

Örjan Westerlund

Whisk(e)y

HISTORY, MANUFACTURE, AND ENJOYMENT

*h.f.*fullmann

Whisky in Scotland for the first time

Northern Britain was originally populated by the Picts. They got their name from the body paintings they adorned themselves with. Or was it because they carved pictures on rocks? Or because they had clothes with colored patterns? Take your pick. There are in fact today Pictish designs preserved on stones at some ancient sites and they reappear as reproductions, for example in several of the labels and symbols on various versions of Glenmorangie's whisky labeling and packaging.

The fate of the Picts has fallen into oblivion, since their disappearance from our history in about 900 AD is as poorly documented as their origins. However, during the great European migrations they were forced out by Celts who, arriving via what is now Ireland, populated what was to become Scotland from the beginning of the 5th century. The Celts brought to this part of north-western Europe their Gaelic language and their culture.

In 409 AD, the Romans left south-west Scotland. There, and in Ireland, the kingdom of Dál Riata was formed. St. Columba arrived in Scotland from Ireland in 563 and began to save Picts and Scots as fast as he could. It was in conjunction with this that Columba founded the monastery on the island of Iona, west of the Isle of Mull and about 12 miles west of Oban.

But now let's take a big leap forward into the Middle Ages. The first Scottish reference to proper whisky is normally considered to be an entry in the Exchequer Rolls (tax records) for 1494. The entry describes how the monk John Cor, from Lindores Abbey just north of the then Scottish capital Dunfermline, had bought in a considerable amount of malt, on the orders moreover of the whisky-loving King James IV of Scotland. In addition to his often-mentioned thirst, the king considered himself to be knowledgeable about medicine, and needed whisky to cure himself and others. Rather like you and your remedy for coughs and colds, I would imagine.

In the Exchequer Rolls it is apparent that John Cor's purchase consisted of "eight bolls of malt to Friar John



Cor, by order of the King, wherewith to make aqua vitae". That volume is the equivalent of about 2,600 pounds (1,200 kg) in weight. That's a lot of sacks of malt. Even if the yield was not as high as today's, it would still have been sufficient to make tens if not hundreds of gallons (or hundreds of liters) of whisky. Distillation was certainly an established practice by the time this entry was made, although it would have been mainly for medicinal purposes, and using wine as the raw material. What's amazing about the brief entry from 1494 is that, for the first time, it provides evidence of Scottish liquor distillation with barley as the raw material. Note also that it was in the Lowlands that it all started.

"The Irish invented whisky, but only used it as a liniment for their sick mules. Only my fellow-countrymen would have thought of the idea of drinking whisky."

Unknown Scottish poet.



The clan culture that came in from the cold

After the battle of Culloden, anything to do with the culture of the clans was prohibited in British public life. So, it was a major vindication when George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822, the first English monarch to do so since 1633. Until this event, the culture, clothing and music of the clans had been viewed with disdain in England and also in Lowland Scotland. Things were now changing in Scotland, whose densely-populated southern parts were fumbling for a national identity and whose northern part had been treated like the poor relation for several decades. The royal visit in 1822 gave Scottish nationalism a real boost. The visit was in addition stage-managed by the very popular Scottish Romantic Sir Walter Scott. The welcome drink? Whisky of course. And dress? Tartan-patterned, naturally. Even the king was dressed up as a clan chieftain—although he was said to have had long pink underpants on underneath. The lengths a prudish monarch will go to to hide the Crown Jewels!

The royal visit and the blessing of the whisky had far-reaching consequences. They contributed hugely

both to the work of introducing whisky into social circles and at the same time to making it politically acceptable as an important product for Great Britain as a whole.

The demand for whisky took another leap forward when Queen Victoria began to spend time at Balmoral Castle, going on grouse-shooting expeditions and reading Sir Walter Scott. What could then be more natural than to publicly divulge a liking for whisky? In truth, these Scottish-related events drove sales of whisky more than the fact that the queen actually also visited Ireland in 1849. Gradually, snifter-drinking English gentlemen were persuaded that their brandy could be replaced by a good whisky. The queen's soft spot for the Highlands also rubbed off, positively, on Ireland.

"... pure Glenlivet whisky; the king drank nothing else."

Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus
(1797–1886, "The Highland Lady",
authoress and social commentator)

HISTORY IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

The history of whisky is a story of alchemists, cantankerous Scots, settlers and inquisitive entrepreneurs with a liking for liquor. The following are some milestones from antiquity through to today, mostly relating to whisky, whiskey, or bourbon.

