

# The Water of Life

Born in the remote Highlands of a faraway land, Scotch whisky is the preferred libation of many a mountaineer. Our new High Culture columnist gives us a tasting.

By Wade Swagar

THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL about a dram of Scotch whisky. Those cold winter nights just don't seem as dreadful with a warming nip of liquid gold in the palm of your hands.

The ancient Celts named it *usquebaugh*, meaning "water of life." Phonetically it became *usky* and then "whisky" in English. It's made from a fermented mash of malted barley, much like beer, which is then distilled, without the addition of hops. Distillation had first been used to extract the essential oils and aromatic compounds of herbs, barks and flowers in the making of perfumes. Some brilliant person figured out they could also use this process to turn an already enjoyable drink into an even more potent libation, like using wine to create brandy.

In parts of the world where grapes were scarce, this same logic led to the creation of whisky from the distillation of cereal grains, such as barley. Monks made their *aqua vitae* or "water of life" in the sacred halls of the monasteries, commonly prescribing it for the preservation of health, the prolongation of life and the relief of many ailments including colic, palsy and even smallpox.

After the closure of many monasteries, the craft of distillation spread, as many of the monks who needed work put their knowledge of distilling to use. The rural Scottish farmer took this knowledge, as well as any extra barley from the harvest, and made whisky. It was used to welcome guests and to invigorate the body and mind during those long, cold, arduous Scottish winters.

The 1707 Act of Union, which combined both the English and Scottish parliaments, threatened to put an end to this practice, as the English parliament set out to tame the wild rebellious clans of the Scottish Highlands by taxing both the raw ingredient barley and its end product whisky. Up until this point, the Scots had paid very few taxes, but now they were part of a large colonial and military power needing money to keep the conquering wheels of the motherland in motion.

The Scottish people saw this as an English imposition and determined there was no good reason to pay for the privilege of making a cornerstone of their cultural history—a product that would, in

essence, become their national drink. A revolt in principle manifested, and the illicit still was cleverly hidden away, high up in the mountains.

THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS, home to Great Britain's highest mountain, 1,344-metre Ben Nevis, are a group of inclement, moody and treeless hills filled with wild, silent places. They can be an inhospitable host, with glowering, ominous skies, torrential downpours and howling winds. Thick stands of heather and dense clumps of bracken cling to rocky crags, weaving into mysterious nooks and crannies. It proved to be the perfect place for an illegal still, hidden away from the prying eyes of the law. Not that this stopped the lawmen from looking. The government taxmen, known as "gaugers," were paid a sum for the discovery of a still or a percentage of the value of any spirits seized. In response, the illicit distillers developed an elaborate system of using fires and smoke signals at the tops of the hills to warn each other of the presence of much loathed excisemen. There's even one account of a tunnel that was fashioned to redirect the smoke from a still fire to a chimney in a cottage some 30 metres away.

Throughout the next century, the smuggling of whisky became commonplace. Coffins were used for transporting and even the space under the church pulpit was a favourite hiding place. Bloody battles often ensued between the smugglers and the gaugers, clashing in the mountains and roadways, each side armed with swords and pistols. Many were injured or killed. In 1820, over 14,000 illicit stills were confiscated; however, only 50 per cent of the whisky being produced was subjected to any taxes.

Much of the illegal whisky made in the Highlands was exported to the Lowland cities and towns, often subsidizing farmers' rents. The landlords, acting as de facto justices of the peace, would often enforce ridiculously small fines on anyone caught with a still, knowing it was those very stills that were paying the rent.

The Excise Act of 1823 put an end to hidden stills and contraband Scotch whisky. With the English government introducing a £10 fee

for a distillery licence, it was once again legal and profitable to produce the "water of life."

ACCORDING TO SCOTTISH LAW, Scotch whisky must mature in oak casks for no less than three years and a day, but more often will be released after quietly aging in dusty warehouses for between 10 and 18 years. Bourbon barrels are most commonly used, as US law stipulates that a new oak barrel must be used for each batch. In recent years, there has been an interest in both ends of the Scotch spectrum, and so interest in "young" Scotches at eight years old and older expressions of 30 years or more is increasingly on the rise. The longer it sits, the more you will generally pay.

Today there are close to 200 active distilleries in Scotland, with

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nearly 30 more having been mothballed, sitting silent for various reasons, their futures uncertain. Scotland's distilleries are separated into six distinct regions or areas, with each area producing a certain style of whisky, with its own characteristics and flavours.

Campbeltown is still designated a whisky-producing region but mostly for historical reasons. The city was once considered the undisputed whisky capital of Scotland but now only has three operating distilleries. One is **Springbank**, known for its medium body and long, strong finish, with hints of vanilla, citrus and peat smoke.

Whisky from the Lowlands tends to be smooth, leaning away from peat and smoke flavours, with just a little hint of fire in the belly.

**Auchentoshan**, which is uncommonly distilled three times, is fresh and fruity, with grassy aromas and notes of citrus.

If you were looking to introduce a friend to whisky, anything from the Speyside region would be a great starting point. It features the largest number of distilleries among the regions, producing

whiskies with rich flavour, complexity and relatively mild character.

**The Macallan**, which is matured in sherry casks, is a full-bodied beauty, balanced with notes of dried fruit and sherry, delivering a long, creamy finish. One can usually find a 12-year-old, an 18-year-old and a 25-year-old on the same shelves, making this a great whisky to taste against itself to explore the subtle changes that occur during those extra years in the cask.

The Islands is a region of the islands Mull, Orkney, Jura, Arran, Shetlands and Skye.

**Highland Park**, which is produced on Orkney and is Scotland's most northern distillery, has been described by many a whisky critic as the best all around whisky. It's full-bodied yet soft on the palate, with a touch of smoke and a gentle caress of heather and honey in the finish.

The Highlands is geographically the largest whisky-producing region and produces powerful and sometimes quite smoky expressions. Glenmorangie was one of the first to experiment with finishing their whiskies in barrels that once held port, cognac, Madeira and even Bordeaux. After 10 years in bourbon barrels, the spirit is transferred into these casks for an additional two to three years to impart additional flavours. Trying a 10-year-old **Glenmorangie** against one finished in a port cask really lets you taste the difference a cask can make.

**Islay Scotch** is known for its unique flavour, hailing from the island of Islay, off the west coast of the Scottish mainland, which at one time had 23 distilleries. Today, however, the number has been reduced to seven. Generally the whisky produced on Islay has a huge flavour with a lot of smoke and peat, with a tang of salt and tar thrown in for good measure. **Lagavulin** has an oily, viscous mouth feel, with a punch of smoke and peat that finishes with just a touch of fruit.

The world of Scotch whisky, as complex as the spirit itself, is one worthy of exploration. No two whiskies are the same, so after a long day in the highland regions of the Kootenays, be sure to grab a book and a comfy chair and start your journey. ☐

From the Scottish Highlands to backyard peaks, Kootenay boy Chris George enjoys some of the ol' *usquebaugh* with friends, Plaid Lake, BC. Photo: Peter Moynes