

# UNFILTERED.2021



THE SCOTCH MALT  
WHISKY SOCIETY





4

**WELCOME**  
DAVID RIDLEY AND  
EDITOR RICHARD  
GOSLAN

14

**SPIRITS TEAM**  
PAST, PRESENT AND  
OUR EXCITING WHISKY  
FUTURE

20

**PIP HILLS**  
HOW THE SPIRIT OF  
THE 1960S INFLUENCED  
THE SOCIETY

28

**JENNA ELIE**  
IN PRAISE OF A  
WHISKY WORLD OPEN  
TO ALL

36

**TORABHAIG  
DISTILLERY**  
A RETURN TO SKYE'S  
NEWCOMER

8

**VAULTS & QUEEN  
STREET HISTORIES**  
OUR AMAZING  
MEMBERS' ROOMS

16

**MEMBER STORIES**  
PETER HUGHES ON  
HIS LIFELONG SOCIETY  
JOURNEY

22

**SIR GEOFF PALMER**  
SCIENTIST AND  
ACTIVIST ON WHISKY,  
BARLEY AND MORE

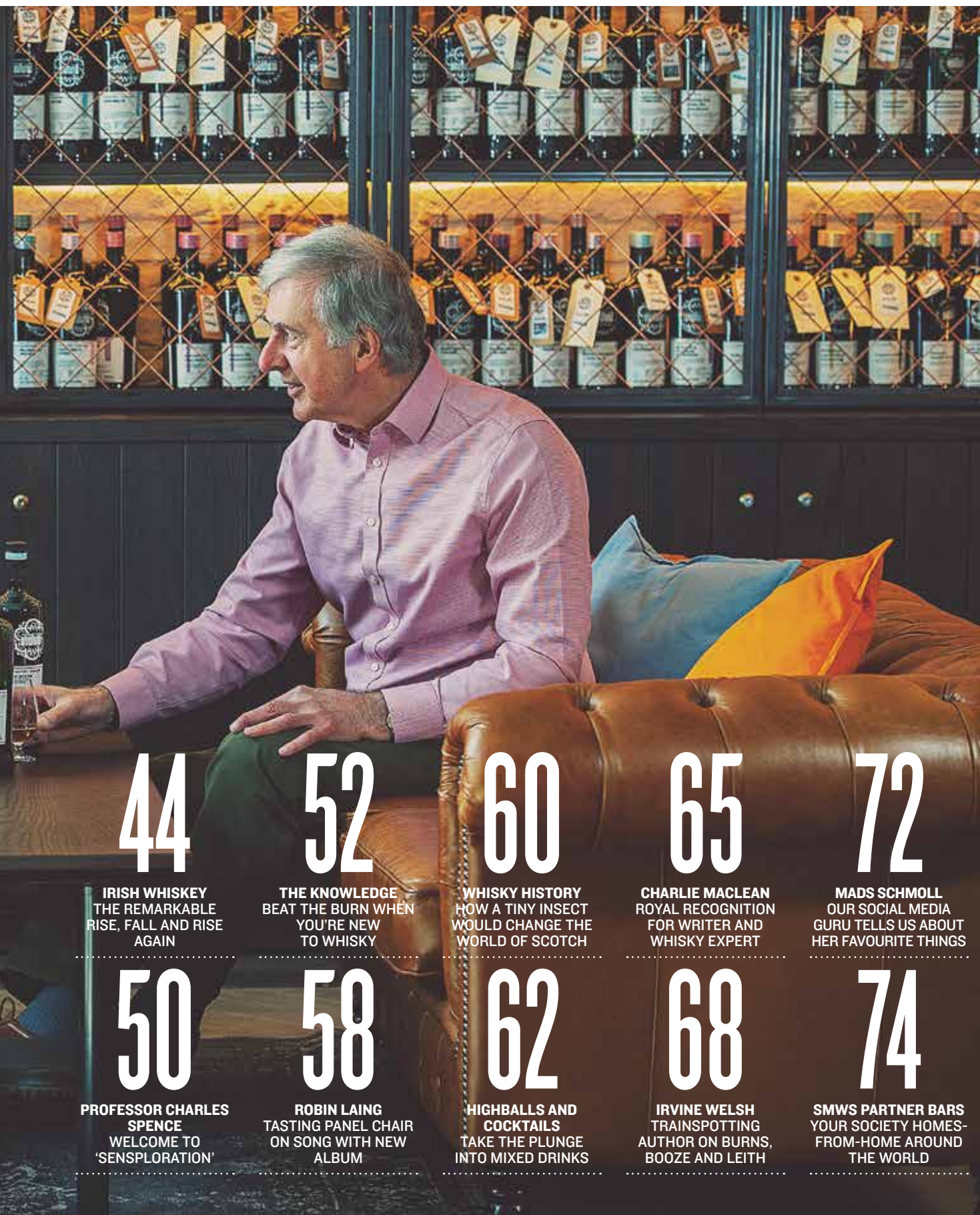
30

**VIC GALLOWAY**  
RADIO DJ MATCHES  
SMWS MALTS AND  
MUSIC

42

**MOA NILSSON**  
WHY YOU NEED  
TO PASS YOUR  
KNOWLEDGE ON





44

**IRISH WHISKEY**  
THE REMARKABLE  
RISE, FALL AND RISE  
AGAIN

52

**THE KNOWLEDGE**  
BEAT THE BURN WHEN  
YOU'RE NEW  
TO WHISKY

60

**WHISKY HISTORY**  
HOW A TINY INSECT  
WOULD CHANGE THE  
WORLD OF SCOTCH

65

**CHARLIE MACLEAN**  
ROYAL RECOGNITION  
FOR WRITER AND  
WHISKY EXPERT

72

**MADS SCHMOLL**  
OUR SOCIAL MEDIA  
GURU TELLS US ABOUT  
HER FAVOURITE THINGS

50

**PROFESSOR CHARLES  
SPENCE**  
WELCOME TO  
'SENSPLORATION'

58

**ROBIN LAING**  
TASTING PANEL CHAIR  
ON SONG WITH NEW  
ALBUM

62

**HIGHBALLS AND  
COCKTAILS**  
TAKE THE PLUNGE  
INTO MIXED DRINKS

68

**IRVINE WELSH**  
TRAINSPOTTING  
AUTHOR ON BURNS,  
BOOZE AND LEITH

74

**SMWS PARTNER BARS**  
YOUR SOCIETY HOMES-  
FROM-HOME AROUND  
THE WORLD

# LUST FOR LIFE

These have been challenging times for all of us in so many ways across the world. But as I sit here with a dram in Leith, I believe it has never been more important to pull together as an international community of members and whisky adventurers. Whatever obstacles we may face, we remain bound by the ambition and spirit that our founder Pip Hills set out for us all those years ago, and find comfort in that sense of belonging

THE past 18 months or so have seen our lives in a state of flux. We have been forced to disconnect from physical spaces and find new ways to engage with each other online, in parks or over garden fences. This has started, stopped and started all over again, and for much of this time we've been physically

separated from people we love and care for. It's left us all feeling understandably uneasy and unsettled. We hope that the Society has continued to bring you not only outstanding whisky but a form of escape and pleasure, through our virtual pub sessions and regular online tastings, and a chance to get together with whisky-loving pals from around the world.

Covid has undoubtedly forced us to re-evaluate how we work, think and live our lives. Some of those changes may stay with us, and one of the positives to come out of this experience is that we will continue to build member benefits and experiences on screen as well as in person. We want to create even *more* excuses for a chat over a whisky – it's what makes our world go round, after all.

Alongside this, we have also had to deal with changes across Europe due to Brexit – and this has caused unfortunate turbulence to the logistics and service of our European members, causing frustration to us all. It's an area we're continuing to focus closely on to make sure we can find the most efficient ways to look after everyone in Europe, and we thank you again for your patience if you've been adversely affected by this situation.

Alongside everything else that's been going on this year, many of you have now invested in the Artisanal Spirits Company, owner of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society. We were delighted to see how many members were prepared to become shareholders and demonstrate their commitment and belief in the ongoing success and development of the Society. The extra funding that our listing brings will support our ambitions to bring you more than ever before – more exceptional whisky, more entertainment, more experiences – and a very bright, exciting future. We will welcome more members



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COVER PHOTO:  
Peter Sandground







David Ridley at The Vaults

into our family – because that’s who we are and that’s what we do. Everyone is welcome and, as we grow, we hope to see more people visit us, enjoy our events and spend time together, all around the world.

We’ll be doing research with members in the coming months and we look forward to hearing your views to help us shape our plans. Alongside this, you’ll notice changes in our Membership Services team and how we help and look after all of you. As part of developing what we bring you, we will do a whisky release *every week* in 2022 to expand the range, opportunity and chance to get hold of our precious one-of-a-kind bottlings. We will also be celebrating and embracing our global community

of members with local and international celebrations and seasonal holidays.

Look out for a special Burns Night in January to kick off a year which we’ll be celebrating with a renewed lust for life.

I’ve always believed this club of ours is pretty special, thanks of course to the unique range of flavours and bottles that we create for you, but even more so because of our members who come together over a dram for a blether. The events of the past 18 months have re-enforced for me just how special that is. At a time when many of us have been at home, stuck indoors but connected virtually, I want to thank you all for sticking with us and for your membership and support. Your spirit, energy and dedication sit at the heart of

this international, flavour-pioneering club of whisky lovers.

Here’s to a new year that celebrates the good things in life. Let’s raise a glass to those all around the world: here’s to good health, good fortune and the stuff that makes us smile.

From everyone at the Society – we look forward to seeing you soon. Slàinte! ●

David Ridley  
Chief Member Champion

# SIMPLY THE BEST

EDITOR  
.....

Welcome to your special 2021 issue of *Unfiltered* magazine – an end-of-year compilation where I’ve pulled together some of the best stories from the vast variety we’ve published in our monthly digital version of the SMWS members’ magazine

PHOTO BY PETER SANDGROUND  
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IT’S been an interesting exercise to dig back through everything we’ve worked on since *Unfiltered*’s reincarnation as an online publication. The shift from producing a quarterly printed magazine to a monthly publication has allowed us to bring so much more whisky storytelling to our members, as well as to find out more about who you are and tell your own stories.

And it’s always a pleasure to hear from you and bring your whisky tales to life. Many of our member features, including this issue’s interview with SMWS superfan Peter Hughes, have come directly from you getting in touch, so if you have an interesting tale to share about your whisky journey, please do let me know.

As David Ridley has already explained, it’s been such a crazy time for everyone, but the world of whisky – whether online or in real life – has certainly helped to keep me going. Taking on the role of ‘virtual pub landlord’ throughout lockdown was a pleasure, especially when it allowed the Society to stay engaged with so many members from across the world (even from a submarine, apparently) and bring music, whisky chats and our quizzes to you each month. We’ll be back with more of that in the new year and look forward to getting together again online, even if our physical worlds have opened up.

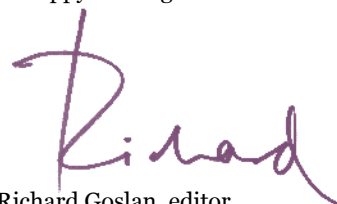
Ultimately, *Unfiltered* is all about helping our members to explore the wider whisky world, visiting the places

it comes from, meeting the people who make it and understanding more about how to savour and appreciate it. Along the way we encounter fascinating characters such as Sir Geoff Palmer, or creative forces like Irvine Welsh, as well as thought-provoking columnists Jenna Elie, Moa Nilsson, Inka Larissa and Professor Charles Spence. Society legends Charlie MacLean MBE and Robin Laing make a welcome appearance – and DJ Vic Galloway joins us to talk music, whisky and perfect pairings.

Like the Society’s ever-changing offering of amazing whiskies, I’d like to think there’s something for everyone in this bumper issue of *Unfiltered*, and wherever possible we’ve provided links and reminders for you to explore so much more online. We have a host of whisky stories, videos and podcasts available to immerse yourself in, and I hope you can pass some happy hours both with this physical magazine as well as all of our virtual offerings.

As always, please feel free to get in touch directly at [richard.goslan@smws.com](mailto:richard.goslan@smws.com) and I look forward to catching up in person or online before too long.

Happy reading and all the best. ●



Richard Goslan, editor

UNFILTERED  
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HOMES WITH HISTORY

**"I FELT THE HAIRS ON THE BACK OF MY  
NECK STIFFEN – I WAS JUST DELIGHTED  
WITH IT, AND I'M DELIGHTED TO SEE  
THAT IT HASN'T MUCH CHANGED"**  
*PIP HILLS, SMWS FOUNDER*



Tune in to Episode 23  
of Whisky Talk to hear  
Pip's story of The Vaults  
in his own words  
<https://whiskytalk.fireside.fm/23>



Find out more about  
architect Ben Tindall's role  
in renovating The Vaults



The Society has two Members' Rooms in Edinburgh, the city where we were founded, in Leith and in the New Town. Each of our venues in the capital has a distinctive character and its own fascinating stories in its stones

"BACK then it was a very different place." Those may be the kindest words Pip Hills uses to describe Leith in the late 1970s, from his book *The Founder's Tale*. But with property prices in the centre of Edinburgh already making that part of the city impracticable, he ventured down Leith Walk to the run-down warehouses and whisky bonds around the Water of Leith in search of a more affordable option for the headquarters of the newly formed Scotch Malt Whisky Society. That's where he discovered The Vaults.

"Some of the warehouses were very, very old and a few of them were still handsome," he says. "Probably the finest was a four-storey building whose whinstone rubble walls were set behind a high perimeter and a gate.

"It was called The Vaults, the definite article indicating some pretension to uniqueness. The Vaults: not just any old vaults in a port stiff with vaulted chambers."

Pip popped into the first-floor office of JG Thomson & Co, Scotland's oldest wine merchants and a leading independent whisky blender, which owned the building at the time. His timing was propitious – the firm happened to be planning a move to new premises and would look favourably on any reasonable offer to buy The Vaults.

"I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stiffen, in the way that they do when the



Pip on a return to The Vaults with David Ridley from the SMWS

zeitgeist seems to be taking command of the ship," says Pip. "I was just delighted with it – and I'm delighted to see that it hasn't changed."

Much of The Vaults' history may be lost in time, but the vaulted cellars that still exist underneath the Members' Room are thought to date back to before 1200. Within the cellars is a rare fungus, known only in the oldest wine cellars of Europe, and brought over with the claret from Bordeaux stored here in exchange for dried fish and coal.

Over the centuries, The Vaults has survived and thrived and is now an amalgamation, culminating with the most recent addition, a fourth storey that was added relatively recently – in 1785.

Wine merchant James Thomson leased the building in 1753, and it subsequently became home to JG Thomson & Co – and then to The Scotch Malt Whisky Society in 1983.

Restoring and renovating The Vaults is another story in itself, as the ancient

building's bones turned out to be creakier than the surveyors had initially predicted.

"I won't go into the detail of the building's restoration," says Pip. "Five of us put up the cash to buy it. One of the five, Ben Tindall, undertook to act as the architect – and an excellent job he made of what was a horribly difficult project."

We can be grateful to Pip and his fellow investors that whatever difficulties they encountered, the building was eventually reincarnated as the home of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society, and it remains so to the present day.

We call it our 'spiritual home', and with good reason – it's where we now hold our Gathering at The Vaults every September.

Every member should try and pay a visit at some point – and in the meantime, we hope you'll be raising a glass to the building that still takes pride of place on our bottles and at the centre of our SMWS badge. ●

The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's Members' Room at 28 Queen Street dates back to the late 18th century, when Edinburgh's Georgian New Town was constructed. As *Leslie Hills* writes, the building has played witness over the years to everything from science and politics to art and industry, and much else in between

THE people of Edinburgh in the mid-18th century occupied towering buildings on either side of the road which runs down the mile-long narrow ridge from Edinburgh Castle to Holyrood Palace. Advocates, aristocrats, paupers and many, many children lived behind different doors off the same crumbling stairs in crowded insanitary conditions.

