgia (and I confess I'm a sucker), it's not often we look back. Such is the excitement with what's happening or what's to come in the whisky world, we rarely reflect on where we've been.

Take a moment just now. Think about what your knowledge of whisky was like when you first stumbled across a single malt. Think about what brands and bottlings were available at your local retail liquor outlet back then. And now contemplate just how far things have come. Even if your introduction to whisky was just a year or two ago, I'm sure you realise the progress and evolution that has



occurred. For some of us, depending on how long you've been enjoying whisky for and how you came to be introduced to this wonderful spirit, the Society may have played a major role in your whisky journey and shaped how you approach whisky today.

The Society recently celebrated 15 years of activity in Australia, which also times nicely with the Society's 35th anniversary. It gave me an excuse to think back on what the whisky scene was like in Australia when the Society first started pouring out cask strength, single cask, single malt on these shores. And there's simply no comparison. The whisky scene in the early 2000s is unrecognisable from the vibrant and exploding industry we enjoy today.

The ironic twist in all of this is that – despite the tremendous change that has occurred in the international whisky scene in the last decade or two – the Society has remained unchanged and constant.

That might seem a strange statement on the surface. For, yes, the Society's ownership has changed hands a few times; the bottles and labels had a wonderful refresh in 2009 and again in 2017; there have been innovations (such as the introduction of the flavour profiles); and

the range of spirits has expanded and improved significantly. And there are other examples of some tinkering under the hood. But, at its heart and core, the Society is fundamentally doing exactly what it started doing in Scotland in 1983 and in Australia since 2002 – bottling rare, unique, and characterful whiskies from single casks at cask strength, and making them available to its members.

Cask strength, single cask whiskies were virtually unknown in Australia when the Society opened its doors here. Education played a key role in the early days. The Society's tasting events were not just opportunities to taste the new whiskies from the latest Outturn, they were also forums to teach and entertain. Such was the respect and acclaim that SMWS events gained in Australia, the Society became the national authority on most malty matters.

As the Society's membership numbers grew over time in Australia, so too did the whisky category as a whole. I wouldn't for a moment suggest the Society can take credit for this, but it's certainly been a journey and a joy for us to play a not-insignificant part of the changing whisky landscape in Australia.

And as for nostalgia? Well, if you really want to connect with something that ties back to the whisky industry from a decade or two ago, look no further than a Society bottling...the contents inside were distilled back then! ●

♥ *Andrew Derbidge is director, cellarmaster and NSW manager at The Scotch Malt Whisky Society Australia.*

35 Y/O TIME WELL SPENT

As The Scotch Malt Whisky Society enters its 35th anniversary, it's an appropriate time to celebrate our existence – and reflect on the pioneering spirit shown by the founders who banded together to form the organisation against all the odds. Back in 1983, after all, no one else could foresee the potential interest or demand for cask strength whisky drawn from a single cask. Those who were fortunate enough to sample it were immediately converted – and our Society of kindred spirits has grown ever since by sharing the love for whisky in its purest state.

As the Society's founder Phillip 'Pip' Hills has written: "The history of the whisky industry is littered with failed attempts to set up independent marketing organisations, some of which have caused inconvenience and loss to the distillers, so the latter were understandably reluctant to countenance outsiders with daft ideas.

"I spoke to a number of professionals, outlining the scheme, and was invariably told that it couldn't work, often on the grounds that if it could have been done, somebody would have done it before."

Thankfully, Pip and his Edinburgh-based pals chose to ignore the naysayers and set up a club that was open to all, committed to sourcing and bottling cask strength, single cask whisky in what he described as "a spirit of pure, if bibulous, altruism".

To secure casks from the distilleries at that time, the Society formed a "gentleman's agreement" not to compete with them in a retail environment and not to display the name of the distillery on the bottle, which could have compromised the trademark and reputation of their brands. Pip, a former tax consultant, devised the numbering system which is still in use.

As Anne Dana, an early managing director at the Society, explained about the environment in 1983: "There were no other whiskies in the shops that were sold at cask strength. The way the whisky industry

worked then, there were the proprietary brands of malts, and then all the rest were blends. Cask strength was not readily available. We were letting people see how good whisky is."

In 1983, a consortium made up of Pip, actor Russell Hunter, writer W Gordon Smith, architect Ben Tindall and building contractor David Allison purchased the then-dilapidated Vaults building in Leith, the Society's spiritual home and still the head office for the organisation. The first bottling, Cask 1.1, was offered to members in November that year, one of four single cask whiskies. As the Society grew, new Members' Rooms followed – in 1999 at 19 Greville Street in London and in 2004 a second Edinburgh venue at 28 Queen Street, with Kaleidoscope Whisky Bars subsequently opening at 28 Queen Street in Edinburgh in 2016 and at Devonshire Square in London last year. The Society now has around 26,000 members worldwide, with a presence in 19 countries, and 100 partner bars.

The year 2018 will be one of reflection and celebration as the Society enters something of a middle-age, no longer the upstart outsider within the industry but always willing to defy convention in the spirit of Pip's "bibulous altruism". This month, there is the first of our 35th anniversary special bottlings, with Cask No. 68.11: *Honey cake with elderflower icing* (see Outturners on page 29), and there will be more anniversary bottlings coming your way. Each one has been chosen to demonstrate the kind of intriguing, surprising casks you only find through the Society – whiskies that inspire the same desire to share with kindred spirits as those doing the rounds of Edinburgh in the early 1980s. We'll also be throwing special events and 35th anniversary parties to celebrate your involvement in the Society – and your role as the lifeblood running through the veins of everything we do.

So here's to a fantastic 35th anniversary year – and many more to come. ●

KINDRED
 1983 **35** 2018
 YEARS
 SPIRITS



 YouTube

To celebrate the Society's 35th anniversary, we've put together a short film reflecting on our growth. You can see it on our YouTube channel at SMWS Silverscreen

PHOTO PETER SANDGROUND

Diluting spirit before ageing in wood is standard practice, but why have whisky makers settled on a particular strength? Tom Bruce-Gardyne investigates

PRO%OFS

IN THE SPOTLIGHT



ABOVE

In theory, distillers are free to fill their casks at any strength in between 40% abv and 98.4% abv



PHOTO MIKE WILKINSON

IS the making of Scotch whisky an art or a science, or a mixture of both? This philosophical debate shifts as you travel through the production process. By the time you reach those long years in the warehouse, the science becomes a little hazy around the edges. The slow expansion and contraction of the casks as they breathe in air and exhale alcohol is still not fully understood. No-one can predict exactly how the spirit will evolve in any given cask, and when it comes to selecting which ones to marry into an actual bottling, well that takes real skill and craftsmanship.

But at that moment when pot still distillation meets maturation and the casks are filled, it is a sure-fire victory for science. The new-make spirit is diluted to 63.5% abv in almost every malt distillery in Scotland, and to 69.5% abv in its grain distilleries. Such precision suggests a legal requirement for Scotch whisky, what with being the world's most tightly regulated spirit.

In fact, there are only two rules about the strength of Scotch: that it mustn't be sold below 40% abv and cannot be distilled above 94.8% abv – a reference to grain whisky from a patent continuous still. In theory, distillers are free to fill their casks at any strength in between, though in practice you wouldn't want to go much below 50% abv. In a cold, damp Scottish warehouse there's a gentle loss of alcohol during maturation and you could risk slipping below strength and losing the right to call your spirit whisky. There

ABOVE

Transport of delight – any spirit above 70% abv that is taken on the road is classed as 'dangerous goods'

**PUT SIMPLY,
THE HIGHER
THE FILLING
STRENGTH
THE LESS
WOOD YOU
NEED FOR
MATURATION**

is also a sensible upper limit that grain distillers know well. "Any spirit above 70% abv is classed as 'dangerous goods', so you would need a different class of HGV driver to move it," says Michael Henry, master blender at the Loch Lomond Group.

SEARCHING FOR THE SWEET SPOT

That still leaves plenty of room for distillers, so to explore why this one strength has become the industry standard, I asked Matt Pauley, assistant professor at the International Centre for Brewing & Distilling at Heriot-Watt University.

"Without naming names, some of the larger drinks companies have spent many millions of pounds exploring the ideal sweet spot for the maturation of whisky, obviously chasing margins and looking for efficiencies wherever possible," he says, before adding: "Can you blame them, when even a tiny increase in strength will increase the amount of spirit they can store by a huge amount?"

