

# SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW™

Incorporating the British Journal of Viscimetry



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## Founder's reserve

For my first visit to Maltmill Towers – your new publisher's swanky purpose-built offices – there was no furniture or door signage in place yet. I was looking for a splash of water (to reduce a ferocious Port Charlotte 'mature enhanced' in a variety of bizarre casks culminating with an organic adrenaline-ampoule finish) when I stumbled on an editorial meeting. "Ah! Founder! Come in," said the Floor (there being no Chair) pouring a bumper BenRiach Ludicras, "we would like your thoughts."

"Would Lady Grist be willing to star in our new Keeper's Wives section? It transpires that Turnbull Hutton is not a Keeper and so Mrs H is ineligible. And will you continue to share your gems of wisdom with the readership as before?"

I lack the courage to discuss with the present Lady G her thoughts on soft porn participation but I am delighted to have my own column in your revamped **SWR**. In consideration of the changes I wonder of the style I should employ; the what's-his-point? drivel of Michael "Rambling" Jackson, or the look-how-bloody-clever-I-am King James' testament of Jim "God" Murray, the wide-eyed-techno-garbage of Ian "Woof-Woof" Wisniewski, the thesaurus-crunching verbiage of Charlie "Diesel" MacLean or the pulled punches of Dave "Lady-boy" Broom, maybe the obsequious hand-wringing of Gavin "M" Smith. Perhaps I'll just decorate it with pictures of Marcin "Mark Chin" Miller or fill it with the uninteresting, vague, fence-sitting, typographical errors of *Whisky Magazine*... I wonder if that of Nick "Dr. Hatchet & Mr. Bloodbath" Morgan is a recognised style yet...

Anyway, my point today is mostly strip-stamps. The repercussion of Gordon "Moron" Brown's meddling is just kicking in. I have this week the first letter from an independent producer/bottler listing a range of products that are being withdrawn from the UK market because it is too much trouble to put tax stamps on niche whiskies destined for the home market. Apart from stamps being a pointless knee-jerk to the London City Bond fiasco that was entirely of the taxman's making – and is now sorted – forcing producers to apply stickers to bottles so that duty can be policed by a force with no policemen is positively barking! And if there are to be inspections, why are we allowed to hide the stamps from retail view, inside packaging or on the reverse? An inspector could visit 30 offices a day if the stamp had to be visible on the shelf, now this mythical bobbie will achieve just four visits if he has to twiddle or open every item. It's bollocks! It is pointless, expensive, bad for the trade and benefiting no-one – no-one at all – just more legislative bafflement from a state that's going tits-up. Bah!

Unless, you consider that maybe it will reduce the blinkered diversification into more absurd twaddly-wine finishes in the UK. Hey, there's positive thinking! Let the overseas markets struggle with them, let's sell real whisky.

So that's it, my first rant for the new regime. I'm off to the New Products Division of Djageo to view a new Drinkaware capsule – one that strips out the alcohol on opening the bottle... Sounds piffle but they're sending a driver and are always very generous with the canapés and syrup. Chin-gin! ■

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### SCOTCH WHISKY REVIEW

PUBLISHER Lord Grist

EDITOR Dave Broom

EDITOR-AT-LUNCH Charles MacLean

AD MANAGER Marcin Miller

## APOCRYPHA

**I**S LAGAVULIN CURSED? For a while it seemed so. Last year, Donald Renwick finally completed his escape tunnel which he had dug from the distillery to the mainland with a bone-handled teaspoon stolen from the Ardbeg café. The fact that he surfaced at Lochnagar might explain why it took him seven years.

Donald was replaced by John Thomson from the Port Ellen Maltings but within a matter of weeks he stumbled across the entrance to the tunnel and used it to escape to Knockando. John was due to be replaced by 'Big' Willie MacDougall from Oban, but at the last minute he gave his Diageo min-ders the slip and fled to Edradour. The curse of Lagavulin appears to have been cured however with the appointment of Ileach Graham Logie. Graham Logie. The saga hasn't finished, as Steve McGingle, Diageo's erstwhile head of operations (Islay division), has now found Donald's tunnel. What is it about Islay they dislike?"

That said... what of Edradour? One minute the second-oldest distiller in the world is there, spanner in hand, the next he is gone. The official line is he's gone south to spend more time with his family, but the expression on Andrew Symington's face when asked "where's Iain?" suggests the parting wasn't quite so amicable.

A hunt for a manager at Springbank has ended. Frank McHardy was due to take a role more akin to production director for the two sites leaving day-to-day running to his brewer. The day before said brewer was due to take over, however, he announced he was leaving to become an insurance salesman which makes him the whisky world's equivalent of John Major who ran away from the circus to become an accountant.

Stuart Robertson, formerly of Cragganmore distillery, has been appointed.

Talking of Springbank are there signs of a rapprochement between the iconoclastic distiller and the SWA? The "industry body" has reinstated Campbeltown as a region in its own right having controversially stripped it of this status a few years ago. And was that really Hedley Wright applauding speeches

by Gavin Hewitt (sadly sans pith helmet) and Campbell Evans at the World Whiskies Conference? Right enough one of our contacts (the one who was awake) did say that Mr Wright's hands did seem to be moving considerably more slowly than everyone else's.

The lack of noise coming from Pernod-Ricard over Glendronach has kicked the rumour mill into action once more. The firm has been quick to slot Scapa into its portfolio and has, apparently, plans for one of its hidden Speyside gems as well, but nothing for 'Dronach has been announced. The fact that Euan Shand was recently spotted in Moscow talking to some Russian gentlemen is purely coincidental. Isn't it?

There is nothing we love more than a whisky festival but the gentleman's agreement which prevented clashes occurring in the same country appears to have broken down. This year's Limburg fest clashed with another show in Hamburg, leading to a no-show at the former by a number of players who felt their resources were over-stretched.

