

A dram of delight

A little sip goes a long way when sampling the flavour of a good whisky

Eric Akis

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Some of the world's most palate-pleasing experiences come from only a handful of ingredients. Single-malt whisky is a shining example -- only three components are required.

When finely crafted, just a wee dram can bring a tear to the eye of those passionate about sipping and savouring this age-old spirit.

In Scotland, the process starts with malted barley, produced by moistening, germinating and drying grain. The barley is then ground and heated with water in stages. The resulting flavoured liquid is fermented with yeast, distilled in copper stills and aged in oak casks.

Many variables affect flavour: where the water comes from, whether or not or for how long the barley was dried over a peat fire and infused with its flavour, what type of oak cask was used and how long the whisky is aged.

These variables can result in huge differences in taste from whisky to whisky, variations that a growing number of consumers around the globe seem eager to try.

Jim Murray, author of the best selling guide *Jim Murray's Whisky Bible* (Carlton) and guest speaker at this weekend's sold-out Victoria Whisky Festival, calls the growth in whisky sales "off the scales."

"It's just unreal," says Murray from his office in England, adding expectations are also higher. People are drinking less, so when they do drink, they want it to be a first-class, ever-changing experience. "If people are going to spend money on the drink, they want it to be good."

Murray says that in the late 1970s, whisky was over-produced in Scotland after consumer preference shifted elsewhere.

Although a number of distilleries had to close, the oversupply turned out to be a good thing, as a number of single-malt whiskies that previously may have been used to make blends were allowed to age and develop glorious flavours.

Some producers who believed most Scotch drinkers preferred milder-tasting blends discovered a greater demand for the stronger, more distinctive single-malt whiskies that must be produced at a single distillery.



CREDIT: Darren Stone, Times Colonist

Whisky connoisseur Iain Hooey has a collection of 30 bottles of whisky opened and another 100 stocked away.

In his book, now in its third edition, Murray colourfully describes hundreds of different types, including those made outside Scotland in countries such as Ireland, New Zealand and Australia, as well as the Glenora distillery in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

In one entry, he describes the taste of Scottish Bruichladdich (pronounced brook-laddie) whisky, aged 10 years, as being a sweet, fruity and malty charge along the tastebuds.

Another, called Ardbeg Uigeadail, he calls an awesome package of intense peat reek amid complex fruitcake and leather notes.

Discovering these distinct tastes has turned some into whisky collectors. Iain Hooley, a host for the Victoria Whisky Festival, says he currently has 30 bottles opened and another 100 or so stocked away, and has sampled countless others.

According to scotchwhisky.com, single-malt whisky is best appreciated at the equivalent room temperature of an old-fashioned Scottish parlour, about 15C.

The experts note that chilled whisky does not readily yield up its aromas, and the addition of ice will close them down altogether. If the liquid is too cool, warming the glass in the hand -- as you do with brandy -- will help to release the volatile oils in the spirit.

The website also says that some whiskies are best served neat, but many producers suggest you add a little distilled, room-temperature water to dilute the strength and open up the spirit by breaking down the ester chains and freeing the volatile aromatics.

The label on the 1970 Bruichladdich bottle suggests the addition of some still, spring water will make it less clear, but will release the complexity in this most pure and sophisticated malt.

Hooley says he likes to first try the whisky neat, then add a drop of water to see what happens to the aroma, flavour and finish.

Asked about pairing food with whisky, Murray does not mince words.

"No, it's pretentious crap, avoid it completely," he says. "You're in danger of screwing up the flavour of absolutely beautiful whisky, or the delicate taste of the food you're pairing it with."

I did find, however, that if you're willing to spare some of it, single-malt whisky can perform admirably when added to food, such as the chocolate mousse and beef tenderloin recipes on page C10.

Special thanks to Ian Hooley for supplying the whisky used in today's photographs.

Note: This weekend's Whisky Festival is sold out, but organizers plan to expand the event next year. To be notified when tickets go on sale, go to: victoriawhiskyfestival.com.

Eric Akis's columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday. The best-selling author can be reached at

ericakis@shaw.ca

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WHISKY CLUB OFFERS A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SPIRITS

Like to join a club, but lawn bowling, model trains, darts and other pursuits just haven't spurred your interest?

Here's one more to consider: a whisky club such as the Companions of the Quaich (a quaich is a traditional Scottish two-handed drinking cup), a Canadian organization with chapters across the country.

Lawrence Graham, president of the Victoria chapter, says members meet every two months for a three-course dinner served with three whiskies.

"It's very social," Graham says. "One member will stand when the whisky arrives and discuss a little bit about the distillery and the [style] of whisky."

The whisky comes before the food so it can be tasted on its own. After the initial taste, members decide how or if it marries with the food on the plate.

Graham says the club currently has 50 members, about 40 per cent of whom are women. Members' spouses can also partake in events.

"If your spouse is not a whisky drinker, then the member drinks their whisky and the spouse drives home," says Graham, with a laugh.

Graham's training as a whisky-club president started in his military days, when he was assigned the arduous duty of bar officer.

He took an interest in whisky, and helped build a tasty inventory that has grown to 120 bottles at The Canadian Scottish Regiment (Princess Mary's) Officers' Mess in Victoria.

"It just tastes good. It is just so interesting, the regional characteristics, every bottling is different. It's a continual journey," says Graham.

If you would like to participate in this journey, membership dues for the Victoria chapter until Aug. 31 are only \$25. After that, they will rise to \$50. To join, contact Graham at lawrencegraham@shaw.ca.

For more information about the Companions, go to www.thequaich.com.