Put simply, the higher the filling strength the less wood you need for maturation. Diageo ages some four million casks at its mighty Black Grange barrel park near Stirling. Were it to reduce its filling strength to say 60% abv, it would need to buy 220,400 casks to produce the same amount of whisky, if my maths is correct. Assuming we are talking of ex-bourbon barrels, whose price has quadrupled in the past decade, that would cost somewhere around £30 million, which is one very good reason why it's not going to happen. Of course, ☛



PHOTO BENJAMIN KRAIN

there is nothing to prevent Diageo ramping up the filling strength and saving a fortune in the process.

CHARACTER AND INFLUENCE

Clearly 63.5% abv is a compromise that, according to the Compass Box chairman Alan Rutherford, was arrived at by trial and error over the years. As he says: “It was eventually adopted by the big distillers to make trading casks easier.”

Given the volume of whisky swapped and traded between the blenders, it would be a real pain not to have an agreed abv. “And if your casks are at different strengths you’ll have different wood characters,” says Michael Henry, adding: “If you want a balance between distillery character and cask influence, 63.5% gives you that because, in terms of the flavour compounds, or congeners, extracted from the wood some of them like alcohol as a solvent while others prefer water.”

It is time to open that well-thumbed treatise *Chemical Mechanisms of Whiskey Maturation* by George H Reazin, published in 1981 while he was working for Seagram. Examining six-year-old whiskey filled at different strengths, he found that above 120 proof, or 60% abv, the congeners begin to taper off very slightly. He also noted that glucose, glycerol and other sugars are more easily extracted from the cask at a lower filling strength.

PROOF OF IDENTITY

Whether or not Phil Brandon has read his Reazin, he fills his bourbon barrels at 110 proof (55% abv) at his Rock Town distillery in Little Rock, Arkansas.

“The reason why we do that is that it just makes for a sweeter, more tasty product,” he tells me. “Sugar dissolves in water easier than it does in alcohol, so the wood sugars are better able to dissolve in a lower abv liquid.” The same “entry proof”, as they say in the US, was standard practice until the limit was raised to 125 proof (62.5% abv) in 1962, apparently to save on barrels and give consumers a lighter product. This is the strength most bourbon is filled at, though Rock Town is not the

ABOVE
Phil Brandon of
Rock Town distillery
in Arkansas

only exception. Michter’s in Louisville, Kentucky, fills at a watery 103 proof (51.5% abv). Even though it “yields fewer bottles per barrel”, declares its website, “we believe the richer flavour makes it worth it”.

Of course, American whiskey and Scotch are very different beasts. In the sweltering heat of Tennessee, the spirit maturing into Jack Daniel’s is trying to suck as much sugar from the heavily-charred, fresh oak barrels as possible before too much evaporates. The sweet hit of vanilla is what such whiskey is all about. Meanwhile the spirit shivering in some Speyside warehouse in a hand-me-down barrel that may have contained Jack Daniel’s leads a very different life. Scotch malt whisky matures at a much softer pace.

Compass Box fills its casks at 58% abv, partly because: “When it comes to bottling the mature whisky, you use less water to reduce to bottling strength, thus having a higher concentration of the oak-derived flavour,” explains founder John Glaser. Bruichladdich, by contrast, has gone the other way. “When the new regime arrived in 2001, there was a determination to do everything at natural strength,” says its head of communications, Carl Reavey. “I can remember speaking to Duncan [McGillvray – the then manager] and he just laughed and said: ‘Why would you mature water?’”

Carl insists the decision to fill undiluted straight from the still was a purely philosophical one, saying: “We just wanted ‘natural’ whisky in as many senses as it was possible to have.”

Obviously the decision would have pleased the company accountants, so maybe that had something to do with it as well. Both Brora and Port Ellen apparently filled their casks at full strength to save money before they closed in 1983, though some say that is one reason why their older malts taste so good.

As for the scientific evidence, Carl says: “We’re aware of science that talks about the different chemical reactions with wood at different strengths. In our view, what that demonstrates are differences and not necessarily qualitative ones. There’s no doubt you’ll get a different result if you fill at 63.5% abv, but does that make it better? No, it makes it different. It seems to be opinion, coupled with tradition.” ●

We’re sad to report that after contributing to this feature, Carl Reavey died unexpectedly on 10 January 2018. He was always a great friend to Unfiltered and will be much missed.



PHOTO BENJAMIN KRAIN



Dr Jim Swan, a giant of whisky, though a modest one

WORDS IAN BUXTON // PHOTOS MIKE WILKINSON

A TOAST TO

JIM

As your editor can confirm, I was reluctant to write this article. It seemed too great a responsibility to record the life's work of one of the most influential and highly-regarded people in the past 100 years of the world of whisky.

Dr Jim Swan died suddenly a year ago, in February 2017. To borrow a phrase of Isaac Newton, if we can see further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants. Giants such as Jim Swan come along rarely, and we should celebrate them. But, though I knew him and had worked all too briefly alongside him, I confess to feeling intimidated by the task.

Let me give you some idea why, by quoting just a few of the tributes I was able to gather from some illustrious whisky folk.

"Jim Swan was my mentor. He changed my life," said Charlie MacLean.



“It’s hard for me to put into words what Dr Swan meant to whisky and to me, because everything you try to say seems to fall short of him,” Kavalan’s Ian Chang told me.

“He introduced science into whisky,” according to former colleague Sheila Burtles, with whom he created the Scotch whisky flavour wheel.

And whisky blender Rachel Barrie put it like this: “His holistic, creative and artistic, yet detailed scientific approach has paved the way for many of us modern-day blenders.”

So, clearly, the man was a legend in his own lifetime. How do you do justice to that in 1,000 words? I’ll begin by summarising, very briefly, his remarkable career.

Beginning at the Royal Society of Chemistry, where eventually he was to hold the rank of Fellow, he undertook pioneering work in gas chromatography. In 1974, Jim moved to the Arthur D Little consultancy, which – long story – was the genesis of the Pentlands Scotch Whisky Research, Edinburgh (and thus forerunner of the Scotch Whisky Research Institute, which you can read more about on Pages 22 and 23) when the industry realised it was cheaper to establish its own R&D facility than pay external consultants.

He worked there for a decade. Over that time, he collaborated closely with more than 20 Scotch whisky distilleries producing pot still malt whisky and grain whisky, gin and vodka on a wide variety of column stills. It was a unique “apprenticeship” and introduction to the industry which is probably unrivalled.

During this period, working with Sheila Burtles, Paul Rickards and George Shortreed (the latter two both highly-regarded blenders), he developed the original flavour wheel. If he had done nothing else, he would be remembered for that alone.

In 1993, he became an owner-partner in R R Tatlock and Thomson, the well-known technical consultancy and, in 2002, branched out on his own to offer his services to spirit producers worldwide.

And he was in high demand. From Scotland to Taiwan; Israel to Latin America, he criss-crossed the globe troubleshooting; advising new distilleries and cooperages (he was, above all, an expert on every aspect of wood) and serving on leading competition judging panels. His clients – those that can be mentioned, because the work was often commercially sensitive – are a roll-call of the most distinguished companies across the spirits industry.

So what of his legacy?



He is probably best known to the public for his work at Kavalan in Taiwan, where master distiller Ian Chang is in no doubt of Jim’s lasting influence.

“We will all be forever grateful and in awe of him. He drove the creation of a second wave, a ‘new world’ in whisky. He pushed the frontiers of whisky production across the world. He opened up an industry that many people thought was untouchable and he innovated and adapted and created new philosophies.

“He has deepened and enriched the entire world’s knowledge, understanding and appreciation of whisky. I know, that in years to come, the newest skills and techniques being developed in the industry will without a doubt be down to him.”

For his own part, Jim was ever-restless and innovative. Back in September 2015, I asked him if Scotch whisky could learn anything from the “new world”. His answer was uncompromisingly direct.

“Principally,” he said, “it must realise that it has serious competition. Scotch is also over-regulated, stifling innovation. I have introduced innovations to several producers just within the last few months that are not allowed in Scotland, yet will not damage whisky’s reputation – an idea such as bringing back maturation in chestnut offers a widening of choice.”

Choice. He was ever for choice, telling me



Dr. Jim Swan: ever-restless and innovative

that the new world whiskies are “expanding the spectrum of whisky flavour and offering the consumer greater freedom of choice”.