The same, it would seem, is happening in Canada where the Ontario Liquor Board has scheduled a Whisky Live just one week before the independent Spirit of Toronto fair. This has been operating for the past two years and is run by our very good friend and fellow fanziner Johanna Ngoh. The inevitable result of this is that Johanna's event will be forced to close – no distiller wants to get on the wrong side of the all-powerful Liquor Board. It is our understanding that legal advice is being taken. Messages of support should be sent to: [johanna@singleminded.ca](mailto:johanna@singleminded.ca)

News reaches SWR that Richard Gordon of the Scotch Malt Whisky Society is leaving to pursue a dramatically different career. He is to become bursar of St Peter's College, Oxford University, England. Speculation about the reason for his departure would be purely academic at this stage.

There is a rumour that Brora's still have been sold... to China! ■

## Spice Tree felled by SWA

**A**S WE SUGGESTED last issue, the SWA has clamped down on Compass Box's Spice Tree, saying that inner staves do not fall within the Scotch Whisky Act. The announcement came on the same night that the firm won *Whisky Magazine's* Innovator of the Year (for the 38th time running)... for, you guessed it, Spice Tree. Rumours that the second batch (which the SWA has, magnanimously, allowed to be bottled) was to be renamed Irony are, sadly, unfounded. Smart collectors will however be snapping this up... whatever the name. Don't think that this is the end of the saga, however. ■



SWR believes that Compass Box lacks press exposure, so we have included a gratuitous bottle shot

## Huge bottom-end

**T**ALKING OF OWN-LABEL (as we were) it appears that there's been a bit of a stooshie at Glenmorangie. Its new owner hasn't taken too kindly to its newest addition having a huge bottom-end business and has apparently demanded that this division is sold off. There is considerable resistance to this among some of the old regime still within 'Morangie (yes there really are some), but one takes on M. Arnault and his vision of luxury at one's peril. Could mashed neep be on the menu at the Broxburn staff canteen? ■

If you have anything for possible inclusion in these pages, please e-mail [news@scotchwhiskyreview.com](mailto:news@scotchwhiskyreview.com)



**Aeneas MacDonald, *Whisky*, facsimile edition with an introduction by Ian Buxton, Cannongate, Edinburgh, 2006, £9.99 (to be published in November 2006)**

**A**eneas MacDonald's *Whisky* is probably one of the finest books ever written about the subject. Published in 1930 it is the work of a true controversialist. Read MacDonald's work, which editor Ian Buxton claims to be the first written for the whisky consumer, and you will find a story unfolding of passion, poetry and national pride – everything which some would argue (incorrectly, in the opinion of this reviewer) is sadly missing from the whisky industry today. But what you should remember when you read it, and here is the joy of the thing, is that MacDonald was not like today's self-styled and self-promoting whisky writers, hand-in-glove (and wallet) with whisky producers.

On the contrary, as Buxton reveals (and, as far I'm aware, only a handful of people previously knew) MacDonald was the pseudonym for George Malcolm Thomson, co-founder of Edinburgh's Porpoise Press, passionate nationalist (at least at the time of writing *Whisky*), intimate of many of the leading figures of Scotland's 20th century

literary renaissance (Neil Gunn, George Blake, Hugh MacDiarmid, Eric Linklater) and also of some of its more shadowy figures, notably the extreme nationalist and polemicist Andrew Dewar Gibb. Thomson had, as his book was being published, moved to London to work for Lord Beaverbrook, a connection that lasted until his retirement, when he took to writing pot-boiling history and historical pot-boilers.

Read against this background, the book takes on greater significance and its core argument, "his championing of the drinker against the complacency of an industry then in frightening decline" can possibly be seen as a metaphor for greater concerns about Scotland that Thomson shared with his learned literary contemporaries. Buxton's introduction is learned and well researched about these connections, to the point of painstaking detail about the publication of the book and its various editions. He answers the question about the pseudonym; it seems Thomson was scared of his tee-total mother and wanted to distance himself from the

publishing house he had co-founded.

Thomson's message of warning to the complacent "make it a quick one" drinker and his attempts to highlight the dangers of the commoditisation of whisky (blends in particular) which he very accurately foresaw still ring loud today, as does his mission to put Scotch back on the "table of the connoisseur".

His text deserves a close reading; his insights into regional taste differences deserve particular scrutiny. Reading this book, written by a real consumer champion, is both an education and a pleasure (the illiterate will find that this handsome facsimile of the first edition with a pretty dust-jacket makes a splendid addition to their shelves of unopened books) and as such it's a must read for all whisky experts, maniacs and gurus today.

Mr Buxton deserves to be congratulated for having the perseverance to rescue it from "the clouds of mystery that veil the youth of the human race." ■

## Do do do do do you remember...

***The Whisky Men*, Gavin Smith, Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2005, £14.99**

(Sung to the tune of *Those were the days* with acknowledgement and apologies to Gene Raskin and Mary Hopkins)

*Once upon a time there was a business  
Full of fun and characters so they say  
Proud and fierce and independent  
Just so sad it's not like that today...*

*Those were the days my friends  
Before the chemists came  
We'd drink our Joe, forever and a day  
We'd dram the whole day through  
We'd work though we were fou  
Those were the days, oh yes they were  
the days*

*It was always someone else who did  
the thieving  
Milking the cow or walking with the dog  
Playing cat and mouse with the gauger  
Swilling out the very last drop of grog*

*Those were the days my friends  
Before the maltsters came,*

*We'd turn the grain, and breathe in all  
that dust  
Our malt was mostly poor;  
Our backs broke on the floor,  
Those were the days, oh yes they were  
the days*

*Give me a dram at seven in the morning  
And another when I throw off the draff  
Each day I crawl home drunk my hands  
are shaking  
Goodness, oh, that clearic was a laugh*

*Those were the days my friends  
Before computers came  
We'd do everything we knew by rule  
of thumb  
We'd open valves by hand,  
CO<sub>2</sub> be damned,  
Those were the days, oh yes they were  
the days*



*Let me tell you something I remember,  
Or did I dream it, read it, maybe I  
was told?  
The past seems such a pleasant thing  
to me,  
A safe and happy place as I get old*

*(sung with vigorous affection and gusto...)*

*La la la la la, la la la la la,  
La la la la, la la la la la,  
Those were the days my friends, we wished  
they'd never end,  
Those were the days, oh yes they were  
the days ■*

# Tales from the underback

## Sports section

A reader (who, after reading this we'd rather not meet on a dark alley late at night) spotted the following on an extreme fighting site on the internet (you see why we'd rather not meet him) giving an insight into the other side of – arguably – the best Polish whisky scribe.