The Town Council decided something had to be done. A competition to design a New Town was won by a young architect, James Craig, who dreamt up a grid of wide streets and squares to be built on the open ground to the north. Between 1767 and the late 1780s, fine sandstone terraces of spacious well-appointed houses and shops gradually

covered the slopes up from Princes Street to George Street and down again to Queen Street.

Homes on this one-sided street with its view over private gardens and open countryside to the River Forth and the hills of Fife, were highly prized, and number 28 was the jewel in its crown. In 1789 Robert Allan, banker and proprietor of the Caledonian Mercury newspaper, bought the newly-built house and moved in with his family. His eldest daughter, Agnes, sailed to India with her husband, a surgeon attached to the 5th Native Cavalry of Bengal, and for a dozen or so years his second daughter Jessy wrote illustrated letters to Agnes. These letters paint an intimate picture of the family's busy social life in the house – and their fears about the long war with Napoleon Bonaparte's France.

As his children left home, Robert Allan moved next door to number 29 and John Tait, a lawyer, moved in. Edinburgh at the time had a number of different police forces and watch committees which endeavoured, ineffectually, to keep the peace. The Council decided to set up a police court and appointed Tait as Superintendent of Police, with extensive powers of summary justice.

In July 1805, Tait was sworn in and began vigorously prosecuting not just beggars and petty thieves but the upper classes, when he felt they were causing nuisance with their noisy balls and

celebrations. He was universally loathed and eventually paid off with a generous pension for life.

Tait was followed at number 28 by George Wood, a surgeon, who appears to have lived in the shadow of his famous relatives. He was the son of surgeon Alexander Wood, known to all as Sandy Wood, physician and friend to Robert Burns and also to the poor and indigent of Edinburgh. He apparently walked the streets with a pet sheep and a raven, and is said to have been the first man in Edinburgh to carry an umbrella. George's brothers were also prominent surgeons.

In 1819, John Borthwick, 13th of Crookston, married Ann Dundas and moved into 28 Queen Street. Ann Dundas' uncle was Henry Dundas, Lord Melville. At the height of his fame, this controversial politician, the most powerful man in Scotland, was instrumental in delaying the abolition of slave trading by British ships until 1807. On 29th November 1833, Ann gave birth to William Henry Borthwick, who was to become the 5th Earl. Four days later she died. John left 28 Queen Street to live on George Square on the Southside. Number 28 became the home of David Young of Cornhill. On the 22nd January 1842, the Caledonian Mercury announced the marriage of Young's daughter, Eleanor, to George Kincaid Pitcairn, an army surgeon attached

WORDS BY **LESLIE HILLS**

PHOTO BY **MIKE WILKINSON**

# 28

## QUEEN STREET



UNFILTERED

Find out more about  
28 Queen Street in our  
online *Unfiltered* article  
for mobiles, desktop and  
tablet readers



to the 5th Dragoon Guards, a Heavy Cavalry regiment. In July 1854, the 5th Dragoons sailed to the Black Sea and were ordered to Varna where 724 British soldiers – George among them – died of cholera in a few short weeks. His widow applied for his pension and died 26 years later on the Isle of Wight.

### THE LODGING HOUSE YEARS

For some years, information about 28 Queen Street is sparse. However, in the early 1850s a rash of births at 28 Queen Street was announced in the press. In February 1851, Harriet Burrell, daughter of the former Governor of Hong Kong and the wife of Rev Thomas Gray of Kirkurd, Peebleshire, gave birth to a son. The new baby was taken home to Kirkurd manse and baptised by the Rev William Steven of Trinity College, Edinburgh. The next record reads: Thomas Stevenson, Civil Engineer... and over the page is the baptism of his son, Robert Louis Stevenson.

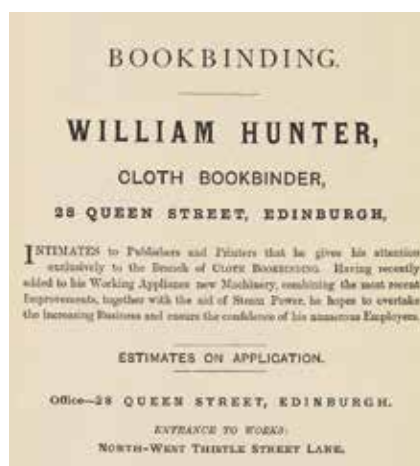
In November 1851, Lady Blanche Mary Harriet Gascoyne-Cecil Balfour, daughter of the Marquis of Salisbury, had a third son, Francis, born into the most prominent political family in Britain. His father was James Maitland Balfour, 8th Earl of Lauderdale. A brother was Arthur Balfour, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1902 till 1905 and Foreign Secretary 1916-1919. Francis became a noted embryologist, admired by Darwin. He died aged only 34, climbing in the Alps.

Two months after Francis Balfour's birth, Lady Louisa Hay, daughter of the Earl of Tweeddale and wife of Robert Balfour Wardlaw Ramsay, had a son and heir. Five girls were born before the boy and four more followed, one of whom married the son of the Duke of Wellington. The heir became a soldier. He fought in India, Afghanistan and Burma, attaining the rank of colonel, but his real interest was birds and he became a noted ornithologist after retiring from the army.

In November 1853, Mrs Wilson of Banknock, Stirlingshire gave birth to a daughter, Margaret. She was the second of eight daughters of coal magnate John Wilson of Bantaskine, who were known locally as 'Wilson's 40 feet of daughters'. Three daughters, including Margaret, married ministers of the church. Mary Georgina Wilson was the odd one out.

She trained as an artist in Paris and achieved considerable fame before dying in 1939, the last of the 40 feet of daughters.

Explanation for the cluster of births lies in the 1851 census. At number 28, Mrs Agnes Mitchell was running a lodging house. Edinburgh had many physicians, some of whom, such as Joseph Lister with his antiseptics, were using modern techniques. Perhaps expectant mothers were drawn to lodge in Edinburgh by them and by the lure of James Young Simpson. Having tried out his discovery, chloroform, on himself and selected visitors in his drawing room at number 52 Queen Street, Simpson was using it in his practice as an obstetrician. For a painless and imaginative insight into the world of James Young Simpson and of the street, both upstairs and down, see the novels by Chris Brookmyre and Dr Marisa Haetzman, writing as Ambrose Parry.



### BOOKBINDING, ART AND ACCOUNTANCY

By 1855, Mrs Mitchell had left number 28 and Dr David Craigie had set up his plate. Craigie was 62 when he arrived in Queen Street and over the succeeding 10 years his health declined. He died of kidney disease on 17th May 1866. By the end of 1866, Mr William Hunter, bookbinder, was the new owner.

Born in 1824, Hunter was a bookbinder by the time he was 15 years old and founded his own business in 1857. He advertised his custom-built workshops at the back of 28 Queen Street as having all the latest improvements and an entirely new and varied stock of designs and patterns. By 1875 he had added steam-power to his

machinery. The house itself he used as offices and rented out rooms to solicitors and allied professions. In 1885, only Miss Jane Wilson of the Scottish Artists Club, the forerunner of the Scottish Arts Club, was resident at 28. Hunter's own home was a mansion in a quiet cul-de-sac in the west of Edinburgh. Queen Street was no longer a prestigious address.

In 1895, Hunter and Sons bought number 29 Queen Street and divided it into offices and studios. William Hunter and his son Norman would rent studios to artists for the next 55 years. The most famous was Stanley Cursiter who was born in Orkney in 1887 and studied art in Edinburgh. In the early years of the First World War he served in some of the bloodiest battles. He survived to become one of the most influential figures in 20th century British art.

In 1918 Douglas Foulis joined William Hunter and Sons and in 1946, soon after Norman Hunter's death, the business became Hunter and Foulis based at Foulis's Bridgend Works. The Association of Accountants in Edinburgh moved into 28 Queen Street and in 1953 became the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland. The workshop at the back was used for training purposes and is now a separate concern.

Then the whole world of craft printing and bookbinding changed. Inexorably the firm of Hunter and Foulis declined. In 1992 it was taken over by Montgomery Litho Group. In 2013 they called in the liquidators and the business which had flourished there for almost 100 years was no more.

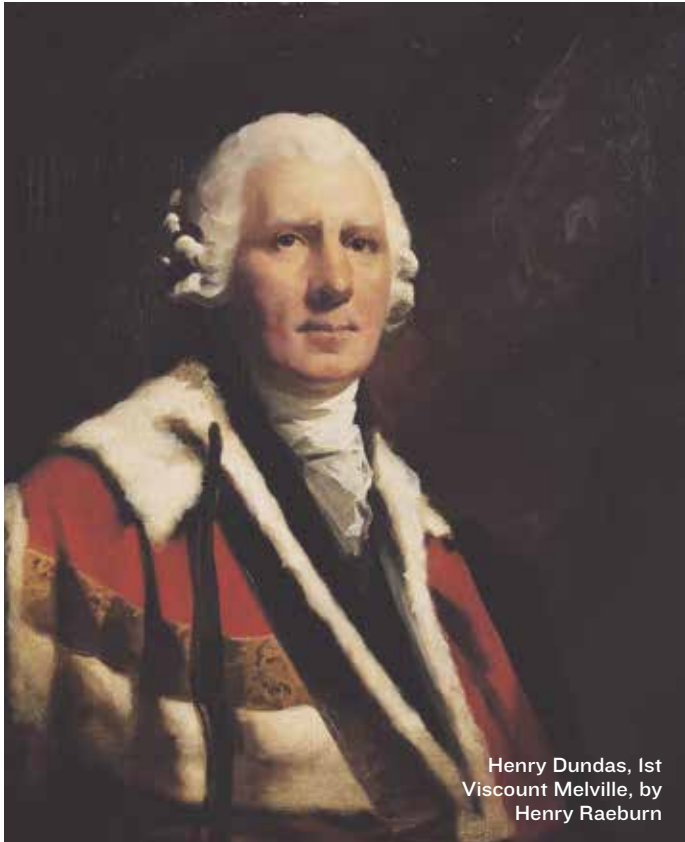
### RESCUED AND RESTORED

And so Robert Allan's fine New Town home remained, carved into office spaces, hung with communication and data cables and corporate notices, until SMWS rescued it in 2004 and renewed the house's past as a convivial hub of like-minded people.

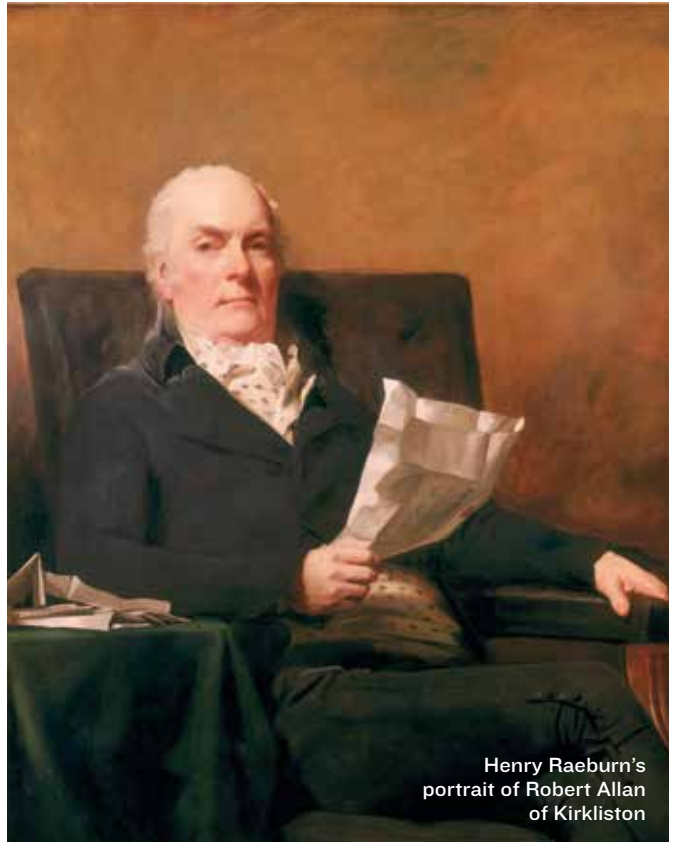
Number 28 Queen Street stands much as it did when Robert Allan looked down over the trees. There are so many stories in its stones. They touch on science, politics, far-away wars, Empire, music, art, personal joys and defeats.

In 28 Queen Street and The Vaults in Leith, The Scotch Malt Whisky Society curates and cares for two iconic buildings, rich in history. ●





Henry Dundas, 1st  
Viscount Melville, by  
Henry Raeburn



Henry Raeburn's  
portrait of Robert Allan  
of Kirkliston



Stanley Cursiter's 'Twilight', courtesy  
of The National Galleries of Scotland,  
painted at 28 Queen Street

## THE SPIRITS TEAM

While the past two years have been challenging in so many ways, it has also been a period of great achievement when it comes to the Society's whisky output. Here, SMWS spirits director *Kai Ivalo* reflects on how far we've come – and what's in store for members in the years ahead

### PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Watch Kai Ivalo explain how the Spirits Team operates to ensure a constant variety of exceptional whisky, for now and into the future.



AT the start of March in 2020, I was visiting another new distillery, on the Isle of Raasay, as our Spirits Team and I often do to meet the makers and sample their spirit. It was a great trip to a beautiful island, but I had no idea that it would be our last opportunity to be out and about before lockdown was imposed, and we suddenly found ourselves living and working from home every day.

By the end of the month, we had already created an online Tasting Panel to keep the essential work of sampling and evaluating our whiskies on track. We then set about tackling all of the other challenges to keep the supply of whisky reaching our eager membership – most of whom were also in a state of lockdown and looking for a nice bottle to sip at home.

Dealing with the challenges of 2020

and the coronavirus pandemic has taken great effort from everyone at the Society, as well as our many partners. But with the lessons learned from throughout that year and into 2021 and with the required effort, creative thinking and determination, I'm delighted to be in a position where we have succeeded in selecting and bottling more casks than ever before.

### PATS ON THE BACK

It's also been a bumper year for awards success, with a range of top-level prizes across various competitions, from the Global Luxury Masters to the Ultimate Spirits Challenge, and plenty more in between. Any award for the quality of our bottlings is gratifying, but it's also pleasing to receive recognition not only for our single cask bottlings but for our experimental small-batch blends, our

# MATURING





grain whiskies, and for our offering of additionally matured whiskies. Cask No. 76.145: *A beautiful, bountiful beast*, for example, is a 32-year-old Speysider that we transferred to a first fill ex-oloroso hogshead, and which picked up gold medals in three separate competitions: the International Spirits Challenge, the International Wine and Spirits Competition and Global Luxury Masters.

#### VARIETY AND QUALITY

I'm very confident the accolades will continue. Our cask stocks are currently at their highest levels with a broader range of variety of spirit and whiskies, cask types and ages. The Society buys casks from the smallest to the very largest producing companies, covering new make spirit to old mature whiskies. At the younger end it not only allows us to specify the cask that

we want at the start but can also see us getting involved in specifying the spirit character that we are looking for. That includes collaborating with distillers and maltsters and involves some exciting experimentation.

It'll take a few years before members get the chance to taste these whiskies but they'll be worth waiting for and we will have some great stories to share about how these bottlings came about.

Members can also expect to see more variety in cask types and in particular, more whiskies that have benefitted from sherry cask maturation. The Society works directly with a number of supplier partners in Jerez in the south of Spain to secure a variety of different casks that offer a range of flavours, great news for fans of the Deep, Rich & Dried Fruits flavour profile in particular. You can also expect to see more articles, information

and events to celebrate this very popular style of whisky.

#### FLAVOUR FOCUS

We recently asked members for their views on our system of flavour profiling, and we'd like to thank you for the fantastic response. We're delighted to see how many of you share our passion for all things flavour-related, and we are analysing your input and considering our next steps. Look out for developments on that in the first half of 2022, and thank you again for taking the time to respond.