There is much to ponder in those words. Sadly, Jim Swan did not publish particularly widely, perhaps because he seldom had the time or perhaps because over his long career much of his knowledge had become so intuitive that it was hard to convey on paper. Had he done so, I have no doubt that he would have been as long revered as the earlier distilling pioneer J A Nettleton (author of *The Manufacture of Whisky and Plain Spirit* in 1913, and arguably the single most important technical book on whisky ever published).

Perhaps the last word should go to the man himself because, entirely fortuitously,

“His holistic, creative and artistic, yet detailed scientific approach has paved the way for many modern-day blenders”

RACHEL BARRIE

I also asked him back then what he saw as his most important achievements. He went for two!

“First, the discovery of the chemical nature of chill haze. It led to the widespread introduction of chill filtration and an understanding of what was going on when cloudy whisky with jellyfish-like floaters were formed. Nowadays the aficionados may consider the process slightly detrimental to whisky flavour and I agree, but without it there would be virtually no 40% abv bottled whiskies on the market.

“Second, the early [work on] wood chemistry that unravelled how different parts of oak trees contribute to flavour.”

Jim Swan was unquestionably a giant of whisky, though a modest one. His legacy will live long and his memory be respected wherever great whisky is drunk. After all, he probably helped make it. ●

ON THE GRAPE



France's oldest eau-de-vie is the spirit of the ages. For 700 years, armagnac has been distilled and stored away for decades, as history rolled on. Today, ancient treasures are still being unearthed, as *Unfiltered* discovered...

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN
PHOTOS MICHEL CARROSIO



The region that produces armagnac is also home to historic towns

Queen Victoria's reign still has three years to go. Vincent van Gogh is slicing off part of his ear in the south of France. Jack the Ripper is terrorising the streets of London. And in Scotland, a new football team known as Celtic plays its first official match (a 5-2 win against Rangers, in case you were interested).

In a secluded corner of south-west France, a still is running, producing a clear eau-de-vie for maturation in oak for the next 50 years or so – maybe til around the time the Second World War begins – before being transferred into a glass dame-jeanne bottle. And here we are, at the tail end of 2017, sampling a drop of this precious liquid – armagnac with a vintage of 1888. Never has the expression liquid history felt more appropriate.

Setting foot in the region of Gascony already feels like stepping back in time, even before we start drinking 129-year-old armagnac. Modernisation seems to have spared it the worst of its excesses. Village squares could pass as film sets for a 19th century period drama, the rows of vineyards are unchanged for generations



and it wouldn't be any surprise to see a mobile, wood-fired still being wheeled along the road from one farm to another. Armagnac is utterly charming, as are the people who have been creating its under-appreciated eau-de-vie since the early 14th century.

We might be a whisky club first and foremost, but that doesn't preclude us from searching out the very best bottlings of other spirits for our curious members. *Unfiltered* is here in Armagnac with the Society's spirits director Kai Ivalo and spirits manager Euan Campbell to unearth some of the region's treasures – although we can't guarantee a bottling from 1888,

I'm afraid. Helping in the quest is Society member, armagnac educator and real-life musketeer* Edward Bates – who has been visiting the region for the past 11 years, and knows everyone and everything there is to know about the spirit. We're clearly in good hands.

THE ORIGINAL CRAFT SPIRIT

First things first: there is no town called Armagnac. The brandy we're here to explore takes its name from a historic county of the Duchy of Gascony, tucked away in a rural oasis south of Bordeaux, west of Toulouse and north of the Pyrenees. A decree from 1909 dictates three départements where armagnac can be produced: the Gers, the Landes and the Lot-et-Garonne. Within those three départements are the three terroirs that define armagnac: Bas-Armagnac, Armagnac-Ténarèze, and Haut Armagnac.

Each terroir has its own distinct soil and produces different styles of armagnac. Like cognac, armagnac has been recognised as an "Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée" (Controlled Appellation of Origin) since 1936, but there is evidence of distillation taking place at least 200 years before cognac was being produced – making it France's oldest eau-de-vie.

"You could say we've been craft distilling here for 700 years," says Claire de Montesquiou, the force of nature who runs Domaine d'Espérance in Bas-Armagnac, one of about 250 family-owned armagnac-producing houses across the whole region. When we visit her chateau, the harvest is under way and vinification of her treasured baco and folle blanche grape varieties will soon start. In this part of the world, however, there's always time for lunch and conversation.

"Variety is the key to armagnac," Claire tells us, explaining what grapes are used across the three terroirs that define the spirit. "I specialise in baco, for its balance and freshness, and folle blanche, which



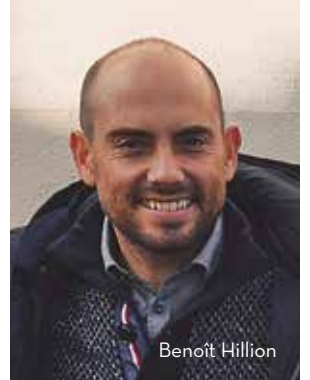
Claire de Montesquiou



Dame-jeannes of delights



Denis Lesgourges



Benoît Hillion



Aurélie Ville



Vincent Cornu



A mobile armagnac alambic at Domaine d'Espérance

➤ adds more floral, feminine notes. People say armagnac should taste ‘rustic’ – but not for me. And you can find ugni blanc anywhere – it’s too much like cognac.”

A TALE OF TWO SPIRITS

Ah yes, cognac, armagnac’s near neighbour both geographically and spiritually. But there are certain key differences. First and perhaps foremost is the scale: armagnac produces a comparatively minuscule amount of around five million bottles sold a year – compared with 175 million for cognac (or 1.2 billion for Scotch) – predominantly by single family-owned estates rather than larger houses or conglomerates. “The angels’ share alone in cognac is five times the annual sale of armagnac,” Stephane Volpato at Jean Cavé tells us.

Grape variety is also different. Where cognac is made up of more than 95 per cent ugni blanc, in armagnac that figure is only about 55 per cent. The baco variety, a hybrid developed in the late 19th century to be more resistant to disease, makes up a further 35 per cent, and is never used in cognac. Baco is noted for contributing roundness, smoothness and aromas of ripe fruits, and is also the only hybrid permitted for use in Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée wines.

Another important point of difference between cognac and armagnac is in the practice of aeration that takes place, according to Aurélie Ville at Château de Pellehaut. Many producers “work” their armagnac while it’s maturing by regularly emptying out their barrels into tanks, and then pumping the spirit either back into the original cask or into a different cask (often an older one that imparts fewer tannins). The spirit may also be diluted at this point. Benoît Hillion at Maison Dartigalongue tells us: “Armagnac is lively – we have to calm its aggressive character.”

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between armagnac and cognac is that 95 per cent of armagnac is only distilled once, using a specific form of still – the Armagnac alambic. This continuous still allows the wine to be pre-heated in a cylinder by the pipes containing hot alcoholic vapours from the still. The wine then flows over a series of plates in the main column, clashing with the alcohol vapours produced by the heated wine in the lower half of the still.

Distillers control the strength depending on the number of plates, their position and the flow rate of the wine. Armagnac can legally be distilled from 52% abv to 72.4% abv according to AOC production conditions, but traditionally the strength is around 52-60% abv.

While many producers have their own alambic, up to 30 per cent of distillation is still carried out by travelling versions that ➤



The team from the SMWS like what they see...and taste



A shelf of samples at L'Encantada



Cask warehouse at Château de Laubade



Stephane Volpato draws a sample

ARMAGNAC ADVENTURE

➊ make their way from farm to farm, using LPG or even sometimes wood as fuel for distillation.

Another point of difference with cognac – age statements on bottles are much more common. The concept of vintage year bottlings is far more developed with armagnac, with many producers making bottlings available with a statement of the year in which it was born. Vintages must have a minimum of 10 years of maturation, but – as we discovered with our sample from 1888 – there are a lot of ancient vintages lurking in these dusty rural warehouses.

“Here we have our paradise!” announces Catherine Bouteloup at Armagnac J Goudoulin, as we enter a cellar crammed with 30-litre dame-jeannes, filled with stock dating back to 1914. Elsewhere in the warehouse is a huge steel tank – containing 8,000 litres of 1934 vintage armagnac.