“The opening minute was spent with the fighters feeling each other out. Each fighter fainted and countered trying to judge the others reaction until Wisniewski dropped and took Noble to the ground. The rest of the round was spent with Wisniewski, either in Noble's guard or in the full mount just long enough to do damage before Noble could get guard back... the round ended in convincing fashion for Wisniewski.

“The second round was... more of Noble pressing the fight... In the tie-up, Noble reached around Wisniewski, picked him up and threw him onto his back with a thud from the apron and a gasp from the crowd.

“The... final round [was] spent... looking for the opening that would finish the fight. Midway through the round, Noble overextended once and Wisniewski got the takedown. In the full mount Wisniewski couldn't finish Noble and despite working from a bad position Noble never quit... the round ended with Wisniewski in a full mount landing shots to Noble's head. Maybe not doing a lot of damage, but it was convincing enough for the judges to score the bout unanimously for Wisniewski.”

The question is does he keep his hair magnificently coiffed when even in the “full mount”? What had Sir Iain Noble (of Te Bheag and Poit Dhubh fame) done to offend our bigos-loving scribe in the first place? ■

## Alfred Barnard is unwell

### STOP IT AT ONCE...

#### The smugness of the big and the arrogance of the small

You can be massive and generally excellent; you can be miniscule and more rubbishy than a rubbishy thing. The excellence of a distillery should be assessed in the same way as class. You've either got it – or you haven't.

Or, call me old-fashioned, you could even judge a distillery on its output.

#### Phoney mailings

Do you really think that the distillery manager has the time, inclination or skills required to write a formulaic AIDCA marketing missive to you?

Next time one lands on your mat, check whether the letter gets your Attention, then grabs your Interest, before creating Desire, eliciting your Commitment before compelling you to Action. My betting? NFW.

There is a certain synergy between the quality of the communication and the product. So suitably gullible marketing attracts necessarily gullible consumers. Talking of which, what did happen to my square inch of Islay's Vindaloo Factory?

And I only ever received a few Black Bottle mailings from the 'Distillery Manager'. How did they even manage one, given that there's no such place for a blend?

Thank Murray for small mercies, at least most whisky junk mail is no longer printed on parchment.

#### Obsequious 'celeb' interviews

Has-beens who never were – these are almost always written up in Q & A format.

They're your notes, scribe, not a finished article.

You've seen the sort of thing. They're nearly always with drummers.

Draff Monthly: When did you first taste single malt?

Benzy Drin: We were on tour supporting Mogadon in Finland five years ago, and Slimy Towed [Lead Singer of Mogadon during their halcyon period 1967 – 2000 when I was a true Moggie! Ed.] was given a case of Glen Toblerone by their Scandinavian management company. It was like 'Wow' – specially with lemonade. And it's really, really like ironic, 'cos Glen T are now co-sponsoring our World Bank Tour of village halls in Germany.

#### Our own Minor Sleb Corner

SWR has to have one. It's the law.

Your columnist recently got lured into some posy Covent Garden club (in London, in England) by Derren Brown's agent who'd been celebrating getting an extended Channel 4 contract for his illusionist client. Free drink was mentioned.

It turns out that the great mindbender – as clever as David Blaine is irritating – is also something of a malts fanatic. (The agent might have been exaggerating, but he was probably only 30% or so out.)

I have yet to meet Dezza – although a tasting is on the cards. But someone's already working magic on me.

I've just contributed to a whisky publication and agreed a fee of precisely nothing. Mind games? That's Olympic gold medal-winning level. I've asked the surgeon not to sew up my vent, but fit a zip. It'll be much easier next time. ■

Alfred Barnard was spluttering all over Jon Allen

## Did you know...

Single malt Scotch whisky production is a dynamic process from growing barely to opening the bottle. It is an over-simplification to state that any one part of the process is more important than another.

There are more than 100 compounds in single malt whisky and flavour is derived from the action and interaction between these and other compounds. No one single element delivers flavour. Stories you have

heard about flavour being down to the water or the peat or about dents being beaten into new stills to replicate the old ones don't tell the whole story. What is true, however, is that any variation will, by extension, alter the flavour balance.

The new make spirit of any distillery is unique entirely because of the details; change the details and you change the DNA. The subtlety of spirit complexity all comes from differentiation.

Whisky is made of different proportions of compounds none of which are unique to individual whiskies; they are made of the same compounds but in different proportions. In this regard, whisky is more complex than chocolate. It is, in fact, about as complex as a strong cheese.

A glass of single malt is – as defined by the number of flavour compounds – as complex as a good piece of Roquefort, only better... ■

Marcin Miller

# Swiss Toni's malt whisky patter

Gavin D Smith

**Y**ou know, appreciating fine malt whisky is like making love to a beautiful woman. It needs to be caressed and nurtured, pampered and amused, even if at times you know in your heart of hearts it is really a cheeky little madam that needs its bottom spanked with a silken slipper.

You must make your whisky desire you with the power and dominance of your masculine personality. Begin by treating it as you would a beautiful woman to whom you have just been introduced. "Hello," you should say, "how are you this evening?" Make it the centre of attention; make it feel it is the only drink in the room.

Just as a beautiful woman should always make the most of herself, with elegant dresses from the leading Paris fashion houses, silk lingerie from Agent Provocateur, and the finest of cosmetics, so a malt whisky should be presented in the choicest of glasses. Select one that you can cup in the palm of your masterful hand. Feel the eager, amber liquid respond to your warming touch, sense its arousal as you inhale its exquisite aromas and prepare to take it into your mouth.