3000 BC: The ancient Egyptians get the hang of how heating and condensing increases the concentration of a liquid and can also separate mixtures of liquids.

800 BC: Distillation of arrack is known in India. Around this time distillation is also known in China.

384 BC: Aristotle is born (384–322); he later describes distillation in his *Meteorologica*.

432 AD: St. Patrick is sent to Ireland from France to convert the island to Christianity and is said also to have taught the art of distillation.

12th century: At the medical school in Salerno the use of distilled wine is first documented in Europe.

1170s: Henry II of England sends soldiers to Ireland. It's likely they brought uisge beatha home with them.

1494: Aqua vitae is first mentioned in writing when the monk John Cor buys 2,600 pounds of malt.

1506: Note from English King Henry VII's treasurer that the king bought "aqua vitae to the King" on his visit to Inverness, September 15 and 17.

1519: Hieronymus Braunschweig's book "Das Buch zu destillieren" is published. It describes with copious illustrations and much detail how brandywine is distilled for medicinal purposes.

1579: First reference in law to aqua vitae in Scotland. A grain shortage means production of aqua vitae is restricted to the upper classes.

1618: One of the first written references to the expression "uiskie". It's mentioned in the accounts after the funeral of an estate owner in the Highlands.

1644: Scottish parliament approves a proposed law to start taxing "everie pynt of aquavytie or strong watteris sold within the country." Tax on "strong watteris" for the first time. Taxation is to bring in money for the rebels against Charles I.

1690: The first distillery in Ferintosh is renamed after being burned down by the Jacobites while the owner Duncan Forbes of Culloden was fighting for King William II against James I in 1689. Forbes and his descendants are exempted from liquor tax, so-called excise duty, due to his efforts.

1707: The Union Treaty this year saw the combining of the Scottish and English parliaments.

1724–25: A malt tax is introduced in Scotland and simmering discontent erupts into illegal distilling, riots—the Shawfields Riots in Glasgow—smuggling and tax evasion.

1746: April 16, Catholic troops and clan militias are defeated under Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden. In this last battle on the British Isles, the Stuart family and the clans are swept away for good by a government army superior in both number and equipment.

1749: Giacomo Justerini arrives in London from Italy and sets up as a wine merchant in the firm Johnson & Justerini.

Mid 18th century: Unflavored whisky—"plain malt"—starts increasingly to part company with the flavored version. This happens more and more as quality improves and the flavoring is not needed to hide fusel oil, taints and bad craftsmanship.

Ireland

“Any of the girls who want something Irish in them?”

Anyone who knows their Thin Lizzy will recognize the words in the heading from a live performance in the late 1970s. They came, with a crooked grin, from one of the rock world’s more contradictory characters—Phil Lynott, an Irishman of mixed race, in revealingly tight leather trousers and a haircut not unlike a bearskin hat. A moment earlier, he had been wondering if any of the girls in the audience had any Irish in them. Which he then followed up with the above offer. Setting aside the innuendo, getting on for forty years later it seems clear: both the girls in the audience and everyone else these days *do* get something Irish in them pretty often, to judge by the success of Irish whiskey sales.

Revenge is brewing: amber tumblers cupped in coarse craftsmen’s hands in rural pub settings; commercials with flying houses in fantastic tales from the Irish countryside; massive campaigns and a stream of product launches—profile-raising is underway, and everything suggests that it is having an effect on the popularity of Irish whiskey. It must be due some acclaim anyhow; surely the kilt-wearing Scots and the bandy-legged Americans can’t be the only ones on the whiskey map? If we start from media profile, Ireland has a pretty familiar image too. You’re probably thinking of rolling green hills, a roaring swell, and perhaps a stone house with a pub at the roadside in a small village? By all means, spice up the picture with grim Northern Irish 70s realism—rough English policemen on the hunt for nimble-fingered bombers and troublemakers. Dilute with a couple of pints of Guinness in a gloomy bar and consume the mixture in the company of an Irish setter, and there you have an emerald-green dish of well-rooted national identity which is at least as sharply defined as Scotland’s. Ironically enough, the Irish like the Scots have a national pride catalyzed by an unwillingness to be cowed by the same English supremacy; in both

cases whiskey is one of the basic ingredients and for Ireland it’s a whiskey that has now come in from the wilderness. Those of us on the padded side of the bar have now again realized that the amber liquid from the emerald isle deserves better than being drowned in sweetened coffee dripping with cream.