We can't say too much more right now about what you can expect throughout next year, but rest assured there will be new distillery codes coming your way and a few surprises we hope you will open and enjoy with friends, family and fellow members – in person, if possible. ●



# ALL TOGETHER UNIQUE

Peter has been sharing  
his love of whisky with  
the Society for 30 years





PETER Hughes' Society journey dates back to January 1991, an inquisitive phone call to SMWS HQ at The Vaults, and a recommendation that set him off on a lifelong exploration of the spirit in our green bottles. More than 30 years later, Peter now has 12 volumes of detailed tasting notes, covering almost 1,500 Society whiskies, and it's still very much a work in progress.

"When I first called the Society, it was Anne Griffiths – or Cooper as she was then – who picked up the phone," remembers Peter. "We got chatting and she told me a bit about this Cask No. 46.3 from the 1990 Winter Bottling list that she liked. I bought that along with a contrasting bourbon cask bottling, and that was it – I was hooked."

From his base in London, Peter became a passionate member of the Society and started not only making regular purchases but attending the tasting events that were taking place periodically in London and the south-east of England at the time. Anne Griffiths became responsible for developing the Society's tasting programme in the UK, and Peter and his fellow members were keen to make the case to her for a Members' Room of their own in the capital.

"Anne was doing regular tastings in London and got on well with the membership down here," says Peter. "A few of us started to badger her about setting up a Members' Room in London, and she became a champion for that. We have lots to be thankful to Anne for what she did, along with the managing director Richard Gordon at the time."

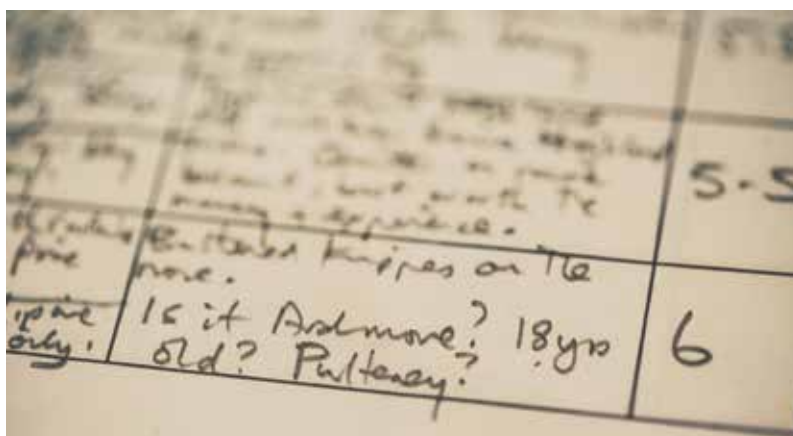
Peter and his fellow members' powers of persuasion did the trick, and the Society's new Members' Room at 19 Greville Street in the Farringdon district – next to the Hatton Garden jewellery hub – officially opened on July 20, 1999. Appropriately enough, Peter was the very first member to celebrate the occasion with the inaugural dram in the new venue.

"I found out from the manager that the doors would be opening at noon, and having been the one to badger the Society into opening a Members' Room, I was determined to be the first person to have a dram there," says Peter. "I still remember it – it was Cask No. 90.4, 21-years-old, light and summery. My tasting notes tell me it would have been

Like The Scotch Malt Whisky Society's intriguingly named whiskies, our members are all different, with their own personality and character. But they are united and constant in their passion – to share the world's best whiskies, and to take pride in belonging to the world's most entertaining whisky club. Like our whiskies, our members are 'all together unique', and there's nothing we love more at *Unfiltered* than finding out more about who they are and what motivates them.

From members who have moved country to be closer to where Scotch comes from, to others who have created new businesses by working with old casks and barrels, you are an inspiring and inventive bunch.

Here, member *Peter Hughes* describes his own Society experiences, documented meticulously since he signed up more than three decades ago



perfect for a hot summer's day or a picnic."

Peter even managed to turn a promotion within the Metropolitan Police, that covers London, to relocate to the station in Holborn – a handy 10-minute walk to the new Members' Room.

"I was always popping in to Greville Street after work, assessing drams with the staff or other members and sitting there scribbling my tasting notes," says Peter. "I was even asked to contribute to the Society's Tasting Panel at one point, which was a huge privilege and responsibility and something I really enjoyed. You're selecting whiskies for a membership that doesn't have access to sample drams in a nearby venue, so honesty was important – if a sample

## MEMBER STORIES

didn't hang together or wasn't balanced you had to be clear about that, although you would also recognise if something was cheeky, different or had a certain character.

"I've always been willing to have a debate about whisky, and enjoy the stories behind the drams – such as with Cask No. 10.56. It was the Society's first bottling from a huge Spanish gorda cask, and although it was only six-years-old it was amazingly mature for its age.

"It was something new for the Society and was to be applauded, much as some



Scan this code for SMWS  
member stories in the online  
archive for *Unfiltered* magazine

of the custom cask bottlings that we are seeing now."

One thing that's been constant in Peter's entire time as a member of the SMWS is in his meticulous and detailed record keeping, with a note of every dram tasted, every bottle purchased and every document retained.

"If I'm tasting a dram in the Members' Room as a one-off experience, I'll normally spend up to 45 minutes with it and I'll only add water once I'm satisfied I've got to grips with the unreduced nose and palate," says Peter.

"After that, I'll add water and repeat the process. After about 20 minutes, I'll let it stand before returning to it later. Once at home, I'll transcribe my notes into the tasting book.

"I never refer to SMWS tasting notes until I've sampled the whisky for myself. Only then will I compare notes, and sometimes I'll comment in my notes on any similarities or differences between the two.

"It's a bit different whenever I buy a bottle, as I'm able to take more time to assess it. I'll start note taking straightaway, but I'll often stick with rough notes until I've sampled it for the sixth or seventh time. I'll also do this over a period of time, say a month, possibly two, and in some instances even a bit longer. Only then will I write the notes up as a definitive tasting note in my current book."

Now retired, Peter has been able to develop his interest in the history of the First World War with a series of three books, *Visiting the Fallen*, about the war graves in and around Arras and stories of the soldiers who died there. He's also enjoying his Society as much as ever and making regular visits to Greville Street since restrictions have been lifted.

"The staff are brilliant, always helpful and happy to have a chat about style and flavour profile, and ready with suggestions for bottlings that may not be on the current list," says Peter. "I also like to help other members with my own recommendations – anything I can do to help is part of the relationship I have with the Society. It's nice to nurture that kind of etiquette and atmosphere, where everybody has that sense of belonging. It's something that's unique to the Society and I hope it continues that way. It's been a fantastic journey, and it's still going on. Relax and have a dram..." ●

Peter has detailed notes on every dram he has tasted and every bottle purchased





A man with dark hair, wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, stands in a garden. He is holding a small glass of white wine in his right hand. The background is filled with lush green foliage and some red flowers on the left. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early evening.

UNFILTERED

**"I LIKE TO HELP OTHER MEMBERS WITH  
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**PETER HUGHES**

The Scotch Malt Whisky Society was born out of a cultural movement that gained momentum in the 1960s, which gave Scotland a new sense of confidence and pride in the country and our produce – including whisky in its purest form. SMWS founder *Pip Hills* reflects on the ‘risorgimento’ that took place and how the Society emerged from it with a sense of ‘gleeful iconoclasm’

MAIN PHOTO BY MIKE WILKINSON

I HEAR that some distillers are bent on reviving what they believe to be the production values of the 1960s, as a means of conferring some distinction on their product. If this is the case, one hopes that they will be selective about their resurrections. One of the cardinal rules of bodysnatching (an old Edinburgh custom) is that the resurrected should be either very fresh or very ancient. Anything in between was likely to be pretty nasty.

There is a long-established tradition in the Scotch whisky industry of looking back to an imaginary golden age as a means of validating the practices of the present. It occurs roughly once a generation: long enough for there to be few people around who have personal experience of the supposedly idyllic past – and most of those few dependent for their pensions on not interfering in

the latest promotional wheeze. From where I’m standing, 1960s revivalism looks suspiciously like an outbreak of this golden-agery. I’m old enough to remember the 1960s as a young adult, and I can tell you that they were not one of the nation’s gastronomic high spots. Food in Scotland was dull indeed and beer – all young men then drank beer – was strong, gassy stuff whose carbon dioxide content served mainly to disguise its miserable flavour.

Whisky then was a drink mainly for old men and not something whose flavour was even a matter for consideration. It got you drunk even more quickly than the beer, which was what mattered; if you combined the two, each stimulated the other’s tendency to procure an altered state of consciousness – and, psychotropic drugs being almost unknown, were the only commonly available means of doing so.

Malt whisky was feedstuff for the blenders, little else. In Scotland, malts were known to few folk outwith the industry: elsewhere only to a handful of cognoscenti. For a balanced and kindly account of Scotch whisky at the time, David Daiches’s *Scotch Whisky, its past and present* is easily the best. At the time, there were few books about whisky and distillery owners and managers were evidently bemused at having a request from a most distinguished scholar, to visit and learn about how the stuff was made and matured. A generation later, David was delighted by what we did at the Society. I remember one evening in the Members’ Room when, over a dram, he described how his research had taken him to an Islay distillery which, out of decency, I won’t identify.



Pip with his vintage Lagonda

# SPRIT OF THE 60S





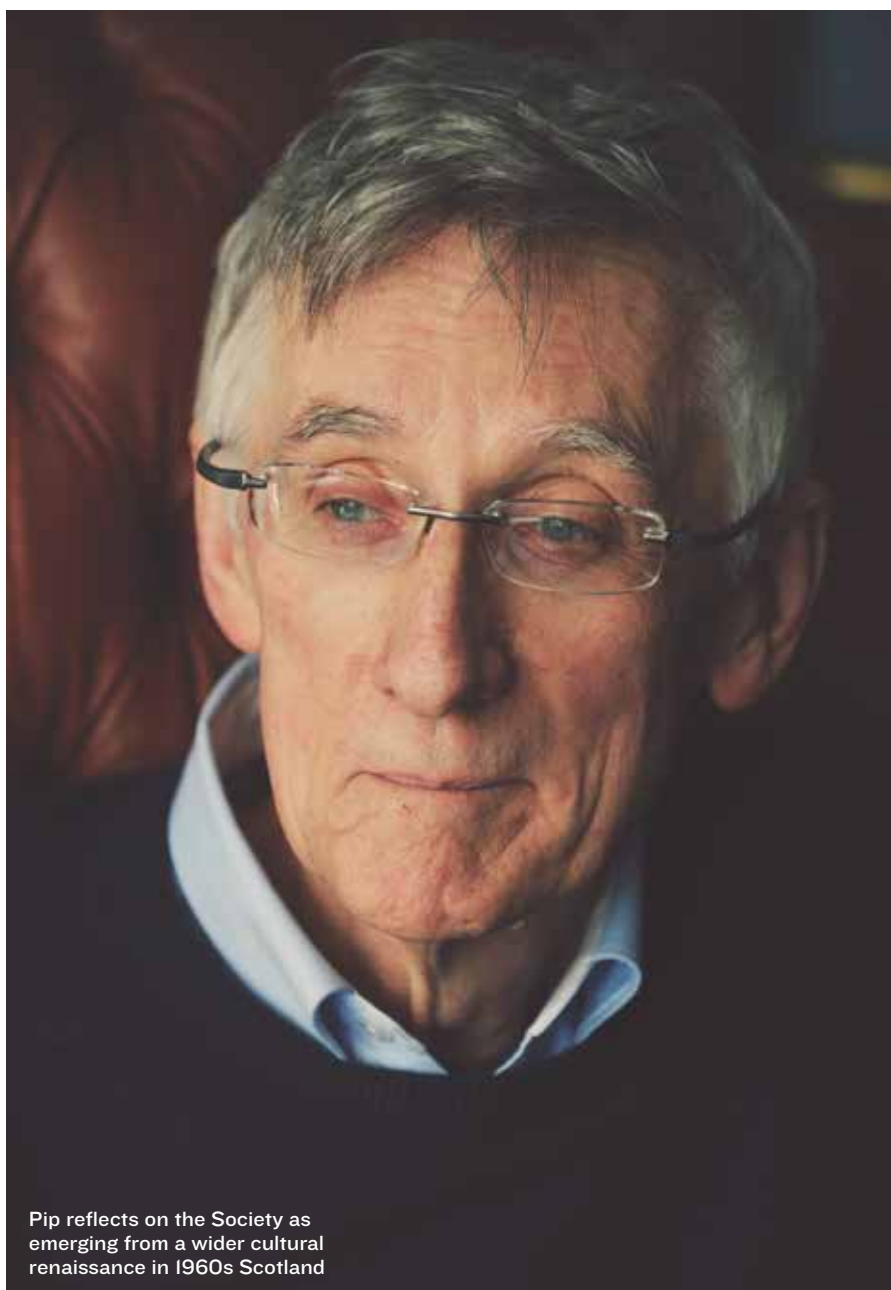
The people at the distillery were most obliging and keen to show him everything to do with the making and maturing of the spirit. At the end of the tour he was taken to the sanctum sanctorum, the Sample Room, where the owner himself (the distillery had for generations been in family ownership) offered him a dram of the finest. To David's surprise, the dram he was offered was of a well-known blended whisky in whose makeup the malt was prominent. When David asked if he might try instead a glass of the malt itself, the owner expressed surprise. A glass was produced, a sample poured and a little water added. When David said it was lovely stuff, the owner, astonished, confessed that it had never occurred to him, for mere pleasure, to drink his own whisky as a single, unblended, malt.

Such is the power of belief. Not only were blended whiskies dominant commercially, but they embodied a system of values and beliefs which was so powerful that people close to the stuff could remain in ignorance of their own product. And this was a microcosm of how people in Scotland saw themselves – as inferior partners in things British and beholden for their self-esteem to a fabric of myths and legends. But by the 1960s, a change was under way. A reappraisal of what it was to be Scottish was led by cultural historians and folk singers, playwrights and television producers, journalists and poets. The Scotland we have today is the outcome of a *risorgimento* which got under way in the 1960s. The changes have been so profound that they are unrecognisable to most folk today. When that renaissance met the Britain-wide foodie revolution, it affected even Scotch whisky. Looking back at the beginning of the Society, it's not difficult to see us as part of the wider movement. Our confidence and gleeful iconoclasm, our willingness to take on an establishment as huge as the Scotch whisky industry, were made possible by the way things were already moving in wider spheres.