But be warned. At times it may be wilful and capricious, filling your senses with delight one day, only to disappoint the next. Blame your mood or your natural sensitivity, but never blame the whisky itself. A fine malt whisky is an emotional creature, and will sense your disappointment, your lack of fulfilment. Encourage and praise it, make it smile for you. Only that way will you win its heart. The smile of a fine malt whisky lights up a room just like the smile of a



beautiful woman.

An older whisky should have poise and confidence; it should be at ease with the world around it, like a beautiful mature woman. Its contours have been softened and rounded by the passage of time. But beware a malt whisky that is too old, just as you would beware an ageing woman. There is a fine line between maturity and old age. Be alive to the danger of bitterness, for dissatisfaction and disappointment may linger on your tongue.

Just as you should never ask the age of a beautiful woman, so you should never ask the price of a fine malt whisky. Some pleasures are beyond monetary value. For the gentleman of reduced means, however, some gratification may be gained from supermarket own-label malts – the working girls of the whisky world.

Above all, my friends, just as you would take a beautiful woman, take your whisky with passion.

Bottoms up! ■

## Shorts

### An Omen?

A remake of *The Omen* opened on 6/6/06. The same date was used by someone calling himself "Damian" Riley-Smith, managing director of *Whisky Magazine*, to issue a terrifying press release about editorial changes. Well, it is spookier than the film...■

### Letters page

Sir,

I am a bit disappointed to see that you've already fallen into the trap of self-serving vanity publishing by giving over (as I calculate) almost a page of this "new" edition to photographs of yourselves.

It makes me puke when I see bylines with pictures of brainless (yet strangely well connected) twits on every page of the *Daily Telegraph*. And do I need to mention Jon, Mark and Robbo? I do not expect to see it in SWR!

Yours etc.

Name and address supplied ■

### Classified ads

"Sad, cloistered whisky bookworm seeks back issues of SWR to complete life.  
Box #1"

If you can help this pathetic individual, please send an e-mail to [info@scotchwhiskyreview.com](mailto:info@scotchwhiskyreview.com) and we'll put you in touch with each other. SWR - bringing people together. ■

## Hands up who cares?

**T**he industry remains on tenterhooks about the possible, or should that be inevitable, sale of Invergordon. Actually, we just made that up. The industry couldn't care less. The hot money at the moment is on French company La Martiniquaise winning the battle, especially after the SWA's favourite drinks mogul, India's Vijay Mallya, apparently pulled out of the race. Invergordon would be a fair fit within the LaM portfolio which is

geared towards bottom-end products for the French supermarkets.

Although Whyte & Mackay seems perfectly willing to sell its own-label division, the carve-up of the firm might potentially be more awkward than it originally appears. Invergordon after all wasn't just an own-label business, it had a grain distillery (the reason that W&M bought it all those years ago) plus Tullibardine, Bruichladdich, Tannavulin and Jura. The

first two have been sold on, the next is closed... but will they be willing to sell Jura? We think not.

Would a Scottish firm want it? Only one which believed that money could be made in low-price own-label. At the recent World Whiskies Conference, industry analyst John Wakely was disparaging; he had this to say: "Why the industry hasn't had a whip round to instigate some sort of industrial accident at Invergordon I don't know." ■

# Confessions of an anorak

Davin de Kergommeaux

In our search for the perfect dram, we Malt Maniacs collectively taste and score thousands of malt whiskies every year. We taste them, we score them, then we move on to the next. Time is a wasting and that next dram might just be the one.

We began drinking whisky because we liked what it did to our noses and our tongues. The pleasure was immediate and real, but also transcendental as flavours and aromas evoked pleasant memories and romantic images, some real, most from whisky ads. The bottom line though, now as then, when we taste a dram, is that thousands of chemicals in the whisky create reactions in millions of tiny nerve endings that cause our brains to tell us we're happy.

Since Victoria arrived at Balmoral and gave it the nod, Scotch whisky has built its reputation as an authentic product. Kilts and bagpipes abound in advertising, as do the

*Add a drop of  
caramel, though, and  
suddenly flavours  
began to integrate*

purest of waters and the finest of Scottish (we imagine) barleys. These, along with some kind of yeast or another are the only ingredients allowed in Scotch whisky and from these, each distillery creates its own distinct malt.

The roughly 117 distilleries with bottlings on the market have become somewhat of an obsession for the Malt Maniacs. A Matrix of malts, posted on our website, includes tasting scores from at least three of us, for whiskies from each of these distilleries. Our goal: to have at least six different bottlings from each distillery included on the Matrix so our readers can judge from the numbers whether they might enjoy a certain malt they find in the store.

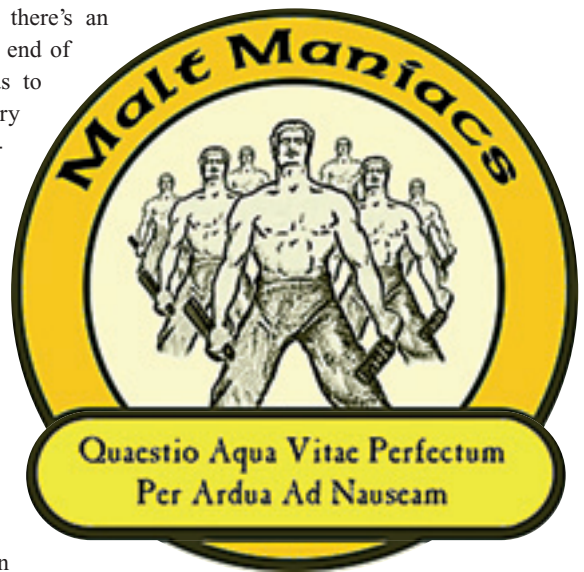
The trouble is, not every malt was intended for release as a single, so some of the bottlings we taste for our Matrix Tasting Sessions stimulate our tiny little nerve endings a whole lot less than they could if we simply stuck to distilleries we know we love. But we're anoraks, let's face it, and we're going to taste them all. While collectors battle to pay hundreds of pounds for a 7-year-old Sherriff's Bowmore mini, we're scouring e-Bay for that as-yet-untasted Allt A'Bhaine.