From the beginning

It’s likely that the Irish learned the art of distilling liquor before the knowledge had reached Scotland—something to be voiced discreetly if there are any Scots in the vicinity. However, the fact that Ireland was converted to Christianity before Scotland is a strong indicator that the art of distillation arrived earlier in Ireland too. It was probably returning pilgrims who passed on the knowledge, although this may have not happened as early as in the time of St. Patrick as some people have asserted. Ireland’s history has been intertwined with Scotland’s since early times. The Dál Riata kingdom was established in the 5th century in the north east of what is now Ireland and what later became south west Scotland. This part of Europe became Christian at the beginning of the

Whisky production

Any self-respecting book about whisky contains a section about production. If you are one of the anorak-wearing types at home with a camera and notebook observing mashing and accustomed to making your way among the casks in the storage warehouses, then you can probably skim quickly through this chapter. If, on the other hand, you belong to the happy flock that has just acquired a taste for whisky, have visited your first distillery or only want to find out more about how whisky is made, then you have an interesting chapter containing basic facts about whisky ahead of you. There is a thorough analysis of malt whisky, but also some space devoted to corn and unmalted barley. The magnifying glass is particularly focused on what it is that provides the taste since this is the most important thing for us, is it not?

From barley to whisky

The barley

There are a couple of answers, both just as sensible, to the question of why barley began to be used for whisky in the first place. One of these is the obvious one: barley was used because that was what was available. Beer had been made from barley throughout living memory. When returning monks and men with a medical education taught others the art of distilling, it was, however, the alcoholic fermented raw material that was readily available that was initially used, i.e., wine. But soon enough, perhaps as early as the 12th century, a mash using only barley began to be used. In other words, they began to distil beer instead of wine.

Another reason why barley is still used today, when other kinds of grain are actually available, is that barley is one of God's best whisky raw product packages—compared with other types of grain, barley has a high starch content, which can be converted into fermentable sugar. Also, and rather practically, barley contains the tool to break down the starch, i.e., the necessary enzymes.



◀ *One of the stills in Mackmyra's gravitational distillery.*

Not just the cask that provides taste

After kilning, the next stages involve making use of the valuable properties of the malt. More interesting than the tricks of the trade is how those properties affect the taste of the whisky in your glass. This is particularly the case because the Scottish malt whisky produced today is still primarily used as an ingredient in blended whisky, as a flavoring you could say. About ninety percent of all whisky sold throughout the world is blended whisky, although only about 80% in my malt-loving homeland of Sweden. From this point of view, the most important thing about malt whisky is that it has a clear and consistent character. We talk of properties such as smokiness, sweetness, fruitiness, oiliness and grassiness. You also experience this type of basic characteristic when you yourself smell a whisky during a tasting or sitting at home on the sofa. A much more difficult part of the jigsaw is finding characteristics that match. Two different types of malt whisky with a sweet taste can have a completely different effect as part of a blend, depending on their other characteristic traits of oiliness, malt taste, smokiness and so forth. This explains why, to get a good blend, it is so important to choose a base, the grain liquor, that combines well with the other ingredients.

The character of a whisky emerges during maturation, however. Broadly speaking, about two thirds of the color, aroma and whisky character come from maturation in the cask. Mashing, fermentation and distillation certainly have a considerable effect on the aroma, flavor and mouthfeel of the raw liquor and thereby also the whisky. The effect they have can be managed with precision nowadays, which is largely the result of research into the factors that give rise to the various qualities of the end product. I say nowadays because many of the contributory chemical and biological reactions were not known just a few decades ago. This was a time when the distilleries would beat their chests and proudly declare how they made the best whisky in the world. Surprisingly enough, they were rather taken aback if you dared to ask what it was that made it so good.

◀ *The extremely cultivated Henric Molin among the fermenting tubs at Spirit of Hven. (Top)*

◀ *Stills at Ardbeg. (Bottom, right)*



Fermentation

Most of the character of the raw liquor is produced during fermentation. Everyone in the brewing industry knows that the yeast affects the character of the final result. There the way the yeast is looked after is reminiscent of how sacred cows are handled in India—carefully, cautiously and with dignity. In the whisky industry, it has been primarily American producers who have historically considered yeast highly important for taste. This trend can now be seen in other whisky-producing countries. In the US, their attention to the care and choice of yeast manifests itself in, among other things, their own highly-valued yeasts being stored like the family jewels in several different geographical locations, so that they can survive power cuts and other catastrophes without individual strains dying out or degenerating.