Over at L’Encantada, Vincent Cornu explains how his passion for armagnac became a business, joining forces with five friends as an independent bottler to seek out the very best single casks they could

discover from across the region. “There is a huge amount of variation in the casks we sample from, but our role is to unearth the treasures that are out there,” he says. “For some small farmers, creating armagnac is a little like keeping cash under the mattress – they save their barrels from generation to generation. We’ve even discovered casks from farms that only ever did three distillations and have been maturing that stock ever since. There’s as much variation in armagnac as there is in life.”

A COMPELLING DISCOVERY

For the whisky drinker, that makes armagnac an intriguing and compelling discovery. As with whisky, aromas are extremely varied and the rusticity and small-scale production of armagnac means characteristics vary dramatically from distiller to distiller, even within the same region. The spirit can range from big, bold and robust, with complex, full-grape flavours, to light and floral, or deeply spicy, with heavy dark fruit and leather or chocolate. Like the world of whisky – you have to taste a lot of different

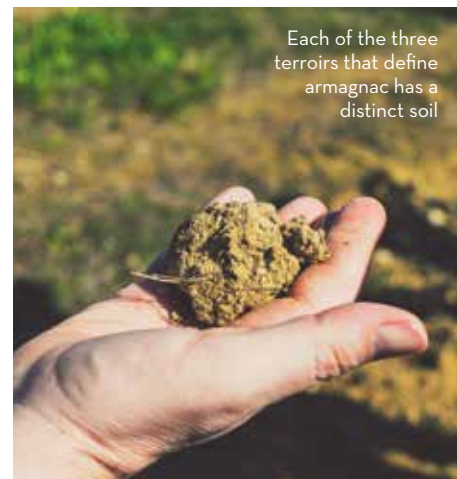
armagnacs to find what kind of profile you like best. Even better, visit the region and the distillers yourself. You’re guaranteed not only wonderful armagnac – but outstanding regional Gascon food to accompany it.

Understandably, Denis Lesgourges at Château de Laubade is an eloquent promoter of the joys of armagnac – but even his vocabulary fails him when he tries to describe the pleasures in store for the uninitiated.

“A whisky drinker of today is an armagnac drinker of tomorrow,” he says. “We just need to put it on the map. A lot of people don’t know armagnac, but once they taste it, the value of what they taste is...oof!”

It doesn’t have to be an 1888 vintage to experience that “oof”. But it certainly helps. ●

**The Company of Musketeers of Armagnac is the club that promotes armagnac around the world. The name comes from Gascony’s connection with the character of D’Artagnan in Alexandre Dumas’ novel The Three Musketeers. D’Artagnan was based on a real character who was born in the Gers region.*



3

THREE terroirs that define armagnac: Bas-Armagnac (57% of production), Armagnac-Ténarèze (40%) and Haut Armagnac (3%)



4

FOUR main grape varieties, ugni blanc (55%) baco (35%) folle blanche (5%) and colombar (5%)

5

FIVE MILLION bottles sold in a year, compared with 175 million for cognac

ARMAGNAC UNPACKED



30%

30% distillation carried out using mobile stills

40%

40% 40-48% abv: usual bottling strength, with 40% the legal minimum

THE BOTTLING CODE

Armagnac has its own classifications, depending on the age of the youngest eau-de-vie in the blend.
 VS or ***: Minimum one year ageing in wood
 VSOP: Minimum four years
 Napoleon, XO: Minimum six years
 Hors d'Age: Minimum 10 years
 Vintages: Minimum 10 years but the year on the label corresponds to the single year of the harvest. A vintage cannot be blended with armagnacs made from grapes of any other year.

HOW IT'S MATURED

Armagnac is aged in 400-litre oak barrels, stored in cellars similar to Scottish dunnage warehouses. It typically goes into new barrels for between six months to two years of its life, before being transferred to older barrels so that the extract of wood and tannin compounds doesn't dominate the flavour. Most producers use French oak from the Limousin



or Tronçais forests. The oak can offer wide grain for bigger flavours and tannins or narrow grain, for more restrained flavours and tannins, each of which imparts a unique character to the final spirit. Some producers use local casks of black oak from Gascony, which has even wider grain, tends to be more tannic and imparts much more colour, with a more intense and dark fruity character. Black oak is becoming less common as the supply has diminished.

HOW TO DRINK IT

Like whisky, or cognac, it depends on its age. A VS or *** or a VSOP works well with a cocktail, for cooking or for food matching. Younger armagnac is often drunk long, with ice and tonic, as an aperitif. Older armagnacs are for sipping, and are ideal as a digestif. Unlike whisky, no one adds water or ice to their armagnac - its lower strength means it's unnecessary, does nothing to improve it, and can create flaws in the spirit.

WELCOME TO THE INSTITUTE

*In our quest for perfection and the advancement of knowledge,
The Scotch Malt Whisky Society has signed up as a member of
the industry's leading research and technology organisation*

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN // PHOTOS MIKE WILKINSON

Andrew Forrester,
senior scientist
and technology
transfer manager at
The Scotch Whisky
Research Institute

First there's a near-infrared analyser, to look at grain quality. Next, a friabilimeter, to monitor how well grain has been modified during malting. In the following room we encounter a density meter, to measure both apparent and actual alcohol strength. Then there's the gas chromatography-olfactometry (GC-O) instrument. To scientific simpletons like me it's like a big electronic nose, but is in fact a tool used to make the link between chemical composition of whisky and its flavour.

A tour of the laboratories at The Scotch Whisky Research Institute (SWRI) is a fascinating insight into the research that goes into every aspect of Scotch whisky production, from raw materials and processing through to maturation, flavour analysis and product protection.

Unfiltered is here because, as of January this year, the SMWS has become a member of SWRI, taking its place alongside the producers – representing around 90 per cent of the whisky industry in Scotland – who now form the industry-funded research and technology organisation.

SWRI developed from what was previously the Pentlands Scotch Whisky Research body, founded in 1974 by a group of distillers who wanted to collaborate to tackle common problems and challenges within their industry. Among its early pioneering chemists was Dr Jim Swan, whose legacy you can read about in Ian Buxton's article on pages 13 to 15.

In 1997, SWRI relocated to purpose-built facilities – with a Charles Doig-inspired pagoda roof – at the Robertson Trust Building in the Heriot-Watt Research Park on the outskirts of Edinburgh.

Unfiltered's tour guide today is Andrew Forrester, SWRI's technology transfer manager, who has a good stab at explaining to me what a flow cytometer does. There's a calm rationality and focus to every activity we encounter, as materials are tested and analysed, and data is gathered and processed.

"You don't come here for romance," says Andrew. But in its own white-jacketed way, there is a romance about what's happening here – because whisky, more than other drinks, both deserves and sustains this level of scientific scrutiny.

"I think the romance of Scotch whisky is that when you get into the level of detailed examination of flavour as we do, you find that its flavour complexity is astounding," says SWRI director of research James Brosnan. "The more we find out about Scotch, the more interesting the story becomes.

"Even in areas that we think are quite well understood, for example with our recent research on the origins of flavours associated with peated whiskies, we've been able to show that actually the



SMWS spirits manager Euan Campbell in the sensory laboratory with SWRI senior scientist Frances Jack

contribution of the different compounds isn't as straightforward as we thought. Some of the recognisably peated aromas might have their origins in the peat, but they're not the phenolic compounds that we talk about. That's new knowledge. One of the reasons I've worked in whisky science for 26 years is because there's always something fresh to find out."

Flavour and sensory science is only one area where the SMWS will be working with SWRI scientists. As the Society has developed over the past 35 years, it has taken more control over sourcing and buying its own casks, purchasing new make spirit, managing the maturation of its stocks and evolving its programme of additional maturation.

"We're on a continuous quest to pursue a diversity of flavours and bottle the highest quality possible for our members – and have a bit of fun along the way," says Kai Ivalo, the Society's spirits director.

"By working with SWRI, we'll be able to build on the skills we've developed over the past 35 years. That means going beyond being maturation experts to exploring the world of new make spirit, working on cask selection, experimenting with flavour

diversity, and further developing our knowledge of sensory evaluation.

"Joining SWRI is an investment in quality, in the ability to take more control and in having more involvement in every stage of the process. It's about being able to better nurture our stock and offer more choice for members."

One of the most important aspects of SWRI's research is around sustainability – across the entire supply chain but also in flavour, specifically in ensuring that the industry can maintain its diversity.