Tiny nerve endings beware – there's an obsessive collector at the other end of that nerve fibre and if he has to choose between tasting a Very Old Ardbeg again, or an as-yet-untasted Glen Spey, well, the first six times out of ten the Glen Spey will be a terrible temptation.

But there's more, for yes we're anoraks and yes we've bought the whole authenticity scenario. Our sensitive palates are trained to detect even the slightest off-note or adulteration. We abhor chill-filtering, barely tolerate dilution to 'table strength' and scorn artificial colouring. We can taste even minute quantities of spirit caramel in a whisky (it's bitter, you know, not sweet like you'd expect).

So sure are we of our palates, that a while back, Maniac Michel van Meersbergen conducted blind tastings with four different malts to which a tiny drop of spirit caramel had or had not been added. The eight Malt Maniacs who participated in this experiment (and they really were blindfolded) were able in many cases to detect differences between the caramelized versions and the unadulterated ones, but surprisingly the slight drop of caramel often improved the reactions in their tiny little nerve endings. The tasters scored each malt and when the blindfolds were removed often found those with caramel added had not only scored higher, in many cases they had tasted more 'authentic'. The caramel-enhanced whisky was often identified as the unadulterated and vice versa.

Even more remarkable though, was the effect of adding a drop of spirit caramel to a rough vatting of these malts. That blending is an art was quickly proven for the vattings lacked structure, complexity and balance.



The Maltmaniacs logo is at once Stalinist and homoerotic

They were mixtures, not syntheses. Add a drop of caramel though, and suddenly flavours began to integrate. Scores went up as the caramel somehow knitted the constituents together into a whole. Clearly for a blend, caramel improved the reactions in the tiny little nerve endings. Hmmm, that's not what Michel and his team had expected.

Those pure-water-finest-Scottish-barley ads taught us well to listen to our logic rather than our tiny nerve endings. As anoraks we've done the analysis and we know how to identify the truly authentic malts. We drink whisky because we like what it does to our noses and our tongues and in the process we're scoring thousands of whiskies and reporting them on our Matrix. In fact, we're tasting three more Allt A'Bhaines in just a few weeks; we'll let you know if one turns out to be the perfect dram. And Michel, if you're joining us, could you bring a little spirit caramel with you?

Now that they know, those tiny nerve endings just might demand it. ■

## Maltmaniacs n. pl.



24 malt whisky nuts from four continents meeting on-line and in person to debate whisky minutiae, share tasting experiences, and tip each other off about special drams and sources, all the while contributing to a massive and growing whisky web-resource at [www.maltmaniacs.com](http://www.maltmaniacs.com) and running a successful annual malt competition.

# Cheap is not cheerful

by Dave Broom

LET'S FACE IT, one doesn't expect to be ranted at during a trade conference. These things are normally quite sedate affairs – highly specialised, they leave delegates with some food for thought and varying degrees of total bewilderment. For example, at the recent World Whiskies Conference I had to chair a meeting which revolved around the notion of 'causal ambiguity', a term which apparently means that malt whisky should continue to be romantic or it will lose its specialness which, when put like that, seems to be a pretty reasonable argument. The advantage is that I can now impress people at parties by dropping "causal ambiguity" in to the conversation. Try it... and throw in viscometry as well. My, how your stock will rise among your peers.

Anyhoo, I'd shuffled into the first session of the day, head somewhat thick after a strategy meeting of the editorial board of the SWR which started at lunchtime in Glasgow and ended with large drams in the Oxford Bar in Edinburgh at closing time.

"I've spent my career pissing off senior management," said the cove on stage. "Don't see why I should stop now." He didn't. Right enough, he didn't have to. His name was (and probably still is) John Wakeley and he's... well all you need to know is that he's a top analyst and shoots from the hip. Some delegates laughed, then squirmed, some squirmed then laughed. Nervously. "Anyone here worked for Seagram?" he asked. One hand was, hesitantly, raised. "Ahhhhh." he said, before launching into a devastating sardonic demolition of young Edgar's business "strategy". To be fair, it wasn't anything that we hadn't heard before — but one doesn't normally do that sort of thing in an on-the-record public forum. The few hacks in the audience grinned and scribbled furiously.

Underneath the abuse, Wakeley's core message centred on the role of cheap whisky. "Three-year-old Scotch isn't any good. A blend of spirits aged in second-hand wood? It's horrible. That's why they douse it in cola in Spain and don't drink it anywhere else." There was a small intake of breath, some shifting in seats, more nervous laughter. Even if faces were becoming a tad stony, everyone there knew that he was right.

Then the kicking really began: "The Scotch industry has the lowest return on capital of any FMCG business (that's

fast-moving consumer goods to you and me... groceries in other words) and in the UK, the one time that consumers might pay premium prices [ie Christmas] you give it away. Then when everyone is on the wagon in January you hike the prices up so that no-one buys it. Then, as the end of the first quarter arrives in view and you need to show your shareholders some profit, you slash prices again."

Doesn't really need much more additional comment, does it? Well, maybe. Because I've been hearing this from the industry itself since the late 80s. Low prices are killing blends they all said. What happened? They joined in because, apparently, it was "a necessary evil". Then own-label began to grow as the industry desperately tried to offload a surplus and make some cash. Here's Wakeley again: "An industry that was struggling to sell even five-year-old whisky in Europe then made its own task even

*But what happened to this hot, sexy market in the UK last year? It lost 50,000 cases, that's what*

harder by supplying supermarkets with liquids which undercut its own brands. This is the same lunacy which destroyed UK food manufacturing."

Blends have not and never will recover from this approach – two litres of Bell's for £20 anyone? Aye, but malt.. well malt is growing, malt is trendy, we all love malt. Well, sure we do... that's why you're reading this fanzine probably. But what happened to this hot, sexy market in the UK last year? It lost 50,000 cases, that's what. Why? Bell's was at two for £20! To their credit, most malt firms tried to resist deep discounting. Many paid the price, in particular those which had played the price game for a long time.