Nowadays, a Scotsman also chooses his yeast carefully when it comes to producing whisky. The length of fermentation affects the growth of bacteria. A rapid fermentation reduces the chances of bacteria growing and thereby reduces the element of acidity in the wash that the bacteria contribute to. In terms of flavor, the effect of this is that the raw liquor becomes fruitier with a greater degree of acidity in the wash. This is because the reactions of the acids with the copper stills during distillation add a fruitiness to the raw liquor. A producer desiring a sharper, grassier tone in his whisky will thereby choose a hard-working yeast that consumes the sugar in the wash quickly. Those desiring a more acidic wash instead, and a fruitier whisky with more esters, will choose a yeast that chews through the sugar content of the mash at a somewhat slower tempo. But how long actually is long? This obviously varies depending on the conditions, but after about 40 hours no further alcohol is produced. If fermentation is allowed to continue for twice as long, 80 hours, the otherwise grassy character will clearly have developed into a more acidic, in other words fruitier, whisky. Often the

fermentation time at distilleries varies because it is allowed to continue for longer on weekends. In terms of extremes, a first example in this context would be Tomatin, where fermentation is quick and lasts only 46–48 hours. On the other hand, there are producers like Cardhu with long fermentation periods, averaging 65 hours, or Glenfiddich, where, with fermentation lasting between 55 and 72 hours, there are fermentation buildings where there is already a heavy, sweet and fruity aroma in parts of the distillery at the fermentation stage.

Distillation

As we know, each stage of the distillation process gives the raw liquor increasing purity. Other ways to determine the flavor of the raw liquor and which substances accompany it from the still are temperature and time. This is largely governed by how the distiller decides to make his cut. Put simply, the cut decides how little or how much of what comes out of the still is collected. It's done by controlling when to start collecting what is coming from the still and when to stop. Calculated on the basis of percentage of alcohol per volume, the first drops collected will have a high alcoholic content; once the distillation has been depleted of its ethanol, after a few hours, this will reduce and the receiver will on the other hand become increasingly full.

The three main elements of distillation are usually called head, heart and tail. In other words, it is how big a heart the producer decides to collect that governs a great deal of the flavor of the raw liquor. The temperature rises as a result of distillation. If the distiller decides to allow the beginning of the heart to touch on the head, the liquor will have a more flowery and lighter character. If the heart acquires part of the tail, the raw liquor will be oilier and heavier and, if the prerequisites are there from the malt, also smokier.

The reason this happens is that the components in the wash that are light in chemical terms, the substances with a low boiling point, evaporate away early when

Good taste

Behind the whisky you like to drink, there is a whole science, or perhaps a swirling cocktail, of chemistry—esters, heavy and light alcohols, aldehydes, ketones, phenols—totaling many hundreds of flavorings in a single glass. In addition, we are talking about flavorings and aromatic substances where not even the aforementioned world of science knows everything about the interaction between the chemicals and where we don't even know everything about the origins or the identities of all the substances. We should probably be quite happy about this, since unknown factors do after all add an air of excitement to your favorite liquor and perhaps a little of that pioneering spirit when you attempt to identify the aromas.

As we know, a whisky normally contains around 40% alcohol – check! 60% water – check? No, of the remaining sixty percent a few miserable tenths of a percent consist of other substances. These fractions of the whole include various forms of sugar. There

*"If a body could just find oot
the exac' proper proportion
and quantity that ought to be
drunk every day ... doctors
and kirkyards would go oot
o' fashion"*

James Hogg, 1826, a Scottish
poet and author (1770–1835)

are also other substances that give the characteristic color, aroma and flavor that are typical of whisky. Certainly, a pedant would say that there is a taste to both water and ethanol and that may be the case, but that flavor profile is not characteristic of whisky in particular.

The few tenths of a percent is shared by what a puritanical chemist specializing in alcohol would call impurities. These arise or are introduced during all stages of the production process and for different reasons. Different alcohols can themselves give rise to a variety of sensations, whether this is a whiff of methanol in the early stages of distillation or the heavier alcohols towards the end. Alcohols per se may give aromas of cucumber, violets, grass and mushrooms. Through gradual oxidation, other substances are formed from the alcohols which contribute to aromas and flavors. So-called aldehydes arise when alcohol is oxidized and during the reaction is deprived of hydrogen atoms. The aldehydes arise during both distillation and the process in general. The aldehydes are often given the credit for positive experiences, such as the aroma of vanilla, cinnamon, oranges and bitter almond, and also cloves, where the substance eugenol is the active component. These pleasant aromas are derived from heavier alcohols and come from the later stages of distillation.