The change in whisky took some time, of course, for nothing to do with whisky ever happens quickly. But the attitudes we find today, attitudes shared by producers as well as consumers, were formed then. Whether it's altogether a good thing is up for discussion, of

course. And, like all revolutions, it's vulnerable to corruption. Where whisky is concerned, the best defence against that is to maintain our objectivity in appraisal of the spirit – what matters is the flavour, the rest is of little consequence. The effects of the revolution are obvious in any airport duty-free: glossy packaging proclaims the superior quality of many whiskies. Sometimes it's true – for the revolution was real and what we and some others did then, had beneficial effects. But sometimes it's not and we are, if anyone is, entitled to say so. ●

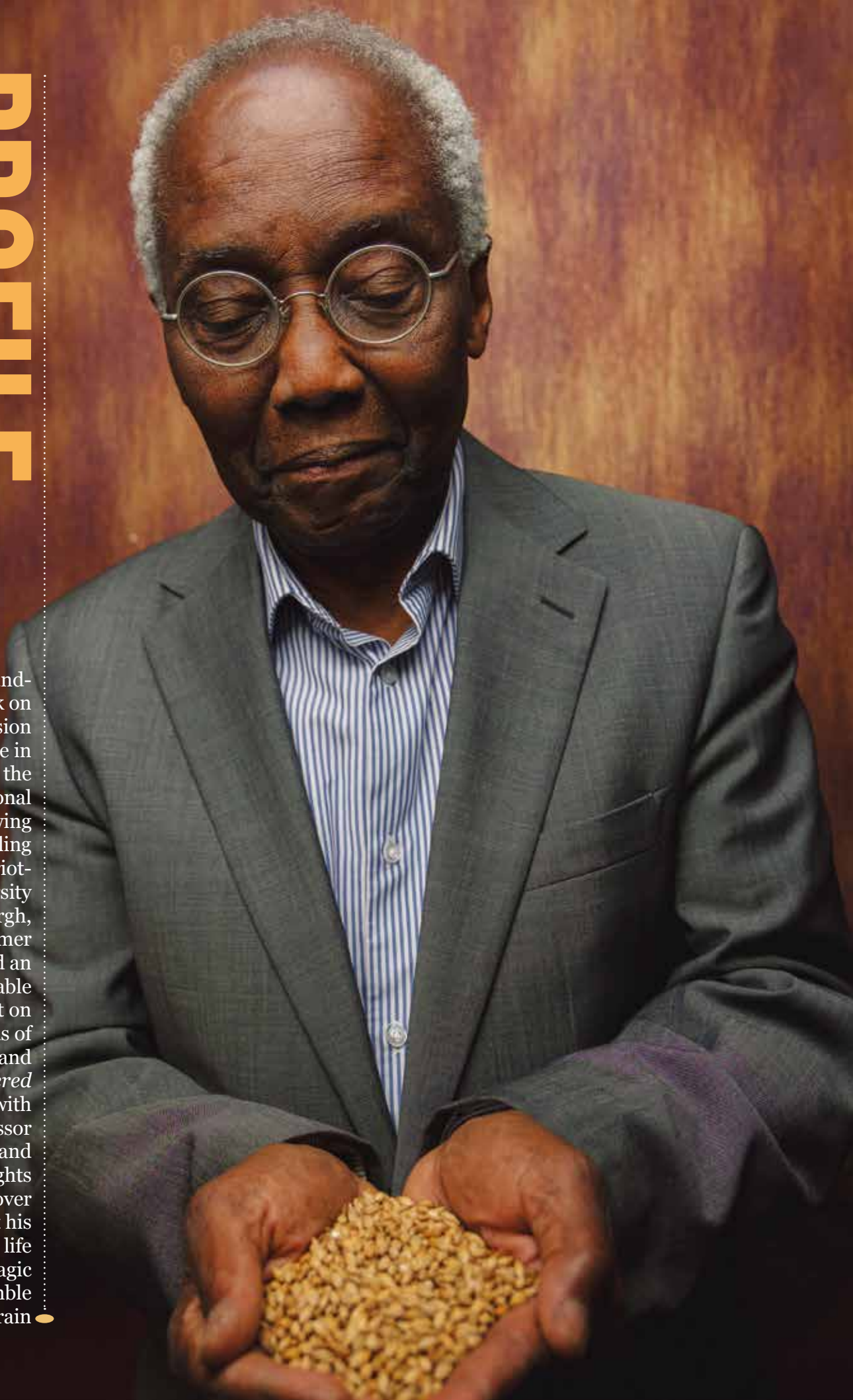
*The Founder's Tale*, Pip's book about starting the SMWS and a life of whisky-fuelled adventures, is the perfect accompaniment to a Society dram. Order your copy at <https://smws.com/curl-up-the-founders-tale>



Pip reflects on the Society as emerging from a wider cultural renaissance in 1960s Scotland

# PROFILE

From his ground-breaking work on barley abrasion to his role in setting up the International Centre for Brewing and Distilling (ICBD) at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Sir Geoff Palmer has had an immeasurable impact on the worlds of whisky and beer. *Unfiltered* caught up with the Professor Emeritus and human rights activist to discover more about his remarkable life and the magic of the humble barley grain





A close-up portrait of an elderly Black man with grey hair, wearing round glasses and a grey suit jacket over a blue and white striped shirt. He is looking down with his hands clasped in front of him. The background is a warm, textured brown.

PHOTOS BY MIKE WILKINSON

# SIR GEOFF PALMER

### How did you end up becoming a scientist?

I was born in Jamaica in 1940 and my mother left for England in 1951. I went to join her in London when I was 14. I'd never travelled more than 10 miles before, and I arrived 5,000 miles away at Liverpool and then had to find Paddington. I had no idea where it was! Eventually somebody told me how to get a train to Paddington, where I met my mother.

The next morning, she woke me early, fed me, and told me to get dressed. A man was standing at the door, he must have been from the immigration services. He said to my mother: "Where are you going?" and she said: "We're going to work, my son and I." The man said I couldn't go to work, because I was 14 years and 11 months old, so I had one month to finish school, he insisted.

My mother took me to the local school, where I was designated 'educationally subnormal'. On a test they gave me, one of the questions, I can remember it clearly, was: "What is Big Ben?" And I must have written, "It's a big guy."

Well, that designates you as 'educationally subnormal'. So, I was told to go to another school, and that school took me for the summer term, thankfully. If it were winter term, I wouldn't be talking to you, because being summertime, I played cricket. And I was very good at cricket, and I got picked to play for London School Boys cricket team.

And that's why I'm talking to you, because I went to the secondary modern school, played cricket for London, and the grammar school saw it. Then the headmaster had me transferred, on the basis of my cricket.

I stayed at Highbury County from 1955 till 1958, then left and got a job at London University Queen Elizabeth's College as a lab technician. That's when my name changed, because at the interview in 1958 Professor Chapman, the head of biology, said: "What's your name, young man?" I said: "Godfrey Henry Oliver Palmer." He said: "Can I call you Geoff?" I said: "Yeah, if I get the job," and he said fine.

### Were you interested in science by this point, or was it just a job?

It was just a job. I wasn't interested,

because I didn't have the background. But I worked there and Professor Chapman was one of the good people that I met. In 1959 he stopped me one day while I was running about and said: "Somehow I think you've got some ability, and I'm going to give you some time off to do your A-levels and O-levels." By 1961 I had four A-Levels and six O-Levels.

But I applied to every British university and couldn't get in. I was an overseas student, and they had no facility for taking an immigrant who'd just arrived and lived in the community. When Professor Chapman asked me: "Which university are you going to?" I said: "I'm not going to any, I'm going to stay here."

He made me wait outside his room for about 15 minutes then said: "You're going to Leicester University." He had obviously telephoned his friend or whatever. And so I went to Leicester in 1961, and that's where I met my wife.

### What did you study at Leicester University?

I did an Honours degree in Botany then went back to London in 1964. But the only job I could find was peeling potatoes in a restaurant. I peeled potatoes from June to December in 1964 and felt I was going to peel potatoes all my life. So I applied for a Master's at Sutton Bonington at Nottingham University.

I had an interview where one of the most senior politicians in the country was there, and he told me I should go home and grow bananas. I told him it was difficult to grow bananas in Haringey. So I didn't get that position.

Then I saw an advert for Heriot-Watt University for a PhD. I applied and the famous Professor Anna Macleod [the world's first female professor of Brewing and Biochemistry] interviewed me. After about 10 minutes she said: "I'm going to take you." She gave me a dustbin full of barley. I said: "What am I going to do with that?" She said: "Get on with it. That's your research material."

I then went and read up as much as I could about barley and malt. Those references are still in my head because I went to the library at the Royal Botanic Garden, next to where I lived in Edinburgh, and tracked their barley research, right back to the 1800s. After

three months, Professor Macleod sent me a letter asking: "Are you still doing this PhD?", because I never went in the lab. I told her I was ready. I started the lab work in January 1965, and I got my PhD in '67.

When I finished the PhD, I did a post-doc between 1967 and 1968. I left Edinburgh in 1968 and looked for a job but Professor Macleod said I should go into research. Between 1965 and 1968, I developed the concept of malting. Some of it was controversial but it's now part of the science of barley and malt.

### What did that involve?

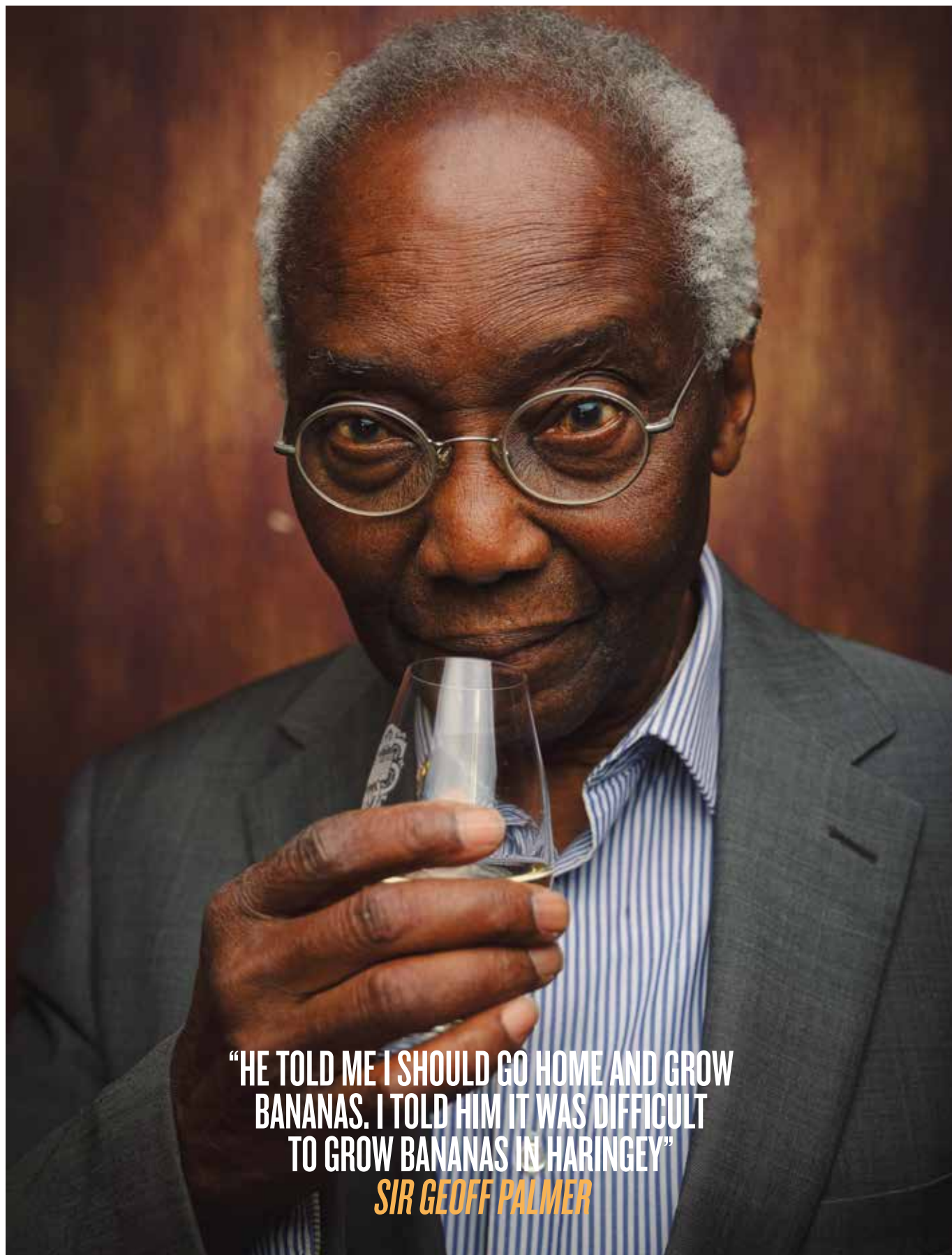
The first thing I did was to look carefully at how the grain digests itself and changes itself into malt. I looked very carefully at the grain modifying itself microscopically. And I came up with the concept that the grain digested itself asymmetrically, not symmetrically. And if it was asymmetric, it's the aleurone – the bran – that was producing the enzyme. Because my anatomy wasn't bad, I pointed out for the first time that an excised embryo is contaminated with aleurone. The aleurone goes over the scutellum for this purpose. So therefore, if an excised embryo is producing enzymes, it's not the embryo tissue that's doing it – it's the aleurone contamination.

Then I thought how could I develop that concept? Because if the aleurone is responsible, then what I needed to do was to stimulate the aleurone even before the germ does it, and that should make the grain malt faster. I took a pin and stuck it into the back of the grain, then stuck the back of the grain in gibberellic acid, and it malted. You had to stick a pin in because the pericarp, or fruit wall, kept it out, so it's impervious to chemicals getting in.

If I could get the gibberellic acid directly in from zero, then it should increase the malting rate. And I now knew that the pericarp kept it out, so I had to develop a process which would scarify the pericarp.

I found a pearler in the attic, but instead of pearling the barley completely, I only gave it 10 turns. With those turns you've lost less than two per cent of the husk, but you had scarified the distal end of every grain. Then we malted them and they malted from both ends. And that's what's called





**"HE TOLD ME I SHOULD GO HOME AND GROW  
BANANAS. I TOLD HIM IT WAS DIFFICULT  
TO GROW BANANAS IN HARINGEY"**  
***SIR GEOFF PALMER***

the abrasion process. The first was 10 grams, then I got the workshop to make it into 100 weight an hour. We published a paper in '69 on it, and by 1970 it was patented – by the industry, not by me.

**What was the impact of your discovery?**

It meant that a five-day malt had the same modification as a seven-day malt, so it took two days off the process. Over the course of a year in terms of production time, it was enormous. And it told us a lot scientifically about modification.

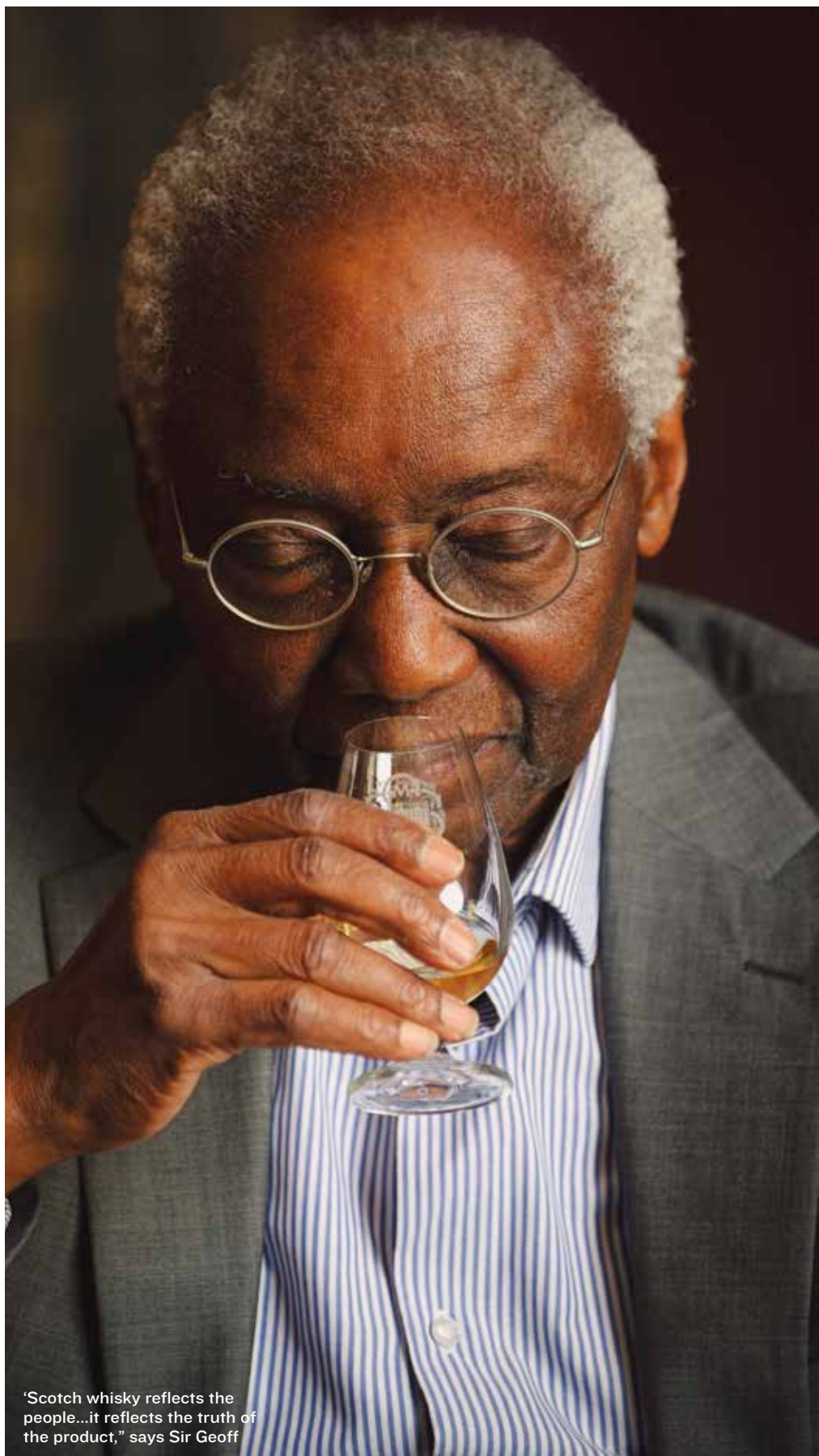
But the malting industry wasn't interested, because it was going to make malt faster and they had the capacity for production. The people who were interested though were the brewers or people making their own malt. Watney Truman were the first people to apply it, and that increased their production because they were floor maltsters, then Allied breweries.