Some of these may struggle to recover, for once you're in the consumer's mind as a cheapie then you can never become anything else. Look at it this way. You have a premium product, one which by its nature is scarce. One which will probably never sell much over 200,000 cases a year globally (that's not



a lot in the grand scheme of things) because that's as much as your distillery can actually make.

If this product were from Bordeaux it would be selling at a premium, if it were from Piedmont, Napa, Champagne, dagnabbit even Cognac it would sell at a premium. What do we get? £14.99. AT THE BUSIEST TIME OF THE YEAR! In the last issue, I said I was no businessman. I've not changed that opinion, but this notion of how best to sell top-end whisky doesn't make sense to me.

£20 plus is not an unreasonable price for a bottle of malt, is it? Look at what the very same supermarkets charge for an often mediocre wine with bubbles in it. We're quite happy to shell out £20 plus for that and spend much of the time trying to convince ourselves that our chests aren't hurting with the excess acid. That bottle of Champagne will last, what, an hour with friends. A bottle of malt? A considerably longer time.

It is value for money even at £50 plus because it is (hopefully) complex, a drink that demands you take your time over it. Perhaps someone can therefore explain to me why the industry seems hell-bent on devaluing not just individual brands, but the whole category by cutting price for short-term gain?

It wouldn't surprise me that if supermarkets continue to force this game on distillers that some firms simply withdraw from the UK market – there's plenty of places out there where they can make margin. That, in turn will affect even specialist outlets such as Loch Fyne. Back to Wakeley's closing words. "Whisky has a good image, so why bother to save something which isn't worth saving? Cheap whisky." ■

# Peter Russell

interviewed by Marcin Miller

Now in his 50th year in the whisky industry, Peter Russell has seen it all. As Chairman, he has overseen the sustained growth of Ian Macleod & Co, proprietors of Glengoyne, Isle of Skye and Lang's among others. The company currently produces and sells over 15,000,000 bottles of spirits per annum

## Tell me a little bit about your business.

*My father started the Peter Russell firm in 1936. He came from Gravesend in Kent – a Sassenach you understand. He was a chemist in a Gravesend paper mill but he had an aunt, Miss Harper of Harpers Wine and Spirit Gazette. He told his aunt that he was fed up with paper-making and she offered him the chance to go up to Scotland selling advertising space in the magazine, which he did in about 1924. So he came to Scotland and went round all the distilleries and the various blenders. And, of course, in those days the blenders were not usually distillers: Blenders bought from distillers and they would buy the whisky when it was new and hold it until it had matured. They would then blend it. It is very difficult to know how much new whisky to buy as it is impossible to know what sales will be made next year – far less in four, five, six or seven years time when the whiskies will be blended. You don't know how much you are going to require.*

## Still the conundrum today isn't it?

*Indeed. So blenders would find they'd bought too much or too little; depending on how sales were going they'd find they were over stocked or under stocked. My father was going round selling space, speaking to these various people who would say "look I've got too much three-year-old grain". And the next person would say "business is so good I haven't got enough three-year-old grain". He would buy from one and sell to the other. That was how he started out on his broking business. He started as a whisky broker in 1936 and he set up an office in York Place, in the same building that Drambuie had.*

## Was anyone else broking whisky in those days?

*Oh, yes; there were three main brokers other than my father; William Lundie & Co, Stanley Morrison and the Hepburns.*

*I became a Chartered Accountant in 1952 and that was when you were paid £400 a*

*year in Edinburgh, £500 in London and £600 in Paris; so I went to Paris! I who used to prepare the accounts for French and Belgian businesses which were owned by either British or American companies. We prepared the accounts and they would then be consolidated with their own companies. My father became ill in 1955. He was born in 1900. He died in 1956, of cancer. He didn't drink a lot at all but he used to smoke. At that*

*time he'd been joined in the business by my uncle, my mother's brother-in-law, and he died when he was 61.*

*After my father died, I ran the business along with my brother, David, who joined me in the 1960s. At that time we were really just whisky brokers, but I could see that with the consolidation within the industry it was going to be more difficult to just be a broker.*



Peter Russell (left) with his son Leonard



We used to sell a lot of blend to J&B in the very early 60s when J&B was taking off in the States and they hadn't got sufficient stocks. We used to buy whisky from three different blenders and sell it to J&B. I then thought perhaps blending is not as difficult as it's made out to be so I started blending myself. I recall going down to Grierson-Blumenthal in London; they had decided to sell all their stocks of whisky and I bought them – without having a buyer. I remember walking over Battersea Bridge – they had an office on the south side of the river – and thinking I shall have to throw myself into the river if I can't sell these stocks! So I went to a pub for lunch, phoned up Chivas and sold, I think, 90% of the parcel in one phone call.

### **The objective with broking is to shift it as fast as you can, to keep the cash flowing and to prevent you from sitting on stock.**

Yes exactly, the terms were always, I recall, 14 days. Anyway the chap from Grierson-Blumenthal said "oh, we sell about 50 cases a fortnight to Sainsbury's, perhaps you would like to continue to do so," so I did. From there, in the early 1960s, I think we were the first people to go in to supply the big supermarkets with private labels. The big boys didn't want to do it. They thought it was beneath their dignity to do such a thing, so we did it and, frankly, made a lot of money. We continued to supply them right up until half a dozen years ago when things became so competitive. We still do a certain amount of own label to Sainsbury's and other supermarkets as well but it has become so competitive. People are just bloody idiots; they sell so cheaply. I wouldn't want to perhaps name names but a company (not too far from my office in Broxburn) is selling very, very cheaply.

### **As the new owners are not in the cheap end and will be slightly more profit-driven.**

You can make nothing out of it at all. They have equity in the brands that they own so that is where they should be concentrating their efforts.

### **When did the sales of own label really take off?**

Well I would think in the early 1970s. We've been supplying Sainsbury's for over 40 years.