If the aldehydes are then oxidized a step further, acids are formed, as with ordinary ethanol which, when exposed to air, is slowly broken down into acetaldehyde, which, in turn, oxidizes into acetic acid. We're

Ten of the best

Choosing the ten best types of whisky in an objective manner is impossible, as ranking them becomes a very subjective process. Nevertheless, I have made an honest attempt to include high-quality whiskies where the producer has a clear concept and high ambitions for his product. There is also some geographical spread here to provide a bit of breadth. Above all, however, this small and carefully-made selection contains a number of whiskies I recommend you try if you have not already done so. They are all available in well-stocked stores and they have also enjoyed a longer life than seasonal products, even though Balvenie Port Wood is, for me, the very definition of a Christmas whisky with its fruity, velvety body. And I can certainly state that Blanton's Straight from the Barrel is a whisky just made for the late summer—it is best drunk on warm evenings under an August moon accompanied by the clinking of ice and some good company!

Ardbeg Ten (46%)

An aroma of an Asian spice store, tarred hemp rope and just a hint of peppermint. In addition, a sweet, rich and, at the same time peaty aroma with elements of salt and aniseed, as if you have just opened a bag of liquorice tablets warmed by the sun. **The taste** is full-bodied and sweetly grainy. It will take on a sweeter character if you add a few drops of water. **Its aftertaste** has spicy, salty tones. Here, there is a trace of weak salmiak, a little grain husk and its long finish provides a hint of cigar smoke and burnt wood.

A young Islay whisky stored in a bourbon cask, which, thanks to its youth, has acquired malt, smokiness and also a slight full-bodiedness from its ten years in an oak cask.



Balvenie Port wood, 21 year old (43%)

A slightly acidic aroma with flowery tones of ripe fruit with the malty, perfumish tones that are typical of Balvenie in the background. A touch of strong sweetness and also freshly baked sponge cake emerges. **The taste** has a buttery strength with traces of butter biscuit and is intensely malty with dark marmalade tones. Delicious! **The aftertaste** is intricately malty and jammy, and austere without being dry. Reminds you of the sensation you get in your mouth after swallowing a glass of a rather weak unsweetened fruit drink made from strawberries, blackcurrants and a little cherry. A little peat emerges well into the aftertaste. An excellent matured whisky that is good on its own or in company with a piece of fruity chocolate and a creamy cigar.

Matured at the neighboring Glenfiddich distillery in a bourbon cask and, finally, for 6-9 months in port pipes, i.e., used port casks with a volume of about 132 gallons (500 liters).



Glenmorangie Finealta (46%)

The **aroma** is a fruity, perfumey one and is oddly composed of prickly sweetness, dried fruit, some slightly peaty phenols and even a drop of nail polish. Dried fruit and vanilla dominate and the vanilla aroma is reminiscent mainly of butter biscuits. The **taste** is initially peppery, particularly if you taste another whisky from this elegant, well-tuned family in parallel. The pepperiness is joined by a creamy sweetness that has both a malty, grainy tone and also a gilt edge of phenol the whole time, just like the aroma. The **aftertaste** leads with phenols that, along with malty sweetness, are most delicious. When they fade, a soft, dry, cask tone intensifies, maintaining the theme of malty sweetness, and soon moving to a longer aftertaste of a more cereal-accented, grain husk character.

Apparently, Finealta means elegant in Gaelic. According to the producer, the recipe dates back to 1903. Here, there is a fine combination of light, smoky tones and balanced fruitiness from storage in oloroso casks. Very successful and certainly old and classic, but I become absolutely ecstatic from the first sensation in my mouth: a sensation that can only be expressed as "really good whisky" so as not to complicate matters!



Highland Park 18 year old (43%)

A richly fruity **aroma** with caramelized pears, a little dried apricot, and a touch of orange. The **taste is of unobtrusive and well-balanced sweetness** that continues to have a fruity tone with a breadish dryness that slowly releases the peat taste. The **peat tone then continues in the aftertaste**, which has light, fruity, almost perfumey, flowery characteristics that meander on towards peat and cask. Complex and uncommonly varied in the composition of its characteristics. A whisky to spoil yourself with, or else to introduce someone to the world of malt whisky with.

Forty-five percent blended in first-time cask, which makes this eighteen-year old from Scotland's most northerly whisky distillery an essential, foundation whisky for all needs; it's also, as a rule, very good value.





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