"If you look at the processes across the industry, they're all fairly similar, using the same cereals, using the same yeast, using similar distillation systems and parameters," says Frances Jack, senior scientist in flavour and sensory science. "But we still haven't been able to measure every flavour compound. We need to understand where these flavours are coming from, so that we can maintain them. That's especially relevant to the SMWS and your focus on individuality and flavour diversity."

John Conner, senior scientist in maturation and analytical chemistry, says that the more knowledge the Society has access to, the more likely it is to end up with the required variety and quality of whisky for its members.

"Our maturation research project helps members choose the right casks for their products," he says. "That includes analysis of the effects of heat treatment on different species of oak. Understanding more about what's happening during maturation allows you to better plan what the final product is going to be."

Access to day-to-day technical support and a range of analytical services from SWRI are obvious benefits that should help the Society to offer members even more choice and quality. But it also brings it into a "research club", working for the long-term prosperity of the industry as a whole.

"Being a member of SWRI means playing a part in the ongoing success of Scotch whisky, and we're delighted to welcome the SMWS," says James Brosnan. ●

BELOW: research scientist Kenneth Macgregor



SPEYSIDE

Two distilleries – one new, innovative and polished, the other steeped in no-frills tradition – share a devotion and commitment to the human touch

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN // PHOTOS PETER SANDGROUND

TAKE A tour of many distilleries nowadays and you can be left with an impression that the most important person in the building might not be the maltman, mashman, master distiller or warehouse manager, but the IT expert. Increasingly, operations are controlled from the comfort of a bank of computer screens where every aspect of production is overseen via a specially designed software program and the occasional click of a mouse. The goal, apart from cutting down on workforce, is to make sure there is consistency in every aspect of operations and precision throughout the process by allowing the increasingly high-tech equipment get on with the job. No human error, a reduction in waste – but maybe less magic along with it?

That's certainly not the case with the two distilleries we're here to visit on Speyside, which represent different eras of whisky making but both of which put the emphasis on traditional hands-on production. In every other respect, Ballindalloch and Glentauchers distilleries are like chalk and cheese, but both are proud exponents of old-school hands-on distilling.

Ballindalloch might have an old-school ethos, but it's also one of the newest kids on the block, opened on 22 September 2014 and yet to release any whisky. Our genial guide is Brian Robinson, a whisky veteran who came on board from working with William Grant & Sons to oversee the non-production side of operations, while Charlie Smith, previously with Diageo, acted as consultant to shape the new venture.

The distillery is part of the Speyside



Ballindalloch – a new venture with a 'one estate' approach


estate where Ballindalloch Castle has been home to the Macpherson-Grant family since the mid-16th century. The building we're touring was a rundown farm steading dating back to the 1820s.

"This was a protected structure, so everything we designed and our ultimate production capacity was dictated by its size," says Brian. "Whatever we did, we had to retain the integrity of the original structure while giving it a new lease of life. But we made a conscious decision to make it as manually operated as possible – it's a new distillery but we wanted to encapsulate a 19th century attitude in a modern operation."

It certainly feels historic. The Macpherson-Grant family turned to local tradespeople to renovate the ancient steading, from repairing crumbling stonework to replacing its slates, and commissioned nearby Forsyths for a

turnkey operation for every stage from grain intake and storage through to distillation and cask filling. Capacity is about 100,000 litres a year, filling 16 barrels a week.

"It takes us a year to make what Glenfiddich can produce in three days," says Brian. "We could increase production, but we want to learn to walk before we can run, and our priority is on making outstanding whisky."

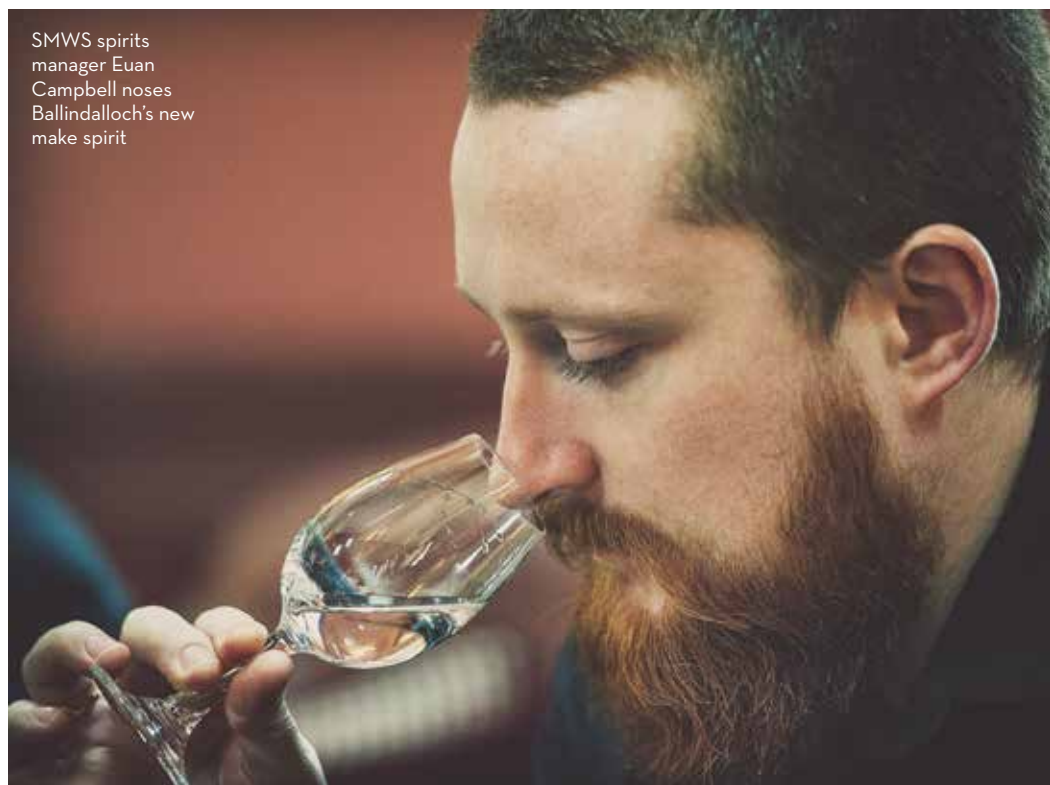
To produce what the distillery expects to be outstanding whisky, the emphasis is not only on a manual production process but on a "single estate" ethos. The distillery's barley is harvested from the estate's fields, where it can take the pick of what it wants to be malted. Draff goes towards feeding the estate's herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle, the world's oldest surviving bloodline of the breed descended from the herd started by Sir George Macpherson-Grant in 1860. 



Brian Robison leads the tour at Ballindalloch



SMWS spirits manager Euan Campbell noses Ballindalloch's new make spirit



DISTILLERY VISIT

“We are able to control everything on the estate, and our production process is hands-on from start to finish,” says Brian. “We mash one tonne a day, five days a week, we have slow fermentation times of between 90 and 138 hours to get a very clear wort, and we distill slowly too for lots of copper contact.”

Following our tour, we end up in the tasting room, where you can really see the estate’s influence. Stepping through from the stillroom, it feels as though you’ve entered a wing of the Macpherson-Grant family’s own castle, complete with a private glass collection, family portraits and shooting trophies mounted on the walls. It’s an imposing yet welcoming space – and the perfect environment to sample some Ballindalloch new-make spirit – which is very encouraging. Like everything else about the distillery, the room has been carefully considered to create exactly the right impression on the visitor.

“We wanted to make you feel like someone has lifted the velvet rope for you, and transcend the standard visitor centre experience,” says Brian. But don’t expect to find any Ballindalloch bottlings for sale here any time soon – there’s no plan to release a bottling until the whisky is at least eight years old. “We’re not trying to be the next big thing, our focus is on being the next great thing. And you can’t make great buildings without great foundations.”

A short while later, we’re in another distillery and a very different tasting room. There are no airs or graces about Glentauchers on the outskirts of Keith, no distillery tours and no concession to prettifying the whisky-producing experience. The tasting room looks unchanged since the 1970s, decorated in various shades of brown and reminiscent of a dentist’s waiting room



Glentauchers makes no concession to prettifying the whisky production experience

from your childhood. But as with much else in this world, you shouldn’t judge a whisky by its tasting room.