### **You must be one of their most long standing suppliers.**

Yes and we always supply them with top quality. I pick out Sainsbury's as they are our biggest one but I think they kept saying they wanted stuff cheaper – all supermarkets do; cheaper, cheaper and cheaper. In order to get blend cheaper you have to put in more grain and grain tastes of very little. It's the malts that give the character to the whisky and, if you put in 95% grain, you get something that is completely characterless. It tastes alright – it doesn't taste foul or anything – but it just lacks character.

So in the 1960s we bought Ian Macleod & Co from Mr Ian Macleod. He had an Estate called Tallgorm on the Black Isle, north of Inverness. We bought that really for the stocks of whisky that he had. However, he threw in the blend Isle of Skye. We didn't do anything with it at that time but we did start blending and bottling it some years later; it was always an 8-year-old and still remains an 8-year-old premium blend. It's got plenty of character because we put in a lot of Talisker and some Highland malts amongst others. Talisker is an excellent whisky and gives a certain character to the blend.

### **Presumably you don't need a lot of Talisker to get a lot of Talisker character?**

No, that is true but DCL – or Diageo as they're now called – have always looked after us very well, supplying us with their malt whisky. They knew that we only used it in our own blend and we would never sell it to anyone else as Talisker.

So we started doing bottled whisky and then we bought a brand called Hedges & Butler and a brand called London Hill gin, which I bought from a pal of mine in the States. We also bought a brand called King Robert – that's done very well. It's a secondary brand – one mustn't call it cheap – a value for money brand which sells about 500,000 cases a year. My brother, David, and I used to go out to the Middle East and sell it in Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. I think a lot of it finishes up in India on the dhows that go out from Dubai creek. That was fun!

We also supplied the firm Rigby & Evans; they were really rum people. We supplied blended whisky to them and they bottled it under a label called William Maxwell. What



Peter Russell prepares a traditional gin and tonic at the Islay Festival

happened there was, we had an agreement on price and the price levels fell tremendously so they were really unable to sell it in a bottle because we were charging too much for the blend. So, we decided that we would reduce the price to a proper economical level and in return we'd have 50% and they'd have 50% of the equity. So David Stevens, the Managing Director of Rigby & Evans, and I used to go over to the States and South America selling Maxwell. I recall that we took out a lot of miniatures with us. However, and as you know, some of the States were dry so by the time we got down to a customer in New Orleans we'd drunk them all! We went and bought a bottle of Dawson's, if I remember rightly, which we thought would be similar to the Maxwell and filled up the miniatures; when we gave them away we muttered something about them having to be opened because of Customs!

### **What happened next?**

We bought Watson's Rum from Allied; Watson's Demerara and Watson's Trawler which only sells in Scotland. Rum is very peculiar – in Scotland anyway. There's OVD which sells throughout Scotland; then there's our one which sells on the east coast; and Black Heart which sells in the west. If you go to a village they'll only be drinking Watson's and in the next village five miles up there

road they'll only be drinking OVD. We make quite a bit of profit out of rum.

## Why is rum so profitable?

The consumers won't switch brands. If you buy a particular rum you don't switch. I think it's because rum is drunk more by the older generation who won't switch. There is greater loyalty.

## There certainly seems to have been a regular pattern of acquisitions.

Yes, and then three years ago we bought Glengoyne Distillery from Edrington. We had never had a distillery before and I think this was a very good move, given the growth worldwide of single malts. Glengoyne has great potential at the premium end of the single malts. We have doubled production at Glengoyne in anticipation of increased sales.

## Had buying a distillery been a plan for some time? Or was it just because the opportunity, the timing or the price was right?

All three. We thought the only category that was making any progress was single malts.

## You must be very happy with your acquisition.

Oh yes, we are; I think it's got a great future. I thought the rise in malts would only be temporary because, historically, malt was the only whisky you had and it was too strong and too flavoursome for people and that's why they started adding grain to make a blend. I thought that going back onto malt was rather a retrograde step and wouldn't continue, but I have been proved to be wrong.

## It has been going on for so long maybe it's here to stay.

Yes, I hope so. There again, quote me on this, because I get so annoyed with people selling malt whisky at such a discounted rate. In my opinion, in retail, the price of many single malts should not be below £20, but you see quite well-known brands at £13 and to cut the price, especially at Christmas time, which people do, is absolute stupidity. There must be a lot of people only buy a bottle of whisky at Christmas time as a gift to give to

father, grandfather or great uncle. People are only too willing to pay £20. Let's face it, these days people want quality and are willing to pay for it.

## What else are people doing in the industry that irks you?

Nothing really. Apart from spending too much money on advertising when we don't have the funds to do so!! No, I think it's also rather a pity that so many of the companies are owned by foreigners!

## Yes, when you were talking about preparing accounts of English owned or American companies in France I was thinking the situation has somewhat reversed these days.

Yes. I think that the people that have come in – Pernod Ricard and LMVH – those are quality people who will hopefully insist that the quality of the goods, not only in the bottle but the packaging as well, is kept high. I understand that Pernod Ricard is spending a hell of a lot of money in China in order to get Chivas Regal as the number one brand. I think they've gone head-to-head with Johnnie Walker Black Label. They are fighting tooth and nail to get the spread. Leonard, my son, the present Managing Director, was telling



Peter Russell Master of the Quatch

me he was in China recently and in night-clubs all over the place you see Chivas Regal in particular. It's everywhere. I think he told me they have hundreds of reps going around the pubs in the towns and cities.

## Are these new markets are worth that level of investment?

These people aren't fools, are they? I think they know what they're doing! But we're also now doing specialty things. We've started a new brand called Smokehead, which is keenly priced and beautifully packaged to appeal perhaps to the younger person. At Glengoyne we're doing quite a number of special "finishes". We are doing some maturing at this moment in new Scottish oak casks; it appears to me that there'll be increased demand for these specialty finishes.

Consumers are looking for more points of difference so it's good to keep the market dynamic by offering different things. Having your own distillery gives you the opportunity to do that.