**Tell us about your role in the founding of what's now the International Centre for Brewing and Distilling (ICBD) at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, and the impact you think the ICBD has had on the worlds of both brewing and distilling?**

It's a big privilege to have taught lots of students who have gone into the brewing and distilling industries, but their success is down to their ability, not my input.

The ICBD started in the late 1980s. I came into work one morning, and there was a letter from the government questioning the validity of brewing as a subject, and whether it had to go. I panicked, because I was thinking: "I don't retire till 2005!" So out of pure self-interest I drove to United Distillers, where [board member] Ronnie Martin worked. I said: "Mr Martin, we have a problem. I think they're going to close the brewing school." And of course, very Scottish in his response, he said: "They can't close the brewing. That's a Scottish institution. Come to my room." We discussed it, and he asked me to write a page of what I thought the future of the brewing course should be.

I thought about it. Of course, we didn't have distilling in the name, so one of the things I put in was that. And that we should also have an Honours degree,



'Scotch whisky reflects the people...it reflects the truth of the product,' says Sir Geoff



because it was just a general degree. And I took that back to him with one or two other points, and he said: “Okay, I’ll run with this.”

He came back after about a month and said: “We’ve got a million pounds from the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA).” When we got that, the brewers came in with smaller contributions.

Then we discussed the title, and we concluded that it had to have ‘international’ in it. And it’s got to have ‘distilling’ in it, and it’s got to have ‘brewing’ in it, and that’s the ICBD. And all the students who’ve been educated in that place have Ronnie Martin to thank. He’s passed away now, but he was the man who took it up and ran with it and delivered it. And we now have students from all over the world. I was honoured to be a part, but ultimately it was out of self-interest!

### **The ICBD now has a global reputation.**

The international aspect is important because in my day there weren’t that many overseas students. But Scotland has always been an international country. Therefore, the fact that we have an International Centre for Brewing and Distilling brings more people in from abroad, especially for the postgraduate course. Our international image was bolstered by the ICBD. If you want to come and learn about whisky, you come to the ICBD. You’re not only getting the best education in brewing and distilling, you’re getting access to the Scotch whisky industry, and that to me is a critical thing to market: if you come and study here, you’ll learn about whisky and brewing but you also get access to the craft beer industry, which is strong in Scotland.

Now what better education can you have anywhere?

### **You were appointed Chancellor at Heriot-Watt University earlier this year. What does that appointment mean to you?**

It was a surprise, but a great honour. I started at Heriot-Watt in December 1964, so I’ve been at the university most of my working life. I hope that I can do everything I can to promote Heriot-Watt as a place where there is education for all. I believe in the concept of one humanity, and in education for all.

### **Do you have a favourite style of whisky?**

People who have known me for long enough would say, it’s the one I get for free! But I’ve always said that people should drink and eat what they like. There were prejudices against blends. But I think we belong to an industry where nobody makes bad whisky.

I was in Japan, doing some work on the raw materials for sake, and we had a great debate about Scotch whisky one day. One of the Japanese said that they imitate Scotch, they think it’s a wonderful product because it reflects the people of Scotland. He said: “Scotch whisky reflects the truth about a people, it contains no unrequired additives. It is simply produced, with no unnecessary complexities. And the raw materials are known and clear. That’s what people abroad value.”

I’ve never forgotten that. So Scotch whisky reflects the people. It reflects the truth of the product, the simplicity of the raw material, without unnecessary complexity to hide anything.

### **You’re also an ambassador for the Robert Burns World Federation.**

### **Where did that connection come from?**

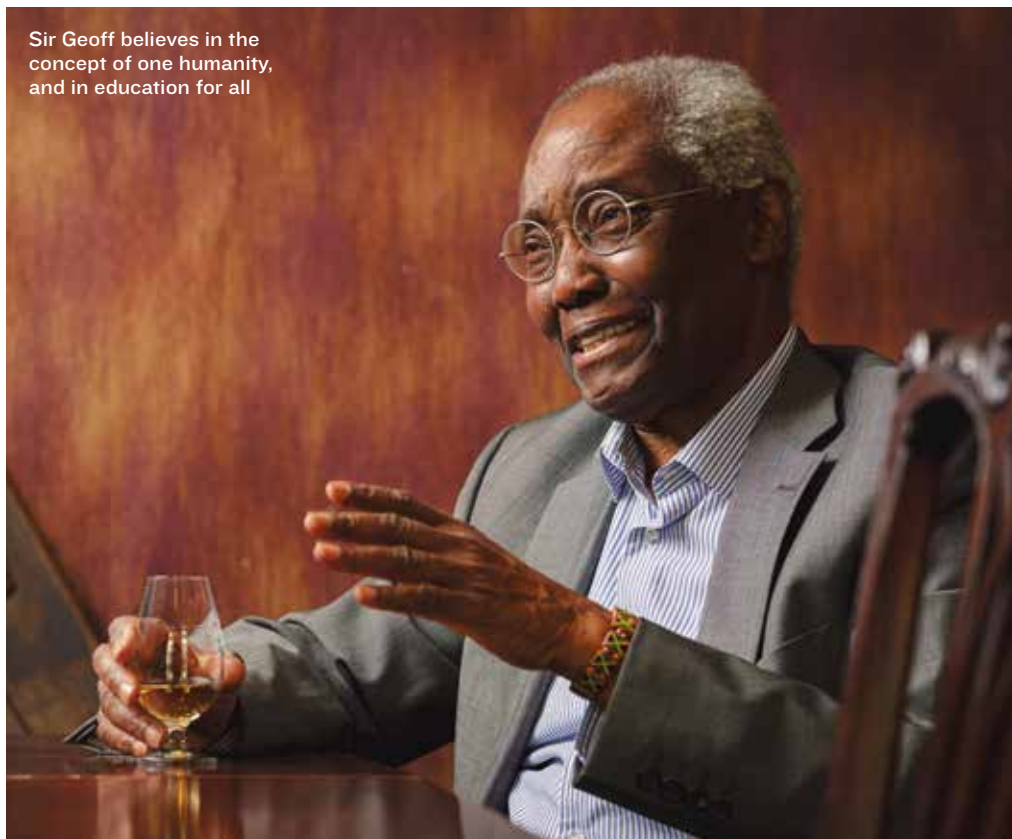
Yes, the first ambassador! I started with Burns in Jamaica when my Scottish teacher got me to sing *My love is like a red, red rose* and I went and told my aunts. They got me by the neck and said: “What’s that sort of thing about sex? At your age, at 10?”

When I came [to Scotland], I read Burns a lot. At the end of *John Barleycorn*, he writes: “Then let us toast John Barleycorn, each man a glass in hand, and may his posterity ne’er fail in old Scotland.”

The whole poem, it says ‘do not underestimate the apparently insignificant’. It’s about a barley grain. It’s about barley being harvested, that’s like trying to kill it. That’s the metaphor. You harvest it, then you take it in and you’re trying to drown it. Stupid! And then you beat it during germination, turning it. And then you put it in the fire. But nevertheless, it triumphs by producing Scotch whisky. That’s what the poem is about.

It’s about trying to stop and defeat the apparently insignificant, which turns out to produce something glorious. ●

Sir Geoff believes in the concept of one humanity, and in education for all



# SCOTCH ON THE ROCKS

If whisky is about bringing people together, it's time that everyone was equally welcome at the table, says our SMWS America ambassador *Jenna Elie*

DO you even drink whisky? Don't you need ice with that? Are you sure you can handle a whisky? Oh, a woman who drinks whisky, you must be...

These are questions women on both the consumer and industry side have most likely been asked at some point in their lives. Because after all, whisky is a "man's drink". Well, at least that's what marketing has been telling us for decades. Every advertisement, panel, boardroom and movie has shown us just that. Even though I represent The Scotch Malt Whisky Society and the best single cask whiskies in the world, I am still asked almost weekly if I even drink whisky. Through my elated breaths of single malt recommendations, fermentation facts, and detailed dialect on distillation, I am still asked. All while my heart is pounding with excitement for the chance to even share these fascinating bits of information on a spirit I literally live and breathe every single day, still I am asked. It would truly be a shame if I shared this passion so vigorously day in and day out and not even drink the stuff! But this is something women in our industry across the world experience throughout their daily lives. This is just one of the many pot-holes in the road, full of twists and turns that we have had to navigate. This road needs a lot of work and is one that we have taken upon ourselves to repave with kindness, inclusion and diversity.

## A COMMUNITY OF BRILLIANT WOMEN

When I first set foot into the world of whisky, I was intimidated. After all, whisky was a "man's drink", and here I was just a blue-haired, tattooed mum who knew nothing about whisky, but wanted nothing more than to soak up every single morsel of knowledge I could about the spirit. I started my journey with late nights on Google



and reading through books, but I knew there was more information out there. I knew that social media was full of communities of people who shared their passions from cars to cooking and even whisky! Prior to my whisky life, I was a treasure-hunting, old dress-soaking maniac who grew a vintage resale business through social media. There, I was embraced and taught by a community of brilliant women who showed me how to do things like pull 70 years of dust and musk from vintage garments and how to make a living in doing so. The community was inclusive and beautiful, and one I hoped to find in whisky. So I embarked on the journey through my page, Whisky A Go Girl, and set off on my quest for knowledge.

In the beginning it was mostly pages run by men showing off their bourbon collections and pricy single malts. Some treated me as nothing more than a piece of meat, with sexist and lewd comments, not giving me the time of day to be looked at as someone who was passionate about learning. Luckily, many also treated me with respect and kindness, some of whom are now my mentors today.

Slowly, I found more women who were sharing their passion for whisky in both their personal and work lives. I started learning from the likes of Kat Aagesen (Sespe Creek), Allison Parc (Brenne), Becky Paskin (Our Whisky), and Jennifer Wren (Whyte & Mackay). Along with them were many other women who shared their knowledge and passion and gave me the encouragement to keep on this path of learning.

I'll never forget the night that Jennifer Wren, the Single Malt Specialist (yes, SPECIALIST!) for The Dalmore and Jura invited me out for drinks at our local whisky bar. I was so excited to meet her and she just embraced me with such love and kindness from the moment we met. She shared her stories, her fierce knowledge of whisky and love of this spirit, and how to navigate this industry unapologetically as a woman. Watching her dance across a stage while singing the praises of single malt, all while making you feel warm, welcomed, and powerful in your knowledge was such a gift. I was so inspired by her conviction and passion, that to this day when hosting tastings and masterclasses, I channel what she

has given me over the years, which is to make sure everyone is included and to handle disrespect with finesse and grace. I too can say the same for Becky Paskin. When I first started interviewing people within our industry, I would scour the web for her interviews, as research. She is an absolutely brilliant journalist and is so passionate about whisky that it's infectious. She too is a huge advocate for women in this industry and celebrates diversity and inclusion through the Our Whisky campaign which she co-founded with Georgie Bell, the global malts ambassador for Bacardi who also started out in The Scotch Malt Whisky Society.

I would need a whole 50-page feature to even touch on the number of women who are making such profound impacts on the world of whisk(e)y. From Fawn Weaver (Uncle Nearest) to Louise McGuane (JJ Corry) to Eboni Major (Bulleit) and Sona Bajaria (Pernod Ricard) to just name a few, the list is long and very powerful!

### **BUILDING A BETTER WHISKY WORLD**

Over the years, I have worked numerous whisky shows, and hosted countless tastings where I have been treated as if I know nothing about whisky, along with the unwanted arm-touching and lewd comments that many of us have faced. I have heard many stories from women who have experienced even worse treatments, some of which have been life threatening. Being talked over, not taken seriously, or even downright ignored by some men when talking about whisky is nothing new, and it's not until I "raise my voice" that they begin to listen and then promptly have to put their foot in their mouths because I just so happen to know what the hell I'm talking about!



Sure, I am experiencing less of this as the topic is more widely spoken of, but it is far from being a thing of the past.

As the industry continues to evolve and change, I know that women will continue to make a big splash and will continue to rise while lifting others up. We will continue to call out misogynistic comments and actions, and champion diversity. For a spirit that is so diverse, and complex, so colourful in the glass, it's still not far from just being the "man's drink" it has been presented as. There is much work to be done and I hope to see more companies champion women and include them and their expertise in all arenas. I hope to see them in more advertisements as leaders in the industry, on more panels, and in more boardrooms. I hope to be one of them one day, sharing with the world a whisky of my own!

I too hope for a more diverse and inclusive industry where people feel welcomed, worthy, and safe. Where they are acknowledged for their contributions, and not just for white women, but for women in the BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour) and LGBTQIA communities. Some current resources, initiatives and organisations such as Diversity Distilled, The Nearest & Jack Advancement Initiative as well as scholarships provided by The Michael Jackson Institute for Brewing and Distilling are actively implementing these changes within the industry. This is an industry where everyone should have a seat at the table and it's such a shame it's taken this long to be realised. After all, this is whisky and isn't bringing people together what it's really all about?

Women have been here for centuries distilling and brewing in all corners of the globe, and we will continue to do just that. I am so proud to be a woman in this industry full of such incredible people, and look forward to being a part of the changes for a better whisk(e)y world. I hope as you read this you are inspired in some way to go out and buy a whisky made by a woman (there are many!), read up on the history of women in whisky and join us in the effort to champion and empower women not only across this industry, but across them all.

If you need a place to start, please reach out to me at [jenna@smwsa.com](mailto:jenna@smwsa.com) and I will be happy to point you in the right direction. ●

Powerful, evocative and emotional, music can heighten the senses and transport us to another place and time in an instant – just like any one of our Society whiskies. We asked BBC Radio DJ and SMWS member *Vic Galloway* to delve into his collection to match our flavour profiles to different musical genres. Here's what he came up with – tune into our Spotify playlist and pour yourself a suitable dram!

