



OUTTURN

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Issue 148



ENDLESS DISCOVERIES AT SMWS.CA

GET ACQUAINTED WITH THE SMWS FLAVOUR PROFILES

Exploration is the greatest joy of Society membership, roaming the broad vistas of flavour and aroma represented in our vast selection of whiskies. But exploration without a map can be frustrating.

So we have 12 distinct flavour categories, each represented by its own colour, from Young & Spritely to Old & Dignified; Light & Delicate to Heavily Peated. These 12 categories offer an alternative to the more traditional method of categorizing whiskies by their region of origin (Islay, Speyside, etc).

Our flavour map gives whisky lovers a far better way to navigate our endless and ever-changing selection of bottlings, many of which are not typical of their region.

YOUNG & SPRITELY

SWEET, FRUITY & MELLOW

SPICY & SWEET

SPICY & DRY

DEEP, RICH & DRIED FRUITS

OLD & DIGNIFIED

LIGHT & DELICATE

JUICY, OAK & VANILLA

OILY & COASTAL

LIGHTLY PEATED

PEATED

HEAVILY PEATED



JUICY, OAK & VANILLA

EXTRAVAGANCE MEETS TIMELESS ELEGANCE

CASK NO. 85.73

\$216.99



REGION	<i>Speyside</i>
INITIAL CASK	<i>Ex-Bourbon Hogshead</i>
FINAL CASK	<i>2nd Fill Sauternes Barrique</i>
AGE	<i>16 Years</i>
DISTILLED ON	<i>21 July 2006</i>
OUTTURN	<i>231 Bottles</i>
ABV	<i>57.4%</i>

An air of extravagance exuded which we described as lemon tagliolini with taleggio, sprinkled with truffle shavings and followed by grilled honey balsamic-glazed fruits. The taste was very different, juicy and tropical like a bay breeze cocktail of pineapple and cranberry juices, white rum and a splash of grenadine.

The addition of water emphasised that feeling of summer delight, with the scent of passion fruit parfait, orange sorbet and a dollop of tutti frutti ice cream. The very refined, creamy texture on the palate was like a vanilla almond coconut milkshake. Following 13 years in an ex-bourbon hogshead, we transferred this whisky into a 2nd fill sauternes barrique.

THE SMWS TASTING PANEL

‘Tasting Panel.’ Two words which have become synonymous with the Society since the early days of the 1980s. So ubiquitous are they, in fact, that it has become easy to overlook the significance of what the Tasting Panel represents, how it works and what it has delivered for the Society’s members over the years. Angus MacRaild has been one of the Panel’s chairs for the past seven years, and here reflects on its functions, and what he’s learned from his role.

Like many of the early concepts of the SMWS, the Tasting Panel was something that evolved naturally, with more than a little serendipity about it. The founders of the Society were friends who socialised and drank their whiskies together. That social aspect informed the decision-making process about what casks to bottle, and the notion of the group sampling session – or ‘tasting panel’ – evolved quite organically out of that.

The Society still selects its bottlings using this process today, and even in instances where Euan and the Spirits Team have conceived and created small-batch products, those batch samples still undergo quality control and assessment via the Tasting Panel.

Perusing an Outturn, you might be forgiven for thinking that the Tasting Panels are frivolous. After all, there’s no shortage of names and notes which veer into the playful and surreal. But the nature of the Society’s presentation is juxtaposed by a rigorously designed and controlled process of quality assessment that is today’s Tasting Panel.



HOW IT WORKS

For starters, Panels are always at least four people these days, and every sample has to pass all four Panel members to move forward for bottling. The makeup of each Panel is varied and diverse. There are tasters with years of industry experience, who bring uniquely authoritative and technical insight. There are also younger enthusiasts, people who might just be starting out on their whisky journey or career, who bring a fresh perspective and interrogate whiskies in ways those of us with more experience might not think to.

A cask sample is shared amongst the panellists, and notes are recorded for neat nose, neat palate, reduced nose and reduced palate. A score is given to each of the four aspects of the cask sample, and then overall comments are discussed among the Panel and recorded. Within this process there are long stretches of concentrated silence, often followed by discussions that can range from the scientific, to the philosophical, to outright giggling – it’s usually in those moments that the inspiration for some of the more outlandish bottling names can strike. Out of that process, the cumulative notes of all Panel members are then worked into bottle notes and names by the Panel chairperson.

NOTES FROM A TASTING PANEL CHAIRPERSON

I started working as a Panel chairperson back in 2015, and during that time it has been a part of my professional life that I have cherished and learned a great deal from. Here are just some of the main takeaways from my time on the Panel thus far...