Glentauchers has been around since the tail end of the 19th century and is now one of the stable of distilleries throughout Speyside operated by Chivas Brothers, the whisky subsidiary of Pernod Ricard. Like the wider industry, the distillery has seen its share of ups and downs over the years. It was mothballed from 1985 until 1989 when it was acquired by Allied Distillers and production restarted, before changing hands again in 2005.

The distillery has always been primarily a producer for blends, from Buchanan’s and Black & White in the past to Ballantine’s in the present. But its manual set-up also plays a key role in training new generations of distillers for Chivas, who are able to study the entire hands-on process before moving on to more modern distilleries which may rely on higher levels of automation.

Our guide is Mark Cruickshank, who as well as Glentauchers oversees Chivas operations at Strathisla, Glen Keith and Longmorn. He comes from an illustrious

whisky-producing background, with his father Douglas a former production manager with Chivas who started working at Imperial distillery at the age of 15 and who oversaw the building of the company’s most recent gleaming space-age distillery at Dalmunach.

“In theory only one guy could run every part of operations at Dalmunach, it’s so heavily automated,” says Mark. “But we saw the potential at Glentauchers to keep everything manual and train our staff in here for between six and 10 weeks before they move on to other sites.”

It’s not only apprentice distillers who pass through the Glentauchers training programme – company executives from Pernod Ricard have also spent time in the mash house and still room getting their hands dirty and gaining an intimate understanding of how the distillery functions.

“We have five operators here who have 150 years’ experience between them, and they pass on all that knowledge of old-fashioned distilling,” says Mark. “When you do things manually you develop an appreciation of the magic involved in the process. Despite the move to automation, we want to make sure we never lose the heart of whisky making.”

Glentauchers now operates with two wash and three spirit stills, producing about 4.2 million litres of whisky a year. Long fermentation times of up to 106 hours and slow distillation of 8.5 hours contribute to a delicate, fruity distillate which is now being bottled as a single malt underneath the Ballantine’s brand name, in a 15-year-old expression along with sister distilleries Glenburgie and Miltonduff.

That’s what we find ourselves sampling in the unassuming tasting room behind the distillery, stepping back in time in more ways than one. Forget the surroundings though, this is a welcome journey into our whisky-producing heritage – one where the human touch is still very much in evidence. ●



Glentauchers ferments its wort for up to 106 hours



George 'Geordie' McDonald has been working at Glentauchers distillery since 1989

COME DISTILLING

Here's the bad news - for budding distillers, the training programme at Glentauchers is for internal staff or by special invitation only - and there's no visitors' centre. However, Ballindalloch not only offers visits by appointment but also provides consumers with the opportunity to expand their whisky-making knowledge with a full day learning about traditional distilling. Its Art of Whisky Making experience covers everything from milling to warehousing and all aspects in between, working one to one with the distillery's staff. The day lasts from 8am-4pm with a break for lunch.



The two wash and three spirit stills at Glentauchers



OUR PARTNER BAR NETWORK

The Quaich Bar at the Craigellachie Hotel is one of almost 100 of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's partner bars around the world, where you can receive a discount on drams by producing your member card. We're adding new partner bars all the time - for a complete list, visit smws.com and search 'partner bars'.

At the epicentre

Society bottlings have become a talking point at the Quaich partner bar in the heart of whisky country

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN // PHOTO PETER SANDGROUND

AFTER A hard day visiting – or for that matter working – in a Speyside distillery, what else would you rather do than retire to the fireside and enjoy some of the region's liquid produce? If so, there's nowhere better than The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's partner bar the Quaich, which you'll find on the first floor of the Craigellachie Hotel.

The hotel, and the bar, date back to 1893, but underwent an extensive modernisation and makeover under new ownership in 2014, reopening at the end of that year. During winter you can cosy up by the open fire, while summer visitors may have the opportunity to sit out on a replica of the original balcony from the hotel's foundation, overlooking the River Spey and

its iconic Craigellachie Bridge.

As well as an ever-changing shelf of Society bottlings, the Quaich stocks about 800 whiskies, all on display across one of the most impressive back bars you're likely to encounter anywhere.

When the *Unfiltered* team stops by, head bartender Angus Bryce-McVay is stoking the fire, mixing whisky sours for a group of visitors from the US and somehow finding time in between to chat about what makes the bar special.

"You'd think it might be relatively quiet and secluded working in a rural place like Speyside, but actually it's the epicentre for the Scotch industry, and there's always something interesting going on, whatever season it is," he says.

SMWS ambassador to the Netherlands Hans Offringa is such a regular visitor that he has bottle number one in the "Friends of the Quaich" corner of the bar.

"The Society bottlings have been a very welcome addition and have become quite a talking point," says Angus. "Even for visitors who already know a lot about whisky, it can be a bit of a curveball, serving them something from one of the green bottles without a distillery name on it. I like to think of it as whisky in its purest form."

We'll drink to that... ●

The Quaich Bar is in the Craigellachie Hotel, Speyside AB38 9SR. Tel: 01340 881 1204 or go to www.craigellachiehotel.co.uk

A spoonful of sugar

The Society's spirits director **Kai Ivalo** and spirits manager **Euan Campbell** enjoy a seasonal glow as some exceptional sherried whiskies hit the sweet spot

PHOTO MIKE WILKINSON

Kai: Looks like lovers of sherried whisky are in for a treat Euan – we've got some cracking bottlings with that influence which fall into our Deep, Rich & Dried Fruits flavour profile – perfect drams to get you through the last of the winter.

Euan: Or to fill up your trusty hip flask if you're heading outdoors or going to watch the rugby.

Kai: I'd be filling mine with **Cask No. 35.203: Feria de Jerez**. It's 21 years old and matured for its full term in a refill oloroso butt – but it's still coming in at a hefty strength of 60.1% abv. For anyone who's a fan of our Deep, Rich & Dried Fruits flavour profile, this is a cracking example of an old-school sherried whisky – and dare I say it, great value for the price.

Euan: We also have **Cask No. 30.100: An abundance of fruitcake**, which is 20 years old and matured in a second-fill sherry butt for its entire duration, and **Cask No. 112.2: Sweet, sassy and playful**, which is 10 years old and matured in a second-fill madeira hogshead. One more that stood

out for me is **Cask No. 44.88: Complex and fascinating**. It's an intriguing mix of a heavier spirit from a distillery that uses wormtub condensers, aged for 13 years in an ex-bourbon hogshead and then given an additional period of maturation in a first-fill PX hogshead for its final two years. It's been appropriately named as **Complex and fascinating**.

Kai: A couple of other interesting bottlings are **Cask No. 89.8: Lemon and Italian meringue cheesecake**, the first time we've had a release from this Speyside distillery since 2003. Another is **Cask No. 107.11: Electrifies the tongue**, from a distillery that we don't see a lot of bottlings from and which has been in the news recently. I'd call it both a typical, and topical, Speyside. And for grain whisky fans, we have a fantastic 38-year-old bottling in **Cask No. G4.15: Syrupy, sun-kissed sweetness**, which at this age has become quite dark and tropical.

Euan: We also have the first of our 35th anniversary special bottlings being released this month, with **Cask No. 68.11:**

Honey cake with elderflower icing. It's an eight-year-old from the Highland region that fits into our Spicy & Sweet flavour profile. Because it comes from a recharred hogshead, conventional wisdom might tell you it's going to be quite light with a little bit of the charred influence, but in fact this is really dark and quite bourbon-like. The Tasting Panel gave it a Spicy & Dry flavour profile but it also has elements of Deep, Rich & Dried Fruits, and it's the kind of cask you only stumble across at the Society, something quite different.

Kai: Finally – this month is all about the Six Nations rugby championship, so we've released an appropriate bottling with **Cask No. 108.10: Spoon-licking good!**. The wooden spoon traditionally goes to the team that finishes bottom of the league between Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales, France and Italy. The Tasting Panel says that this dram is “like licking honey off a wooden spoon”, and here in Scotland we hope that's as close as we get to collecting the award nobody wants. ●



Euan, pictured left, and Kai sample some perfect drams to get you through the last of the winter

BUY THESE BOTTLES

If you are resident in the UK or EU, visit www.smws.com or call 0131 555 2929. Our lines are open from 9am-4.45pm, Monday to Friday. If you are outwith the UK or EU, check your local Society website for availability.

CRACK IT OPEN



OR
COLLECT?