I thought that, with all these special bottlings of very old whiskies, people would buy them and would keep them in their cocktail cabinets looking at them – but I was wrong! They are pulling the corks and drinking them. There's a lot of margin to be made there...

## So you've been working in the industry since 1956 that means you're working in your 50th year?

Yes; perhaps I'll get a special bottle. Except I must admit that I still prefer our London Hill gin. ■



Recently, my attention was drawn\* to an extraordinary scientific paper which displays the viscimetry of organic substances, including whisky, by crystallography. The implications are immense; we may soon be able to profile flavour by *crystallisation sensible*.

Ever since the beautiful yet evanescent threads and spirals that we know as ‘viscimeric whorls’ were observed in a glass of whisky, attempts have been made to freeze that moment, to ‘catch the joy as it flies’.

Flash-freezing has been the most common method employed, using equipment borrowed from the frozen food industry, but while this has achieved some pleasing effects – not unlike the ‘ice flowers’ found on frozen window panes – it cannot be claimed that the method truly captures viscimeric whorls. Nor does it tell us anything about the viscimeric potential of the liquid under examination.

The association between viscimetry and crystallography has not been missed by viscimetrists, however. Some have even claimed that crystallography [divination by the use of crystals] is a branch of viscimetry. It may be this connection that led the French scientist Margaret Aussenac, of the Laboratoire Thiollot, to explore the properties of organic matter in a solution of copper sulphate.

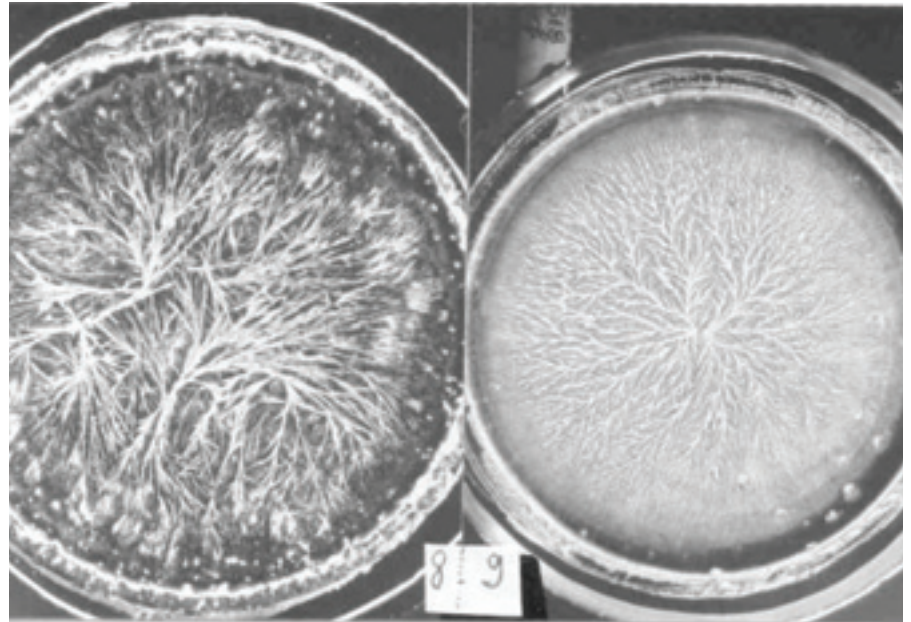
Her results are astonishing, and a full account may be read on [www.biodivin.com/conferences/cristallisationsensible.php](http://www.biodivin.com/conferences/cristallisationsensible.php) – a paper she delivered in March 2004 to the Syndicat International des Vignerons en Culture Biodynamique.

In brief, the method, which is known as *crystallisation sensible* – the literal translation, ‘sensitive crystallisation’, does not really capture the meaning – presents an image of the life force of the substance under consideration.

The methodology is simple: mix 2mls of copper sulphate solution with 3ml of organic material (whisky, wine, vegetable or fruit juice, fat, blood, etc.) and 2mls of distilled water, and place in a broad (11cm) Petrie dish. Warm this at 28C for 14 hours.

By examining the resulting crystals, it is possible to determine:

- whether the substance is healthy, and



Viscimetry of an organic egg

whether it is showing signs of degeneracy or necrosis

- the richness of the substance (e.g. skimmed milk, whole milk, cream)
- the age of the substance
- the vitality of the substance
- its aptitude for ageing/maturing

The photographs that accompany Dr. Aussenac’s paper capture the elegant viscimeric patterns in the various substances: these are nothing less than concrete images of the life forces of each liquid tested. But the images are sometimes shocking: compare the no-life of white sugar with the vibrancy of unrefined sugar; the dense patterning of organic egg with the stringy disorganisation of *oeuf de supermarché*.

Scarily, she also remarks that if a laser has been shot through the liquid prior to mixing with copper sulphate – e.g. with a bar-code reader – the crystals will be de-structured for a matter of weeks... Might this impact on flavour? Perhaps it is safest to buy whisky from specialist retailers who will not use a bar-code reader.

Unfortunately, there are no illustrations of whisky, but she does say that in eau-de-vie the needle-like crystals are broken (*brisées*)

by the distilling process and that – in relation to wine – “each has its signature”, depending upon terroir, grape variety and other factors. If ‘foreign’ liquids have been added, they appear as ‘stains’ on the crystals.

This raises the fascinating possibility of malt whisky profiling by *crystallisation sensible*. Does each malt have its own viscimeric signature? What is the effect of age on the signature? Might it be possible to tell from the crystal whether the whisky is at optimum maturation? Is the signature altered when the whisky is matured in one place or another? Will ‘stains’ appear if the whisky has been tinted with spirit caramel?

Many comparative studies are required. It is rumoured that some initial work is being undertaken as I write by the shadowy Viscimeric Circle of the super-heros of the whisky world, the famous MaltManiacs. Rest assured that I will keep you informed. In the meantime, **SWR** will be very interested in your own findings. ■

NB I am grateful to Olivier Humbrecht M.W., of L’Ordre Ancien de Viscimetrists d’Alsace, for alerting me to Margaret Aussenac’s paper.

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