Whisky is better than it used to be...

On the Panel, we taste a lot of cask samples, often a lot of similar cask types as well – many 1st and 2nd fill barrels, and many refill hogsheads. What has struck me consistently over the years is that the overall quality of Scotch whisky has improved from where it was in the mid-1990s and earlier. Now, it's arguable that with this higher average consistency, some of the peaks of stellar beauty have disappeared, but the persistence of quality always strikes me and has caused me to reassess my opinions about a number of distilleries.

There's amazing whisky from all over the world...

A sibling observation to point one, but there really are some amazing whiskies being made in places we'd never have thought about a few years ago. India, Sweden, France, Australia and New Zealand are all joining the whisky party in a striking way (to name but a few). And the overarching impression is that whisky truly is a global spirit now. Some argue this is a challenge to Scotch. I would argue that's true but also a very good and necessary thing.

Tasting spirits is like exercise...

Being good, or professional, or rigorous with tasting spirits and trying to do it to a reasonably consistent level, is not a place you arrive at and remain. Rather, it is like most physical disciplines, something that requires constant exercise, practice and general maintenance. Tasting is the flexing of your olfactory system and mind in a manner which keeps it honed. This was one of the main motivations for me to start working on the Panel in the first place, and today remains one of the key reasons why I'm still grateful to be doing this work.

Four heads are better than one...

When assessing spirits, the cumulation of different experiences and opinions lends the Tasting Panel a unique power. It's more democratic, more diverse, and stands apart from the highly traditionalist (and boring!) notions of the 'master blender'; these fusty ideas about the auteur of whisky are dispensed with in favour of a process which pairs quality control with something much more interesting than notions of scientists in lab coats: fun! The Panel is a process that reminds us of its roots: that whisky is social, that it is – ultimately – a drink, and its true enjoyment lies in the process of its destruction and in the sharing of that experience with others.



SMALL BATCH BLENDED MALT

WHISKY BABA

CASK NO. N/A

\$160.99



REGION	Speyside
CASK TYPES	Bourbon Hogsheads and Ex-Rum French Oak Barriques
AGE	12 Years
DISTILLED ON	20 January 2010
OUTTURN	2016 Bottles
ABV	58.6%

To create this expression, we opted for some rather unusual casks. Crafted from French oak, these barriques had previously been used to mature Jamaican rum in the Cognac region of France. We filled them with a selection of Speyside malts for a period of 28 months of additional maturation. We then blended selected casks together to create this intensely fruity dram.

On the nose neat we poured golden syrup and honey on to wheat biscuit breakfast cereal. Some indulged in chocolate-coated marzipan and slices of rich Madeira cake, while others baked a golden syrup sponge that was heavy on orange peel and dried papaya. The taste was an explosion of rum-soaked pineapples while the French oak contributed spices such as anise and cinnamon. A satisfying toasty oak note evolved into vanilla pods, mace, nutmeg, orange oil and mango.

With a splash of water we could smell a bowl of sugar-coated puffed rice, varnish and resinous oak, ginger cake, orange zest and barley sugars. There were deep notes of dunnage warehouse, apple cubes, and hints of buttery rancio topped off with desiccated coconut. The palate was now silky and mouthcoating, with tangerines and dark chocolate, and a whisky baba pudding. Melon and mango were drizzled with floral honey, and we ate chocolate orange cake mix straight from the bowl. **Whisky Baba won a Double Gold medal in the 2023 San Francisco World Spirits Competition.**

DEEP, RICH & DRIED FRUITS

FULL FRONTAL DICHOTOMY

CASK NO. 39.275

\$259.99



REGION *Speyside*

INITIAL CASK *Ex-Bourbon Hogshead*

FINAL CASK *1st Fill Oloroso Hogshead*

AGE *16 Years*

DISTILLED ON *24 July 2006*

OUTTURN *255 Bottles*

ABV *56.7%*

Perfumed aromas mixed with toffee apples, dessert wine and calvados while toasted pine nut and crushed oily brazil nuts were sprinkled on to marmalade-glazed pork belly. The palate, however, was rich and dark with burnt toffee, molasses and pine tar blending into maple syrup, liquorice and Christmas cake. Water released lighter aromas of caramel, mojito cocktails and grilled pineapple served with mint chocolate ice cream and menthol rub.

Back to the palate and delicious spices now combined with rum with ginger ale, coffee and bitter marmalade. Burnt fruitcake joined heavy wood with firm tannins on a finish that was both dry and sweet. After 13 years in a bourbon hogshead, this was transferred to a Spanish oak oloroso hogshead.