The moment a whisky is sealed in its bottle, passions start to rise over its future. Angus MacRaild takes stock of the great debate over what its fate should be

For some, corks and capsules are wicked things, to be torn free at the earliest opportunity. The placing of bottles in dark cupboards and high shelves is akin to banishment or enforced ornamentation upon a liquid that only becomes real in the moments of its own death.

Then there are the hoarders and accumulators, lovers of whisky who appreciate the anticipation only slightly less than its consumption. They caress and gaze upon their wealth of bottles and see a liquid history – a shelf full of time capsules awaiting their own moments of discovery.

These two factions debated each other for years until the whisky investor recently arrived; a new and – to some – sacrilegious figure, tainting the discussion with unholy talk of “portfolios” and “speculation”.

The net effect of the rather swift ending of whisky’s age of innocence has been a shake-up of the notion of collecting versus drinking. Most enthusiasts have been forced to concede that such a thing as a whisky “collector” in the truest definition of the term is a rarity. People buy whisky to enjoy it, and that enjoyment is demonstrated through a desire to possess what is often a limited and delicious product.

A SENSE OF OCCASION

Whisky enthusiast Chris Miles says: “If you’ve waited 20 years for a spirit to be ready for bottling, then why the rush? The right time to open a bottle is as important as the right time to bottle it from the cask. I have shares in casks from the years of my kids’ births, and also some whiskies bottled in the same years. I look forward to sitting with them and discussing the respective drams and whisky industry from that time.”

It’s an illustration of the subtleties of most people’s approaches to whisky. A sense of occasion and memory creation surrounds the opening of many bottles. Reasons also become muddled by the natural complexities of life.

“For me there are three reasons for purchase: investment, casual drinking and special occasions,” says independent bottler David Stirk. “I’ll bet a fair few of my third

reason are bought from those who choose the first reason.”

People’s priorities differ when it comes to whisky and, via the anonymous sluice gate of auctions, bottles change hands and end up on different trajectories. Similarly, our own reasons for buying a bottle won’t always stay the same. A bottle purchased as a financial investment might become an investment in future drinking pleasure.

Whether you believe the last decade has seen whisky culture grow up or become steeped in cynicism, what is certain is that the way we think about whisky – what it is, what it should be, what we want from it – has become increasingly complex. Most people, ultimately, seem to fall into line with the notion that whisky is a drink – but not *just* a drink. There also seems to be an increasing acceptance of the idea that to keep is not necessarily to squander.

PASSION AND HISTORY

But what of the true collectors – the ones who accumulate thousands of bottles over a lifetime? It can be a source of deep frustration to visit and view these remarkable collections, to see so many bottles you’d do dark things just to taste. To walk among such bottles knowing they will likely eventually be sold. Probably for millions to someone with pockets you could swim in, before, ultimately, dying in their glass, far from home and forever unknown.

It’s understandable to an extent. A collection of anything is born of passion and love. For whisky collectors, it is often an amalgamation of the artistry of the labels, the changing nature of the liquid over the decades and the sheer, overwhelming history of it all. Bottles look like beautiful and enigmatic secrets. Some you might open, but many you’ll never know. The true collector is okay with this, but many of us struggle to understand let alone tolerate it.

I asked Sukhinder Singh, director of The Whisky Exchange and possessor of one of the world’s most comprehensive whisky collections, how he responds to the charge that bottles inevitably deteriorate. “You could argue that some gems are pieces of history and need to be looked after for the next generation,” he says. “If I turn the

“You could argue that some gems are pieces of history and need to be looked after for the next generation”

SUKHINDER SINGH

bottles to wet the cork a few times a year, they will be okay for another 100 years.”

Part of this drive is a desire on behalf of the collector to preserve, to accrue a selection of whiskies that represents decades of an industry, its people and the changes witnessed. Understandably, when faced with the prospect of opening what seems like an irreplaceable bottle, it can feel like the wrong kind of destruction.

It is undeniable that these bottles are liquid history. Many of the greatest examples represent some of the finest distillates made by humanity. They are precious. Whisky lovers the world over, myself included, have benefited immensely from the willingness of previous generations of whisky lovers to hoard, cherish and – ultimately – die without knowing what many bottles tasted like.

The reality remains, however, that no bottle can be kept forever. Eventually



Angus MacRaild

they evaporate, oxidise and fall apart. Is it right that one of the few remaining bottles of Stromness single malt be allowed to die such a meaningless death? What would the people who made it want you to do? What is there in the end but the cork, the glass, the like-minded friends bristling with anticipation and, ultimately and most pleurably, the memory of its consumption.

Keeping whisky is a skill, a pleasure and, in some cases, arguably a duty. Ultimately though, out of respect for the liquid and the people who made it, it should be consumed rather than face the ravages of air and time. Imagine our descendants, a century from now, opening one of the last known bottles of Lagavulin 16 from the early 21st century. They’ll laugh at how we once enjoyed such bottles in abundance, look at the dwindling fill level and agree the time has come to open it. Or would you rather they kept their window on the past forever closed? ●

How to lose a whisky collection

Sharing it with friends is the best way to go, says Stephen Mathis

Nothing undermines sentimentality for one's possessions like preparing for an international move. But for many who know me, my sentimentality toward my whisky collection turned out to be weaker than expected. Some of that was necessity, some of it was what I came to see as a unique opportunity.

My family moved to Norway from the United States so that my wife could take a great job and so that I could take some time to stay at home with our one year-old daughter. That meant that I would have no income and that our new home would be a nation known for its onerous taxes on alcohol. That's where the necessity came in. I needed the money I could raise from selling off as much of my collection as possible; and I would not risk bringing in more than the legal limit (one litre of whisky per person) and having to pay customs and duties that might outstrip the value of the bottles themselves.

Now, I should say up front that I am not a real whisky collector. I know real collectors, and I am decidedly not one of them, not least because I firmly believe whisky should be drunk, not hoarded. Also, as a whisky blogger, I get sent enough samples for review that there are few bottles I need to buy just to try them. Still, I am a whisky blogger, and some whiskies call to me, and others I simply must have in my collection.

At the height of my accumulating, I had maybe 100 bottles, along with countless sample bottles. But last year when my daughter was born, I cut back on buying whisky, both to save money and in an effort to reduce my overall alcohol consumption. In January, when we decided to move to Norway, I stopped buying whisky almost altogether, and focused on drinking what I had left — and as often as possible with



friends. Along the way, I set out to sell my unopened bottles, primarily to whisky friends. For the most part, I sold bottles to friends at or near my cost, which was a great deal for them, since most of those bottles were no longer available. This helped me recoup my investment in those bottles, but it also gave me an opportunity to share great whiskies with people I care about and who care about whisky.

I also gave away a number of bottles, both to charity whisky events and to friends who would especially appreciate them. This process was even more rewarding than selling bottles to friends. My barber of 16 years, who is new to whisky and who came to the US from Italy when he was a boy, received a limited edition Glen Grant, because he enjoys the lighter flavour profiles and because Glen Grant is the best-selling whisky in Italy. My long-time building contractor, whose family almost all lives in Seattle, received an independent bottling from Westland Distillery. And my co-conspirators at our blog received the kind of treasure trove of whiskies, opened and unopened, you would want to give to two of your best friends, especially ones who had helped you build and maintain a great whisky website for over eight years.

When it was time to move, my wife and

I brought two bottles with us: a Gordon & MacPhail 42-year-old Strathisla matured exclusively in sherry casks, and SMWS Cask No. 792: *Silk Sarong Seduction*. The first I held onto because it was bottled in 1969, which is my birth year. I plan to open it on my 50th birthday. The second I held onto because my co-conspirators and I at The Malt Impostor selected it when we sat on the Society's Tasting Panel one glorious afternoon in 2013. I have no definite plans for that 27-year-old beauty, but I could imagine opening it when my partners in crime come to visit me in Norway.

But after all of that, I can honestly say that I do not remember that well what I sold and what I gave away. I have no regrets about being without any of them.

In fact, getting rid of my whisky collection turned out to be a source of deep joy. Whisky is not only meant to be drunk, it is meant to be shared. And having shared nearly my entire collection in a relatively short time, that truth is all the more vibrant to me.