PHOTO BY MIKE WILKINSON

#### YOUNG & SPRITELY: DREAM POP

Effervescent and sweet, joyous and uplifting, this whisky has a naivety and exuberance to it that I just love. From decades gone by, the present day or even beamed in from tomorrow, Dream Pop pairs with it beautifully. This celestial music seems utterly timeless and forever young, an audio accompaniment that always puts a spring in my step. It is both light-footed and ethereal, yet with hidden mystery and depth. While sipping this whisky, I hear the honeyed vocals of Elizabeth Fraser from Cocteau Twins, the chiming, saturated funk of Khruangbin, the floating arpeggios of Beach House or the stoned grandeur of Washed Out – all drenched in reverb of course. These diffuse in perfect harmony to this playful, easy-going dram. With a combination of candy and citrus, both whisky and music have that impeccable balance of sweet and sour, packing a melodic punch but with a few unexpected twists and turns. At the end of the glass you feel centred, cosy and

elevated. Dream Pop makes me feel young and spritely, as does this dram.

#### Dream Pop essential sounds:

*Cocteau Twins – Iceblink Luck*  
*Washed Out – Eyes be Closed*  
*Beach House – Space Song*  
*Khruangbin – First Class*

#### SWEET, FRUITY & MELLOW: DOO WOP

With the aroma of sherbet and freshly baked apple pie wafting upwards, with one sip I am transported to the corner of a New York street in the 1950s, a barbershop quartet and perfect harmonies. The atmosphere is wholesome and syrupy, yet rich with romance and teenage love. The Flamingos, The Platters, The Teenagers and Gene Chandler all made ageless singles with a dreamlike quality that flow perfectly as the whisky goes down. These songs are heartfelt and personal in that classic, slightly melodramatic way; and the lyrics are idyllic, lush with innocence and wonder. Summer days turn to evenings and float by in a stream of endless piña coladas, while trees shed their flowers as lovers stroll by. This dram conjures up hot and hazy good times and the 50s all-American dream, and there's no better soundtrack to that than these odes to star-crossed, unrequited love. Drift away in a warm glow as the music and whisky stroll off into the distance, hand in hand.

#### Doo Wop essential sounds:

Read more about how  
Vic matched our flavour  
profiles with music by  
scanning this QR code



YOUR WHISKY RHYTHM



UNFILTERED  
.....

A man with grey hair, wearing a dark patterned button-down shirt and dark trousers, stands in a room filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves of vinyl records. He has his hands in his pockets and is looking slightly to the side. In the bottom left corner, there is a framed portrait of a man with a beard and a wide-open mouth, possibly singing or shouting. In the bottom right corner, there is a red plastic bin on a wooden stand. The floor has a black and white geometric pattern.

## SMWS Whisky Talk: An SMWS special series with Vic Galloway

Vic sat down at The Vaults for a chat with well-known whisky fans from across Scotland's cultural life to find out how SMWS whisky inspired their choices of music. Tune in to hear from writers Ian Rankin and Val McDermid, musicians Norman Blake from Teenage Fanclub, Justin Currie from Del Amitri and Stina Tweeddale of Honeyblood.

Whisky Talk: Malt & Music is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, iTunes, Google Podcasts and Stitcher, or search for 'Whisky Talk podcast'.

Watch the videos on the SMWS YouTube channel at SMWS Silverscreen.



*The Flamingos – I Only Have Eyes For You*

*Gene Chandler – Duke of Earl*

*Frankie Lymon & The Teenagers –*

*Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*

*The Platters – Only You*

### **SWEET & SPICY: INDIE-FOLK**

Wrapped up tight in wool and winter coats, scarves flowing and rosy cheeks, the seasonal flavours of gingerbread and mulled wine tickle your taste buds as you and friends stumble, laughing, arm in arm into a familiar hostelry. Indie-folk somehow manages to sum up that time of year to me, that feeling of community, family and hope; as this spicy dram warms your cockles and cheers you through the snow. Acoustic guitars, vocal harmonies, a raw human voice all hold you close and give you a hug, electric guitars twang and occasionally you can hear sleigh bells in the middle distance. In a perfect world your hip flask is full to the brim of this stuff and everyone has a cheeky nip, out of view of the barman, around the roaring fire. Fleet Foxes, Frightened Rabbit, Laura Marling and Grizzly Bear have kept me company before... and there's even some animal symmetry going on here too! This whisky embraces your glass and fits your mitten just right, as you nod along to the music approvingly.

### **Indie-Folk essential sounds:**

*Fleet Foxes – White Winter Hymnal*

*Frightened Rabbit – Old Old Fashioned*

*Laura Marling – Alexandra*

*Grizzly Bear – Colorado*

### **SPICY & DRY: GOTH**

Taking me back to my formative years, the woody and liquorice aromas of this whisky reawaken memories of patchouli oil, leather jackets, black eyeliner and chipped nail varnish. The bass is low and rumbling, the drums are metronomic and tribal, guitars sparkle and the mood is gloomy yet celebratory, in the way only the Goth life can be! Pernod and blackcurrant next to pints of 'snakebite' are lined up on the bar, while the moody, rubber-clad DJ poses in the booth and spins underground classics by The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus and Nick Cave. Shy glances are exchanged below an explosion of dyed, back-combed hair; we sip our drinks, standing smoking in shady corners, minding our

own business while also checking out the competition. All the boys and girls are skinny, the cheekbones cut like razors and the music is the endless soundtrack to a romantic, vulnerable youth. Dry ice swirls through the club as the whisky goes down and the subbacultcha is happy in its clique.

### **Goth essential sounds:**

*The Cure – A Forest*

*Bauhaus – Spirit*

*Siouxsie and the Banshees – Spellbound*

*Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds – Tupelo*

### **DEEP, RICH & DRIED FRUITS: SOUTHERN SOUL**

The balmy heat of the Southern states of the US, with its friendship, hospitality and sugar-coated, deep-fried soul food on every corner, is truly dripping in culture and home to some of the greatest music known to man. This thick, syrupy, fruit-laden whisky is deep and soulful, so the ideal accessory to the sound of profound, gospel-flecked R'n'B from God's own country. With shirt sleeves rolled up, a weather-beaten Cadillac outside, cigars blazing and a side order of treacle pie and salted caramel ice cream on the menu; a Hammond organist hammers his way through the local hits in the 24-hour dive while late, great vocalists such as Otis Redding, Irma Thomas and The Staple Singers ring in your ears. This long, slow, smooth-sipping dram heats you up, but also relaxes you for the tears of joy and laughter to follow. Love is in the air as you sink into your chair and soak it in. This is soul in a glass – kick back and let the mellow melancholy take you there.

### **Southern Soul essential sounds:**

*Booker T. & the MGs – Time Is Tight*

*The Staple Singers – Respect Yourself*

*Otis Redding – I've Been Loving You*

*Too Long*

*Irma Thomas – Anyone Who Knows*

*What Love Is (Will Understand)*

### **OLD & DIGNIFIED: WEST COAST JAZZ**

At the time of BeBop and the even tougher, wilder shapes of Hard Bop, the West Coast of America, particularly Los Angeles and San Francisco, specialised in a calmer, smoother, laid back form of jazz. Bringing the west coast breeze, Bossa beats and Californian cool into

the mix, listeners were transfixed and soon the rest of the world was too. Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans, Stan Getz and Chet Baker were the poster boys and virtuosos who performed up and down the coast for the original hipsters, who lapped it up and lived the 50s/60s dream. Suited, booted, slick and suave, with not a hair out of place; a glass of 'Scotch' was never far away from the players or the crowd. This whisky pulls in tastes of exotic fruit, perfumed flowers and dark chocolate that brings that era of smoky cool right into your glass. Old, dignified but still hip and stylish, this a dram with a cigarette in its mouth, the soft-top down and shades on.

### **West Coast Jazz essential sounds:**

*Chet Baker – It's Always You*

*Bill Evans Trio – My Foolish Heart*

*Stan Getz – Desafinado*

*Dave Brubeck Quartet – Take Five*

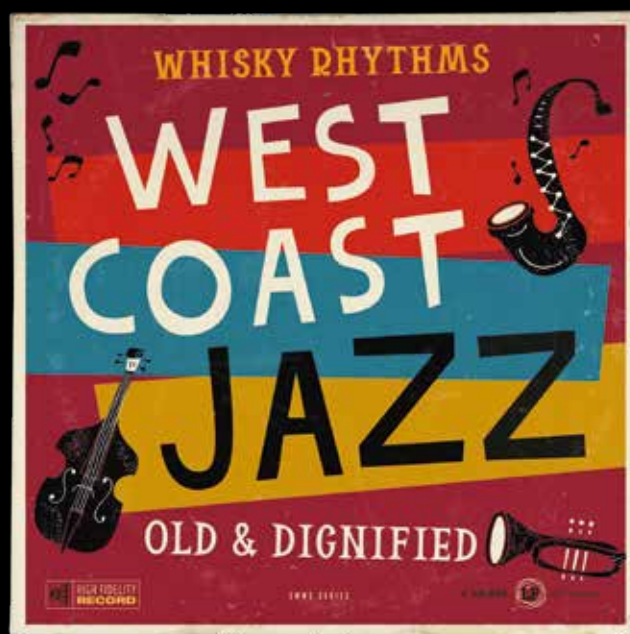
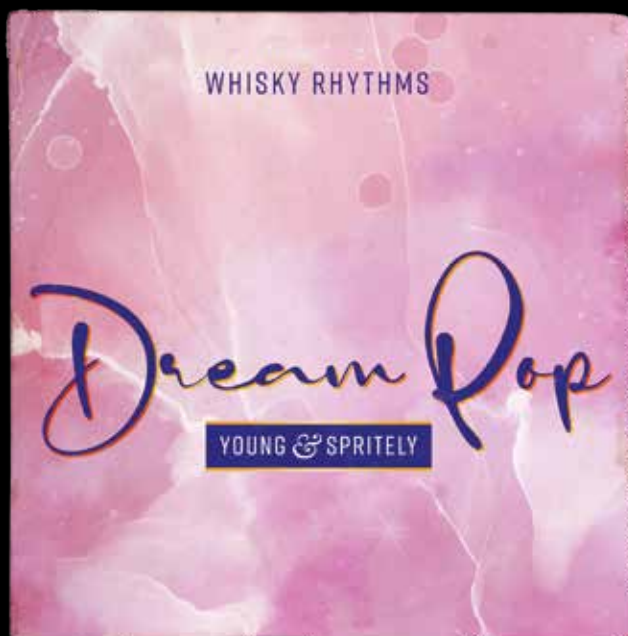
### **LIGHT & DELICATE: SINGER-SONGWRITERS**

Clean lines, humble themes, acoustic guitars and an unadorned human voice all combine strongly with this subtle, refined whisky. It's light and delicate, but underpinning that is an honesty and integrity that's undeniable. With vulnerable delivery, introspective lyrics and minimal production, the sound of a soulful singer-songwriter can simultaneously pull at the heart-strings and ease the daily grind. Pure, vivid yet still melancholy, these are sounds that can often feel floral, ethereal and sometimes bittersweet, much like the dram itself. King Creosote's pure timbre and Jon Hopkins' restrained production, Jose Gonzales' unpretentious finger-picking and whispered vocals, Aldous Harding's quirky acoustic vision, and the 60s brooding master Nick Drake all come to mind while the juice goes down. Here we find ourselves seated in a rural community hall at a folk festival, surrounded by bearded record-collectors deep in contemplation, whisky glasses in hand, concentrating on the artist performing onstage. There is a direct line between the songwriter, the listener and this crisp-tasting whisky.

### **Singer-Songwriters essential sounds:**

*King Creosote and Jon Hopkins – Bats in the Attic*





Jose Gonzales – *Heartbeats*  
Aldous Harding – *Fixture Picture*  
Nick Drake – *River Man*

### JUICY, OAK & VANILLA: ROOTS REGGAE

Let the sweetness overwhelm your senses as this warm, honeyed whisky floods over your palate with hints of ginger, pineapple and banana. The scented escapism of reggae perfectly fits the bill as a backdrop with laid-back drums, luscious harmonies and sincere vocal testimonials all colliding over that ever-present head-nodding skank. Suddenly it all makes sense! Pull up a small wooden table in the town square, pour a glass and feel the bass of the sound system kick into gear and blaze through classics by roots masters like Max Romeo and Burning Spear, followed by intuitive vocal groups like The Wailers and The Gladiators. This dram can take you all the way to Kingston, Jamaica as you immerse yourself in some of the most idiosyncratic and authentic music out there. When you're ready, step up, ask a girl to dance and shake your shoulders to the righteous rhythms while you sing your heart out with the best. This is community and collaboration in a vanilla-rich glass of rural heaven.

#### Roots Reggae essential sounds:

*Burning Spear – Man in the Hills*  
*Max Romeo – War Ina Babylon*  
*The Gladiators – Looks is Deceiving*  
*Bob Marley and the Wailers – Soul Rebel (Small Axe – The Upsetters Recordings, 1970-1972)*

### OILY & COASTAL: ELECTRONICA & POST ROCK

The esoteric world of electronica and post-rock are closely linked in my musical mind – opaque soundscapes that evoke open-ended panoramas and rustic terrain, in tune with nature yet still alien and unearthly. With its coastal notes and a salty aftertaste that clings to your mouth, this is a dram that lingers and takes you somewhere windswept and untouched. Are you on an Icelandic trawler with Sigur Ros, East Lothian beaches with Boards of Canada, aboard a space station with Mogwai, or in some digital netherworld with Squarepusher? Synths, heavily-effected guitars, crisp breakbeats and reverb-soaked vocals

all run into each other, as you stand at the harbour wall. There's white noise and twinkling feedback, but it's in the distance and you pay no mind. Pull on a sou'wester as the elements hit you and the sea water splashes in your face. It's intense but also refreshing, as the waves of sound engulf your mind and the whisky consumes your palate.

#### Electronica essential sounds:

*Mogwai – Dry Fantasy*  
*Boards of Canada – Palace Posy*  
*Squarepusher – MIDI Sans Frontieres (Avec Batterie)*  
*Sigur Ros – Glósóli*

### LIGHTLY PEATED: MODERN PSYCH

Swirling playfully, colours blazing and head spinning... after one sip of this incredible smoky dram, fuzzy logic rules and your perceptions of what a whisky can actually be are thrown into the ether. There's peat, yes... but also a floral, paisley-patterned sweetness at large, light to the touch but full of attitude. Draw on your favourite tobacco and let the lava lamps dazzle you, as Tame Impala raise the ghost of George Harrison, Unknown Mortal Orchestra trip on Johann Sebastian Bach, Thee Oh Sees take you to the stars and back, while Swedish psych-lords Dungen simply blow your tiny mind. The drums continually fall over themselves, the guitars chime and the bass throbs, as this sensuous sap nestles gently in your thrapple. If you want a mind-enhancing whisky that launches you on a journey to the outer limits, there is a modern psych soundtrack of joy to help you along the way. Ya dig, baby?

#### Modern Psych essential sounds:

*Tame Impala – Desire Be Desire Go*  
*Unknown Mortal Orchestra – Swim and Sleep (Like a Shark)*  
*Thee Oh Sees – Web*  
*Dungen – Fredag*

### PEATED: 70s PUNK

London's Burning... well that's what they sang from the rooftops in 1977 anyway, and the smoke certainly pours from the chimney of your Glencairn on this one! It also kicks like a mule and demands you jump out of your skin and pogo to that furious backdrop of fuzz, buzz and clang. Turn it up, blow the speakers

and kick out the jams with this stormy concoction of flavours and fire. Not for the faint-hearted, this dram leads you straight to the engine room and kick-starts your heart. With passions poised and emotions on high alert, The Clash, The Damned, Buzzcocks and Ramones give you a group hug and pull you into the pit for the last dance of your life. The sweat and salt drip from your lips, and the night before is nothing but a blurry memory. Next morning you wolf down a breakfast, then clean up for dawn with a new strut. Punk and Peat, medicine and magic – that's all you need!