SMWS AND SHERRY - FROM SPAIN WITH LOVE

These days, you can find whisky matured in all manner of different wine casks. But how did sherry, of all varieties, become so closely associated with the finest Scotch?



In the earliest days of whisky-making, the choice of whisky cask type was determined primarily by availability. But casks were not in short supply. Since Roman times, wooden barrels had been the vessels of choice for the transportation and storage of all manner of goods, from nails and tobacco to fish and butter. Barrels were particularly well-suited as containers for imported wines and spirits such as sherry, port, claret and brandy. The contents were often consumed straight from the wood but increasingly they were disgorged and bottled in the UK. Empty shipping barrels were then available for reuse with wine and spirit merchants sending them to distilleries for filling with whiskies.

Those who could afford to keep a cask of wine or spirits in their cellars were well aware of the beneficial effects of wood – especially oak – in the maturation process. Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus famously described her ‘Glenlivet’ whisky in 1822 as “long in wood, long in uncorked bottles [and] mild as milk.” But it was also evident that a portion of the previous liquid contents of a cask would seep into the pores of the wood and leach out to influence the flavour (beneficially or otherwise) of any substance subsequently filled into it. The influence of sherry wood was certainly seen to be beneficial to whisky.

The taste for rich, sweet fortified wines reached its zenith during the 1870s, and tens of thousands of butts of sherry alone were imported to the British Isles from Spain each year. Many of the more affluent wine and spirits drinkers came to appreciate the rich, nutty, fruity, mellow and smooth character, as well as the attractive dark golden hue, of whiskies matured in freshly-emptied sherry casks.



During the 1870s, Scottish merchants began developing blends of single malt and grain Scotch whiskies designed to appeal to a wider audience. One of the great challenges for these blenders was to ‘cover’ the neutral-flavoured grain spirit, which generally composed a high proportion of their blends, or to mask the unpleasant phenolic taint of immature spirit. The inclusion of a significant proportion of sherried whiskies proved well-suited for the task and helped establish blended Scotch as one of the world’s most popular spirits.

The spectacular growth in demand for blended Scotch in the late 19th century resulted in a great surge in whisky production. However, the increase in demand for sherry casks coincided with a decline in imports and availability. The competition for genuine used casks drove prices sky-high, forcing distillers and blenders to search for cheaper alternatives to provide the desired 'sherry effect'.

The term sherry cask was frequently used generically, to refer to wood that had contained other fortified wines such as madeira, marsala and malaga. Cheaper alternatives included treating the casks with a rinse of cheap fruit wines (prune was a popular choice) or with a heavily sugared sweet wine syrup. Some sherry substitutes were simply added to the whisky itself.



Substitutes for maturing in fresh sherry casks may have been cheaper to acquire, but it was clear to many in the wine and spirits trade that simply swilling a 'blending wine' around a cask, or adding a few litres to the contents, could not replicate the genuine sought-after sherry character. An industry insider complained in the *Licensed Victualling Trades Review* that the "abominable black decoction" used by unscrupulous dealers turned perfectly good malt whisky into a "coarse cheap-like rum." The *National Guardian* spoke for the respectable members of the trade when it asserted that authentic sherry casks remained "indispensable to the blenders...to do for the whisky what no substitute of added wine or colour can effect."

There was another alternative. In the 1890s, Glasgow blenders and wine merchants WP Lowrie developed a highly successful treatment, blasting the interior of the cask with pressurised steam to open the pores and impregnate the wood with sherry or other wines, according to the customers' preferences. Lowrie's Patent Sherry Wine Treated Casks were in great demand for many years and the method was copied by other firms.

After the Second World War, ex-bourbon barrels from the US became the most commonly used casks for maturing Scotch. At the same time, there was a world-wide trend in favour of lighter spirits such as vodka and white rum. Scotch brands such as Cutty Sark and J&B led a movement to a 'lighter' (and some complained, a blander) style of Scotch. Demand for sherried whiskies eased. But not for long.

The single malt whisky revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s was led by connoisseurs who sought out whiskies with rich, distinctive flavours. Those matured in heavily sherried casks became cult classics, and extremely profitable. The whisky industry had to meet the challenge of sourcing genuine ex-sherry casks once more. Led by Macallan in the late 1970s, a small number of distillers formed partnerships with Spanish cooperages and bodegas, to assemble casks and season the wood using sherry wines such as oloroso or a blend made to the distillers' specifications. After an agreed period, often up to two years, the cask was emptied and the seasoned wood shipped to Scotland.