Needless to say, I am now starting a new collection here in Norway, though I intend to go about doing so thoughtfully and slowly. And I will continue sharing my collection, even as I build it. ●

Stephen Mathis is editor and contributor at The Malt Impostor, maltimpostor.com

A REEL TASTE OF SCOTLAND

WORDS RICHARD GOSLAN // PHOTOS SAUL YOUNG

What do you do when you have a vision for the ideal pub in your mind – but it doesn't exist in your home town? If you are Jenny and Randy Boyd in Knoxville, Tennessee in the United States, there's only one answer – you set about creating it yourselves.

The couple had travelled to Scotland and fallen under the spell of the country, its pubs and its traditional music scene. But back home in Knoxville, there was no equivalent venue.

"I used to dance in a ballet company, and when I became too old for that hobby, playing music took its place," says Jenny. "I started playing violin, and ended up getting into traditional Appalachian and Scottish music."

Jenny and husband Randy travelled to Scotland and loved the local pubs and their music sessions.

"After that trip, I came back complaining that we had no place in Knoxville for adult musicians to meet and share our tunes," says Jenny. "East Tennessee is rich in its Scottish and Irish musical history, as most of our ancestors came from these countries. So, Randy bought the building for me here six years ago, and we found it to be the perfect pub setting."

The extensive refurbishment of an empty bar saw the launch of Boyd's Jig & Reel in Knoxville's historic Old City, where Jenny added instruments to the walls for people

In the country music heartland of Tennessee, Jenny and Randy Boyd have created the ideal pub that reflects their passion for all things Scottish – including an impressive collection of whisky

to join in the regular music sessions, and introduced Scottish pub food – served by waiting staff in kilts, of course.

But what's a Scottish pub – even with music, food and kilts – if it doesn't have a decent whisky collection?

"The pub started out with a music mission, but my husband thought that if it was a Scottish pub, it should have as many Scotch whiskies as we could carry," says Jenny. "We enlisted the help of our then manager, Nathan Johnson, who is also my cousin, and he made it his mission to add to our Scotch collection. I'm very proud of the work that he's done and

the name that we're acquiring around the world for his efforts. And now we're very proud to be a partner bar of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society."

Boyd's Jig & Reel currently has 844 bottles of whisky and whiskey behind its

bar, the majority of them Scotch but with bottlings from both the US and Canada as well as Irish, Welsh, Japanese and Indian distilleries. There are also almost 100 green bottles sitting on the shelf, testimony to a thriving partner bar relationship with the SMWS.

"Learning all about the Society's different flavour profiles and reading the Tasting Notes is what helps to drive my passion for

whisky," says bar manager Anton Quinn. "Our senior bartender Patrick Tubbs was a member of the Society and one of our most valued whisky experts. Tragically, he died unexpectedly in December last year, but I'll always remember his passion for whisky in general and the Society in particular, and I want to pass on his enthusiasm for telling the story of the SMWS and to show our patrons that integrity and quality are of the upmost importance."

With a combination of live music almost every night of the week, plus regular whisky-focused events, there's always something happening at Boyd's Jig & Reel.

"Our whisky events vary from traditional Scottish celebrations such as our Burns Supper and Hogmanay party, to more modern events like whisky pairings with strange and wonderful dishes," says Anton. "We also host a whisky festival every spring, and are always honoured to host master distillers from all over the world whenever they come into town."

So whether you're ready to join in with a traditional music session – or simply take a seat at the bar with a Society single malt – Boyd's Jig & Reel is the place to be. If only we could all create our own perfect pub... ●

Boyd's Jig & Reel is open from Tuesday to Sunday from 3pm-3am. You can receive a discount on all SMWS drinks by producing your member card

♥ Boyd's Jig & Reel is at 101 South Central Street, Knoxville, Tennessee TN 37902. Tel: +1 865 247 7066. See www.jigandreel.com



Jenny Boyd joins a session of traditional music



Bar manager Anton Quinn picks out an SMWS bottling



THE SCOTCH SOCIETY

ESTD THE VAULTS



LEITH, SCOTLAND

MALT WHISKY SOCIETY

OFFICIAL PARTNER BAR




Instruments adorn the walls



You're guaranteed a taste, and possibly also a sound, of Scotland at Boyd's Jig & Reel



UNMISSABLE EVENTS FOR A NEW YEAR

Check your local website for all our great get-togethers in 2018

- AUSTRALIA - WWW.SMWS.COM.AU • CANADA - WWW.SMWS.CA • CHINA - SMWS on WeChat app •
- DENMARK - WWW.SMWS.DK • HONG KONG - WWW.SMWS.COM.HK • JAPAN - WWW.SMWSJAPAN.COM •
- MALAYSIA - MY.SMWS.COM • NEW ZEALAND - WWW.SMWS.CO.NZ • SINGAPORE - WWW.SMWS.SG •
- SWITZERLAND - WWW.SMWS.CH • TAIWAN - WWW.SMWS.COM.TW •
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The Vaults, Leith
MONDAY, 5 FEBRUARY
PAUL JOHN DISTILLERY VISIT
TUESDAY, 6 FEBRUARY
MUSIC & MALTS LIVE WITH
KATY GALLOWAY
THURSDAY, 8 FEBRUARY
BLENDING WORKSHOP
TUESDAY, 13 FEBRUARY
MUSIC & MALTS - IN THE MIX
THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY
MEAT & MALT STEAK NIGHT
TUESDAY, 20 FEBRUARY
MUSIC & MALTS - SAM GILLESPIE
TUESDAY, 27 FEBRUARY
MUSIC & MALTS - SAM GILLESPIE

28 Queen Street, Edinburgh
SATURDAY, 3 FEBRUARY
MEMBERS' TASTING
FRIDAY, 9 FEBRUARY
COGNAC AND
ARMAGNAC TASTING
SUNDAY, 11 FEBRUARY
SCOTLAND VS FRANCE
RUGBY LUNCH
WEDNESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY

WHISKY, CHAMPAGNE
AND OYSTERS
FRIDAY, 23 FEBRUARY
WHISKY AND HAGGIS
SATURDAY, 24 FEBRUARY
SCOTLAND VS ENGLAND
RUGBY LUNCH
WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY
MARCH PREVIEW TASTING

Kaleidoscope Bar
at 28 Queen Street
SATURDAY LUNCHTIMES
STEAK AND WHISKY TASTING
SATURDAY AFTERNOONS
SATURDAY TREAT TASTING
WEDNESDAY EVENINGS
BURGER AND WHISKY TASTING
SUNDAY AFTERNOONS
BEER CLUB TASTING
THURSDAY EVENINGS
CHEESE AND WHISKY TASTING

19 Greville Street, London
SATURDAY, 3 FEBRUARY
WHISKY AND CHEESE
OUTTURN TASTING
MONDAY, 5 FEBRUARY

STEAK AND WHISKY TASTING
MONDAY, 12 FEBRUARY
WHISKY & CHOCOLATE TASTING
WEDNESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY
THE LOWLAND LADIES
WEDNESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY
VERTICAL TASTE "NO 9"
WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY
MARCH PREVIEW TASTING

Kaleidoscope Bar, London
FRIDAY, 2 FEBRUARY
NEW OUTTURN BURGER NIGHT
WEDNESDAY, 7 FEBRUARY
ISLAY & OYSTERS
WEDNESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY
EFFECTS OF OAK MASTERCLASS
THURSDAY, 22 FEBRUARY
STEAK & WHISKY TASTING
WEDNESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY
SHERRY & THE WHISKY WORLD

PREVIEW TASTINGS
FRIDAY, 23 FEBRUARY
MANCHESTER
BIRMINGHAM
IPSWICH
NEWCASTLE

STIRLING
FRIDAY, 23 MARCH
DUNDEE
MELROSE
CHELTENHAM
BRIGHTON
INVERNESS
LEEDS

SATURDAY, 24 MARCH
SHEFFIELD

FRIDAY, 20 APRIL
HARROGATE

THURSDAY, 26 APRIL
ABERDEEN

FRIDAY, 27 APRIL
ABERDEEN
LIVERPOOL
GLASGOW
WINCHESTER

SATURDAY, 28 APRIL
ABERDEEN
GLASGOW

VISIT YOUR LOCAL BRANCH'S
WEBSITE FOR A FULL LIST OF
SOCIETY EVENTS WHEREVER YOU ARE



**THE SCOTCH MALT
WHISKY SOCIETY**

ESTD THE VAULTS, LEITH, SCOTLAND