#### 70s Punk essential sounds:

*The Clash – Complete Control*  
*The Damned – Neat Neat Neat*  
*Buzzcocks – Love You More*  
*Ramones – Teenage Lobotomy*

### HEAVILY PEATED: HEAVY ROCK

You want to go deep? You want to get heavy? Ladies and gentlemen I give you the ultimate – gunpowder in a glass! Batten down the hatches and bang your head to the darkest, densest dram of all. All aboard the highway to hell, party hard while the ship goes down, as we all dance happily into the inferno. But always remember, you lucky people have the very last bottle left! When the bluest bad boys of all turn up the volume and blaze up a fat cigar, you need a proper drink to match. Queens of the Stone Age set the scene with Black Sabbath, Led Zep and AC/DC bringing up the rear, so everyone knows the score. You can't deny it! As this fierce and fulsomely-flavoured whisky goes down, you need a serious soundtrack and only the nastiest and sexiest of all rockers will do. Hail Satan... but do try to sip this one slowly and responsibly at your own personal pleasure, please! Of course, you rock...

#### Heavy Metal essential sounds:

*Queens of the Stone Age – The Lost Art of Keeping a Secret*  
*Black Sabbath – The Wizard*  
*Led Zeppelin – Four Sticks*  
*AC/DC – Gone Shooting*

Search "Spotify + SMWS" or scan this QR code to listen to Vic Galloways Spotify playlist curated for the 12 SMWS flavour profiles





*Whisky Rhythms*

**SINGER  
SONGWriters**

*Light & Delicate*

WHISKY RHYTHMS



**ROOTS  
REGGAE**

← JUICY, OAK & VANILLA →

WHISKY RHYTHMS

**ELECTRONICA  
& POST ROCK**

OILY & COASTAL

WHISKY RHYTHMS

**MODERN  
PSYCH**

LIGHTLY  
PEATED

WHISKY RHYTHMS

**70's**

**PUNK**

**PEATED**

*Whisky Rhythms*

**HEAVY  
ROCK**

HEAVILY PEATED



TORABHAIG  
.....

It's been almost 200 years since the Isle of Skye's one and only legal distillery started operations, so a new set-up in the south of the island was long overdue. *Richard Goslan* paid a return visit to Torabhaig to find out how this newcomer is developing and to get a taste of its inaugural release

# THE NEW SPIRIT

PHOTOS BY HORST FRIEDRICHS, COURTESY OF TORABHAIG DISTILLERY  
.....

TORABHAIG  
.....



THE last time I met up with Hamish Fraser was on a gloomy winter's day in early 2016, when Torabhaig's distillery manager led us through the quagmire of a building site to his chilly office for a cup of tea. A power cut meant there was no electricity and not much in the way of heat.

Thankfully, there was gas to put a pan of water onto the stove for a warming cuppa and a chat about the great things to come.

Five years on, the entire environment is unrecognisable. Torabhaig and its grounds are pristine in the spring sunshine and Hamish looks like a happy

man to have the years of muck well and truly behind him.

"It was a mudbath out there!" he remembers. "The old farm steading was a midden, with a swamp in the centre of the courtyard. It was a huge undertaking to restore the steading, get everything installed and complete the landscaping, but we got there in the end."

The steading Hamish is referring to is an early 19th century farm building which was in ruins, but as a listed building had to be restored in sympathy with its original character.

That meant configuring and designing stills which would actually fit inside the

original stone structure, and working out how to get them in and out.

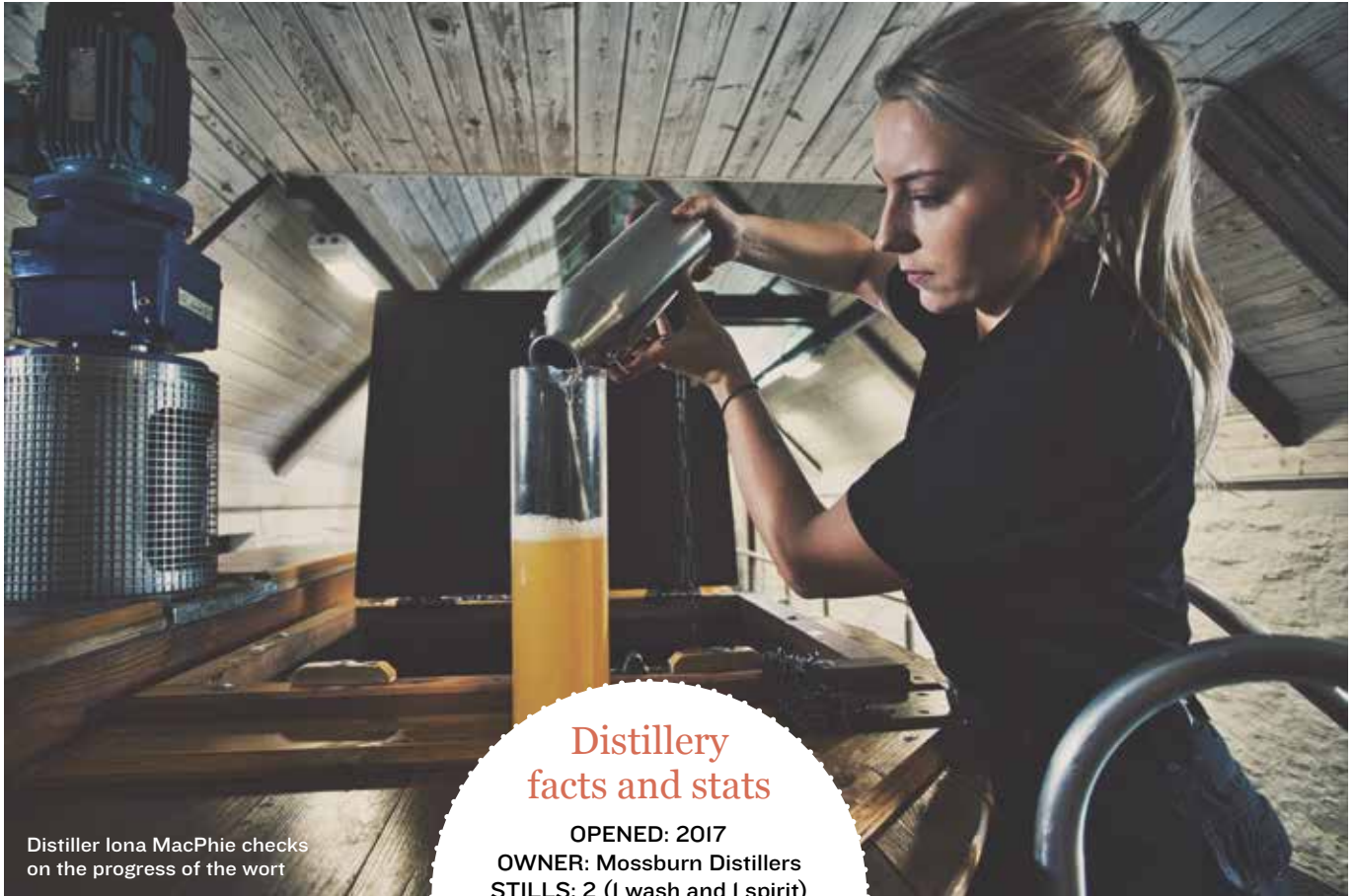
A removable roof was part of the innovative new design, although it's still a few years before it will have to be put to use.

Visitor centre manager Anne O'Lone takes me on a tour, and explains how the steading itself has dictated the character of Torabhaig's spirit.

"Our milling, mashing and fermentation all takes place in the newly added building, which joins onto the original steading," she says, leading me through the structure that's been added to the original building, although with

# OF SKYE

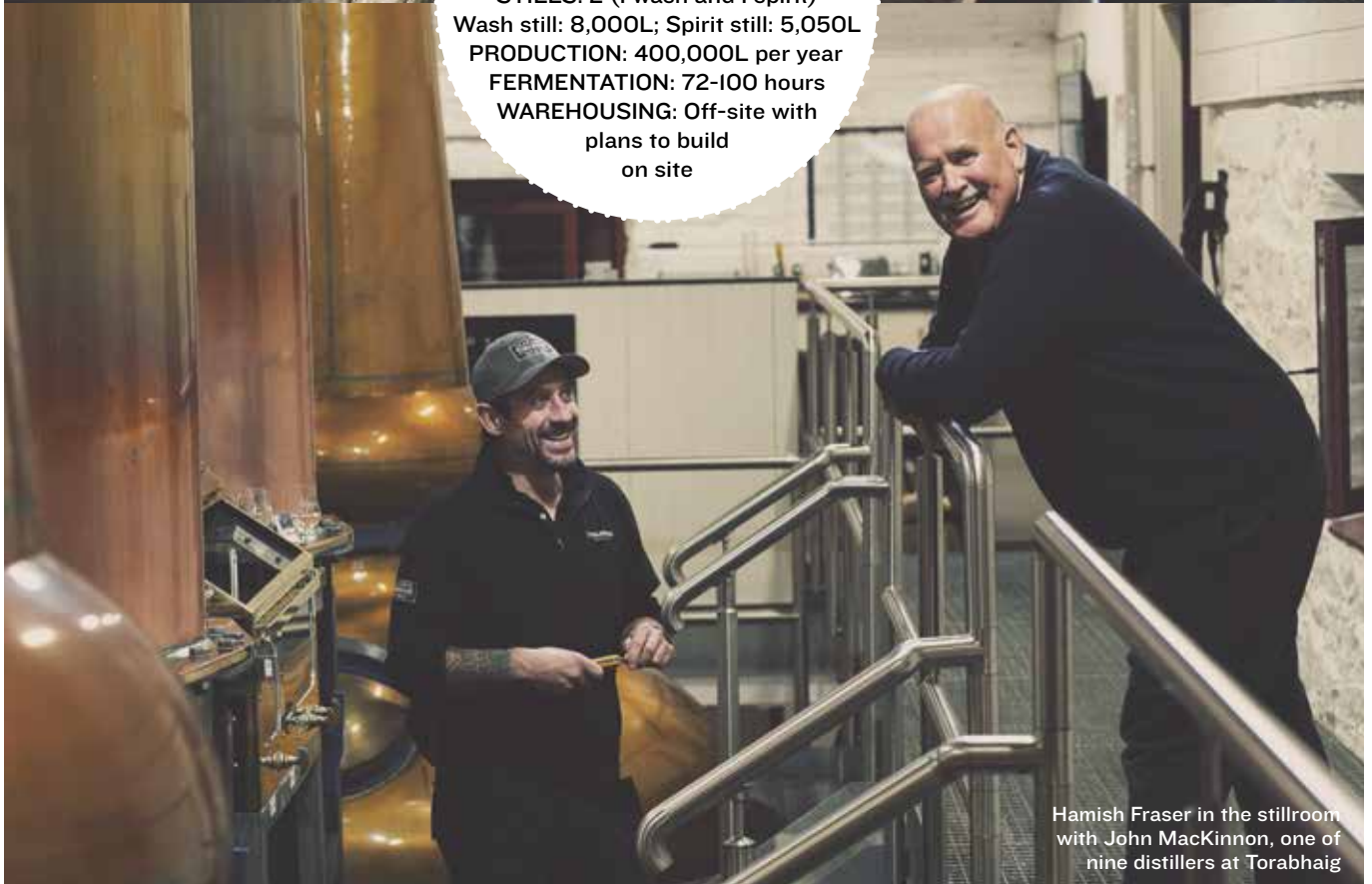




Distiller Iona MacPhie checks on the progress of the wort

### Distillery facts and stats

OPENED: 2017  
OWNER: Mossburn Distillers  
STILLS: 2 (1 wash and 1 spirit)  
Wash still: 8,000L; Spirit still: 5,050L  
PRODUCTION: 400,000L per year  
FERMENTATION: 72-100 hours  
WAREHOUSING: Off-site with plans to build on site



Hamish Fraser in the stillroom with John MacKinnon, one of nine distillers at Torabhaig



its pagoda roof it looks as though it's been there just as long.

"Here in the steading is where we have one pair of stills, and as you can see they are short and round so that they could fit inside the original building. Even the downward angle of the lyne arms is influenced by the need to fit them in under the roof." A wider-than-typical neck on the stills also allows for more reflux and a slow distillation promotes more copper contact.

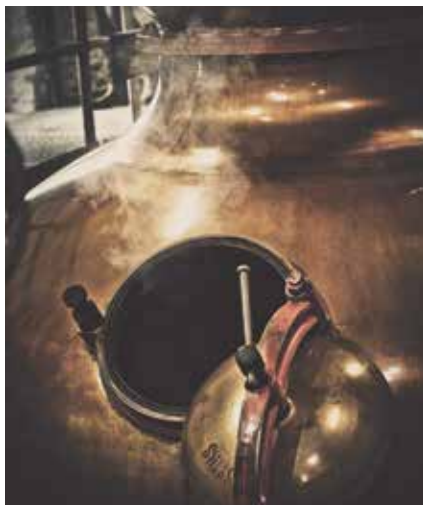
The stills themselves are named after Sir Iain and Lady Noble, in respect of the local landowner Sir Iain Noble who had the original vision for a new distillery on Skye and who owned the steading. He had already gained planning permission for a distillery at Torabhaig, but following his death in 2010, his estate and Lady Lucilla Noble provided the location for Mossburn Distillers to fulfil Sir Iain's dream. "Together in spirit," as Anne says.

And what about that spirit? At the time of my visit, Torabhaig had recently released its first single malt, the 2017 Legacy Series. It was made with Concerto malted barley, peated to a phenol level of 55-60 part per million (ppm) and matured in first fill bourbon barrels. That phenolic punch has been tempered in the cask to be bottled at 16 ppm, but it's still very much a robustly peated dram that speaks of its place on the coast of Skye's Sleat peninsula.

And what a place it is. Now that the grounds have been landscaped and welly



Torabhaig's first single malt, released in 2021



boots aren't essential for a visit, the distillery's position overlooking the ruins of Knock Castle (Caisteal Camus) across to Knoydart and Mallaig on the mainland are up there with the best in Scotland.

The distillery is also playing a key role in the local community. With a manual form of production, the decision was taken early on to nurture nine local distillers from a range of backgrounds.

They have all undergone training and are being supported to qualify as accredited distillers, while also being encouraged to create their own experimental batches for future release under the label of 'The Journeyman Project'.

Torabhaig has also taken its place on the Hebridean Whisky Trail, which includes Talisker, Raasay and the Isle of Harris distilleries, as well as the recent addition of Jura. Whatever route you take, Torabhaig is a welcome addition to Skye and the world of Scotch whisky. ●

### LIKE TORABHAIG, LOVE THIS...

A key part of *Unfiltered's* monthly offering online is our visits to distilleries, where we give members the chance to explore where the whisky comes from and hear from the people who make it.

Despite restrictions over the past year, we've been able to travel far and wide to explore distilleries old, new and even those that are in the works.

Turn overleaf to discover a selection of distillery features – just scan the QR code for each one to open the door and step inside...



GLEN MORAY



HOLYROOD



ARDNAMURCHAN



ROSEBANK



GLEN GRANT



GLENTURRET







Why does it feel unusual to be a young woman with an appreciation for single malt whisky? Maybe it's because so many of us haven't been properly introduced to its joys yet, says *Moa Nilsson*

PHOTO BY **PETER SANDGROUND**

# PASS IT ON

IF YOU'D told me four years ago that I would become a whisky enthusiast before I turned 25, I would have been intrigued, but somewhat sceptical. That's until I was fortunate enough to gain an insight into this never-ending world of flavours and complexities.

For that, I can thank my boyfriend, after he started working in the whisky industry. He took the time to tell me about flavour and where it comes from. That made me want to try some different samples, and one day it just clicked. I discovered that being a whisky drinker suits me – I can be a bit nerdy by nature, and drinking slowly with less quantity while appreciating flavour and craftsmanship is more appealing to me than downing shots and waking up with a horrible hangover the next day.

Now my friends tend to fall into two distinct camps. Those who work within the whisky world love their spirits neat because they appreciate flavour. Others drink wine, cocktails or spirits with mixers to actively hide the flavour of alcohol, often preferring vodka because of its 'neutral' character. Then they laugh at me for drinking whisky because 'it's a dad's drink'!