It's an arrangement which has become increasingly common in recent years, although it has been estimated that no more than five per cent of single malt fillings are into sherry wood. The costs are steep, and the sherry flavours can overwhelm more delicate whiskies: many single malts and blends are vatted with only a proportion of sherried whisky or are 'finished' for just a year or two after maturation in ex-bourbon wood. However, aficionados continue to seek out old whiskies that have been fully matured in good sherry wood and are willing to pay often eye-watering prices to secure them.

SPICY & SWEET

BULL AND BEAR

CASK NO. 143.3

\$212.99



REGION	<i>Seattle</i>
CASK TYPE	<i>1st Fill Barrel #2 Char</i>
AGE	<i>3 Years</i>
DISTILLED ON	<i>16 January 2018</i>
OUTTURN	<i>230 Bottles</i>
ABV	<i>58.7%</i>

A very calm, relaxing, and fragrant intoxicating scent of thyme, tarragon and moss as well as lavender and angelica and under fern-laden undergrowth plenty of wild mint. On the palate two comments to be highlighted, “sweet as a nut” and “Bärentatze“(a bear’s paw), or a small cream-filled puff pastry. Following reduction, loads of eucalyptus, honeysuckle, tea tree oil and balsamic vinegar next to red vermouth and bramble liqueur.

The taste was that of spiced walnut cake with a pomegranate molasses frosting next to a classic cocktail called ‘Blood and Sand’, whisky, sweet vermouth, cherry liqueur and freshy squeezed orange juice garnished with orange peel. Made with Great Western pale malt.

PEATED

SMOKE DEVILS AND TIPSY ANGELS

CASK NO. 156.2

\$189.99



AVAILABLE ONLY IN AB

REGION	<i>Lowland</i>
CASK TYPE	<i>2nd Fill Ex-Bourbon Barrel</i>
AGE	<i>5 Years</i>
DISTILLED ON	<i>11 October 2017</i>
OUTTURN	<i>218 Bottles</i>
ABV	<i>61%</i>

Like walking into a kiln – the atmosphere swirled with smoke devils – while we also found marshmallows, sherbet lemons, a first aid box and salt-encrusted ships' timbers. To taste, the smoke was nutty, lively and abundant, with fruit and juice-flavoured mini candy chews, dark chocolate, cherry chewing gum and brazil nuts. But holding it too long on the tongue might not be advised (unless you have a prosthetic tongue).

Water sweetened and tamed it – the nose found floral perfumes, brine, next-day barbecue gloves and lemon drizzle cake. The palate moved from smoke devils to tipsy angels – still some light industrial notes, but also dark chocolate and hazelnut confectionery, vanilla, lemon peel, juniper and walnut.

PEATED

NOTHING TO
SEE HERE

CASK NO. 53-445

\$254.99



LIMIT ONE PER MEMBER

REGION	<i>Islay</i>
INITIAL CASK	<i>Ex-Bourbon Hogshead</i>
FINAL CASK	<i>Refill American Oak PX Hogshead</i>
AGE	<i>15 Years</i>
DISTILLED ON	<i>24 September 2007</i>
OUTTURN	<i>271 Bottles</i>
ABV	<i>56.7%</i>

The Panel were dismayed to encounter such a deliberately terrible whisky! To look upon the colour you might imagine this was a stunningly concentrated dram infused with deeply syrupy peat aromas. Or that it may contain notes such as ancient balsamico, natural tar liqueurs, herbal wood smoke and root beer syrup. Alas! It is dreadful and must be avoided like Vagon poetry. In happier circumstances water might have brought further notes of umami paste, salted honey, iodine drops and menthol tobaccos.

If you were to stoop to putting this whisky in your mouth you would certainly not find the most thrilling fusion of tars, oils, peat extracts and exotic wood resins. Neither, should you then add water, would you encounter sublime and graceful power, length, depth, complexity and the beauty of a perfect fusion of sherry and peat. Hopefully this tasting note has assisted you in avoiding this wicked distillate. Please ensure all bottles of this grog are safely disposed of at SMWS Canada's headquarters. Matured for 11 years in a wretched bourbon hogshead before being transferred to a definitely NOT sublime refill American oak Pedro Ximénez sherry hogshead.



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Here's how to save money on that!**

There's nothing like sharing the discovery of a good whisky with a good friend, so with this in mind we have our **Recommend-a-Friend program**.

For every new member who signs up on your recommendation, or for every gift membership you buy for that like-minded friend, **you'll receive \$20.00 off the cost of your next renewal fee** (up to a maximum of six referrals/gift memberships per membership year).

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