For many young people, alcohol is simply a route to intoxication, not to flavour appreciation. I'll often only have a dram or two, which can be frowned upon because I'm perceived as being 'boring' if I don't drink more. But as young people how are we supposed to know what to drink, when we're presented with so many options? It's no surprise that you might choose something that tastes like what you're used to – sweet cider, spirits with a

mixer, or a sugar-filled wine. Guidance definitely helps with your choice of alcohol and development of drinking habits. That's why I think a lot of younger men often find the world of whisky easier to approach than some women. For many it's almost a rite of passage and a way to connect with the older generation, where you can sit down with your dad or granddad and explore and enjoy whisky together. There are also many male role models in films and on television, from James Bond through to *Mad Men* and onto Ron Swanson in *Parks & Recreation*, to mention a few.

But where are the female equivalents? And why is it that even though there are a lot more women drinking whisky these days, I often feel less respected than my male friends and colleagues in certain situations?

I think whisky could be a drink for so many more young people in general, and women in particular. Guidance has the potential to help people appreciate the flavours and craftsmanship within the whisky world. Young people like my friends could benefit by learning further about spirits, as I truly believe it could help them and others drink more responsibly and savour the natural flavours in their glass.

So maybe it's up to you – if you're the parent of a young adult, and not just a young man, then it's time to pass on your knowledge. We'll be eternally grateful! ●

*Moa Nilsson writes about whisky and conducts tastings from her base in Edinburgh. Follow her on Instagram @swedishwhiskygirl*



UNFILTERED  
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**"GUIDANCE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO HELP  
PEOPLE APPRECIATE THE FLAVOURS AND  
CRAFTSMANSHIP IN WHISKY...PASS ON YOUR  
KNOWLEDGE, WE'LL BE ETERNALLY GRATEFUL!"**

**MOA NILSSON**

# SPIRITS IN THE STILLHOUSE, BABES IN THE WOOD

In March's *Unfiltered*, *Fionnán O'Connor* took a deep dive into Ireland's whiskey history, considered its remarkable renaissance, and gave an overview of Irish distilling's most exciting new creations



We may be all about Scotch whisky but we do like to keep an eye on what's happening beyond our boundaries. In June, David Cover reported on the incredible rise of distilling across Wales since Penderyn produced the country's first whisky for 100 years in 2004. You can read all about that at <https://unfiltered.smws.com/06-2021/welsh-whisky>



We also dug into the burgeoning English whisky scene, catching up with the owners and distillers at The English Whisky Company, The Lakes Distillery, Cotswolds Distillery, Bimber Distillery and the Spirit of Yorkshire Distillery for a series of interviews and podcasts which you can dig into at <https://unfiltered.smws.com/unfiltered-august-2020/english-whisky>



150  
AND COUNTING

THE SOCIETY'S LANDMARK  
150th DISTILLERY BOTTLINGS  
ARE FROM IRELAND – LOOK  
OUT FOR THOSE COMING  
YOUR WAY SOON, ALONG  
WITH MORE EXCITING  
RELEASES  
IN 2022

Boann distillery's spirit receiver

IT'S A pretty looking place on a Sunday if you're lucky but as anyone who's actually walked through one of those valleys can attest, there's an awful lot of muck in Ireland. Muck in the midlands, muck out west. Muck on a hilltop and again down in the pubs, where you'll also find stale breath, staler carpets, stale cream on stale stout, depending on the decade more or less oil in the bottom of your Powers and in from the downpour, whatever you stepped in still clinging to your soles.

No other life, really, but it should come as no surprise that in selling all this, there's a lot of muck too. When I last wrote for *Unfiltered* in 2014, the pile had grown erosive. Dull old muck about light Irish softness was being churned with fresh slurry from heaps of identically sourced malts strapped to zombified 'brand stories' and the quaint names of valleys where they hadn't been made. Similarly flushed with preemptive success, a shadowy league of market entrants dressed as artisan proprietors seemed intent on re-landscaping the place into a glen bespeckled Toon Town of imitative stock – a kind of Highland simulacrum in which history isn't real

and the whole idyll, approached, starts to sink beneath your feet. Delicate and smooth. Boutique. It all sounded dreadful, but the whisky for a few of them sounded somewhat incidental (as is its spelling here). It hurt all the more because the fault, dear Brutus, lay not within the muck but in ourselves for spewing it so long. Not everyone, in fairness.

Gingery bristle, viscosity and liquorice – the older styles of Irish, grown hoary with neglect, never lost their native acolytes. Abroad though, even among whiskyphiles, the isle just south of Islay appeared misunderstood. Already hastily paved over by a 1980s motorway of ever-lighter blends and branding, Irish whiskey's old oily soul was still largely unknown outside a cultish critical following and those with an intuitive lust for the turbid joys, with the muck outside, of a gulp of viscous fusels in a damp, well-lighted place. As unprecedented cashflow tectonically reshaped the very mud beneath its claws, in 2014 the native breed of raw barley skunk, having persisted so long, appeared at risk of sobering up. In such dire times (as Irish whiskey thrived and

bloomed) it seemed a moral duty to draw lines in the sludge.

That was six years ago. The skunk, still unctuous, is certainly not dead. There's still a war for the poor thing's soul and habitat but there's something cooler – chilling even – downwind of it these days. Musty old peach skin on a two-year old's nose. A dry smoke finish on an oily newmake pot still. Galia melon in a malt. Despite the forecast, there's been a thrilling condensation in these past few years, most of it still in warehouse racks, splicing un-nosed traits to finishes and textures refreshingly, intoxicatingly, decades out of date. There's plenty of delicious Irish whiskey out now but the renaissance – the real one – hasn't even turned six. I've a few on the table and I'm shivering just nosing them. Historic in both senses. It's also snowing.

A HAUNTED, SLIGHTLY  
NERVOUS INDUSTRY

It could also just be the first two drams to hand. Delighted as I was in 2014 mumbling glumly into my Redbreast, a few years on I was collared by the research council to write a PhD on the history of Irish mash bills, a part of

which entails the recreation, with the help of Boann distillery, of a series of lost recipes. It's two of those I'm nosing now and they smell like how snow really ought to taste. Later this year they'll be sent to a lab at Heriot-Watt University for a parallel study in tandem with a blind nosing panel of 30 head distillers. It's because of the sensitivities of that testing that I can't be more specific but this first one, made from barley, malt and oats, is not the dram I thought it'd be. Once composing 5-30 per cent of the typical grist, oats fell off the Irish map in 1974 and though they were an integral part of almost all of Ireland's old single pot still classics, there's obviously no new-make left. As for this, there's a high note, like a wedding cake made slippery by the barley, injected with malt ester pear drops, and grinned at in the background by an uninvited ginger guest. He's an old family friend and his smile only gets wryer in the second dram to hand. What either of these profiles will do in white oak I can only guess.

What Ireland's leading noses will make of them remains a mystery but it's hard, discussing them with Boann's distiller Michael Walsh, not to feel the heart beat fast.

"It's the most important thing I've done," he says. His pride is palpable but tied up with an often humble cognisance of the existence of his projects in the tall vaulted warehouse of Irish whisky's past and future. It's not just Boann. Among anyone who's taken a sincere look back there's a sense in Ireland of a haunted,



Echlinville distillery, "a bit like an Irish Daftmill"

slightly nervous industry, drawn from a very suddenly redrawn map and centuries of untapped wellspring that was covered for too long. Raw barley, yes, but peat and oats and rye and wheat and double distillation and so many things that happened here before and were ignored, denied and swept aside and are sitting now in casks. Lest you get the wrong idea, there's still the old muck, but even that cracks.

There's also nothing stopping anyone distilling anything that comes to mind. Its old industry a ghost outside Middleton and Bushmills, Irish distilling is paradoxically at ease, at least among its nimbler thinkers, to do more or less what it likes, and that's happening too. Unlike in France or Tasmania

though, an itch still twitches with the stillhouse ghost – often among those same distillers. A sense of legacy with some, a curiosity for others, which, vatted into method puts a few of them at the forefront of what's now considered cutting edge. It might just be a chip on the shoulder. It's exciting, anyway.

### FARM DISTILLING, HISTORIC MASH BILLS

In east County Down where the soil is much firmer, the sense of place and history runs deep in their whiskey and even in their labelling. Revamped brands can be exceptionally tacky if not handled well but whether it's Jarlath's sheer sincerity or their stony demarcation between Dunville's as a sourced stock 'homage brand' and the spirit that they themselves lay down, it all comes off just as local pride. (The Dunville's casks sell like sherry-soaked hotcakes nonetheless.) Echlinville itself is a family farm. A bit like an Irish Daftmill and with a similarly disciplined trigger finger that's kept them from putting out a drop of it so far. Their oldest malt will be eight this summer. Aside from malt, they make both triple and double-distilled Irish pot still runs with varying malt and barley ratios and Springbank-like technical glee. The spirit I have here is the double distilled 35 per cent barley 65 per cent malt new-make and it's Saharan, unapologetic, dry as a Triassic spine, traditional Irish pot still relieved only from its chalk-box breath by a skin off the milk-top texture and a filmy, not quite sweet vanilla, made all the more



Fionnán, behind, with Boann's distiller Michael Walsh



entrancing by the dryness underneath it. I briefly lived beside a marble quarry in Carrara as a student (long story) and the two things I remember most are the white gelato and the pervasive taste of whiter dust. It's fantastic, really.

Speaking of vanilla and a sense of place, Echlinville has also experimented with a recreated mash bill from Old Comber, the last old Ulster Irish pot still and one whose remains are only minutes up the road. Double distilled from 40 per cent malt, 48 per cent raw barley, and 12 per cent oats, the original Comber was thick enough to clog a straw. While its second life in Echlinville is certainly fat, there's a creampuff, wafer, pastry-like vanilla from the oats. I swore I'd never say a new-make smelled like croissant but it really does. Even more curiously, Echlinville has tried it both with malted and unmalted oats.

### IRELAND'S PRIMAЕVAL LORE

If there's something in the air in Ireland, there's something in the water in county Down. Downstream of Echlinville in the Mourne Mountains, Brendan Carty's Killowen distillery is as impossible to get to as it is to describe. If nosing Boann with Michael or walking the farm in Echlinville calls back to Irish whisky's industrial and agrarian pasts, Killowen distillery is its primaеval lore. Direct fired pot stills, cuts taken by taste off the drip, malt peated out the back using turf the boys shovel from a bog down the hill... playfully amorphous mash bills of oats, rye, wheat, raw barley, did I mention that they smoke the oats? Killowen are the guys no one outside Ireland knows about, everyone in Ireland can't shut up about, and everyone else is going to find out about in three years or so. The closest Scottish parallel might be Dornoch but to find a Brendan Carty you really need to look to world distilling. The American craft scene, some of the spunkier farm projects in Australia and New Zealand – and yes, our native old 1950s oil, which courses like a bloodstream through their wash into their cuts.

The capacity is tiny. It's really legalised poitin. Killowen's core Irish pot still is mythopoeic stuff. Half peated malt, raw barley grist, and then in tumbling order malted and raw dry-peated oats, wheat and rye and

depending on the run, a bag or two of a specialty malt – all left in an open-top fermentation for a whole week straight. "You leave it open," Brendan told me, "you let bacteria into it, it's brilliant. It tastes like pineapples. We tend to get more infections in our mash, which is great. There's sheep and cattle shite all round the place. I imagine that's airborne." Beneath the myth and bravado, the lads really do have considered understanding of the elements at play. More herbal menthol from unmalted oats, more custard cream and biscuits from the oaten malt, the mouthfeel from both against raw barley oil, the Maillard reactions in direct flame distillation, the cuts of each mash bill, and the cross considerations of the two peated grains. The newmake gristles. Shame about the sheep shite.

Killowen whisky isn't whisky yet but I've a two-year old sample here from a Pedro Ximénez cask and even at this age it knocks the socks off nearly anything I know in Ireland. Pinecone and bacon and a full, burnt caramel underworld with a maple tree forest burnt straight back to pinecone by direct flame and peat. Killowen is Ireland's because it's nobody else's but I know no other whisky like it in Ireland or the world.

His love for Ireland's mixed mash birthright is almost shamanistic, it's so redolent when you hear him talk. I wouldn't be surprised to learn he runs a cult out there in the hills. But Brendan's kitchen shelves are lined with projects from around the world. Europe, New

Zealand, farmyard experiments. "We're sleepwalking in Ireland," he often says with frustration. Taking its original inspiration from Peter Bignell's Belgrove Distillery in Australia, Killowen, at its core, is a tiny stillhouse on an open global stage. It's an awareness Brendan shares with his near polar opposite, the ex-Bruichladdich capo Mark Reynier on the southeast coast. Both men have an acute understanding of whisky as an ultimately nationless sensory hypothesis, but if Brendan Carty is the Irish incarnation's Alan Lomax, Mark Reynier is John Cage.

### AN UGLY FACILITY, A DAUNTING AMBITION

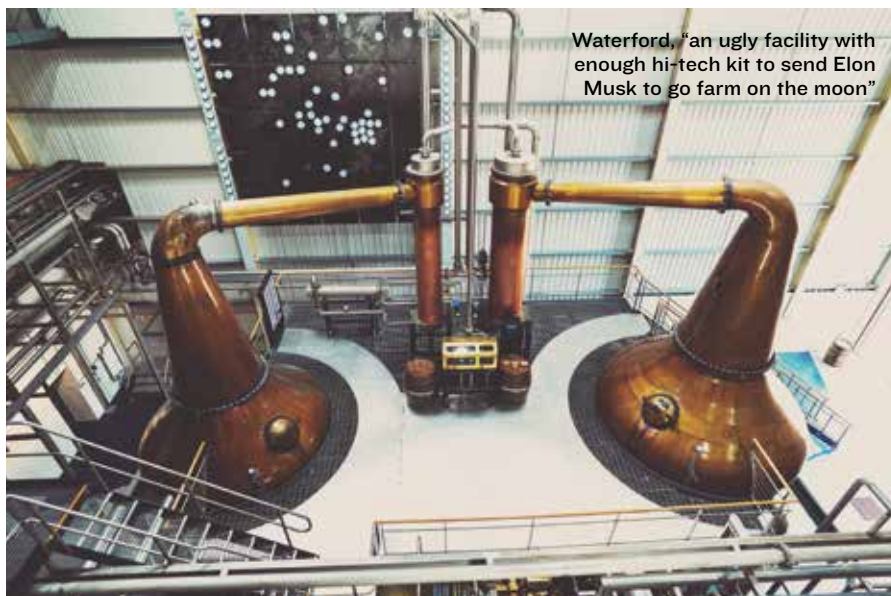
Waterford distillery is a revolutionary act in the industry and an experimental actor in the drink that it produces. Sourcing barley from rigorously documented local farms and field types, the distillery aims to apply vinicultural and biodynamic know-how to create what Mark claims will be the finest whisky ever made. It's a daunting ambition and one he pursues with a zealotry and integrity that aspires either to music or to maths. What Mark lacks in interest in the rest of Irish whiskey per se he more than makes up for in chthonic preoccupation with the island's soil itself. The terroir studies, the barley strains and sourcing graphs against congener analyses, single origin releases, and a pending cuvée programme – it all really deserves an article unto itself, and there are plenty. I've three drams



Killowen distillery, "as impossible to get to as to describe"

here that might pierce the topsoil though – Bannow Island, Gaia and the much sought-after Lómhar, meaning precious and not to be confused with the near sonically identical lobhar, meaning riddled with disease.

It's an ugly facility. An ex-Diageo brewery with enough hi-tech kit to send Elon Musk to go farm on the moon. Ned and the staff have repurposed those organs into a love letter ghostwritten to single malt in principle and, less known abroad, an invaluable ally (really nuclear thinktank) in the more local war on bollocks and gombeenmanship. It was Bannow Island 1.1 that won me over though. Entranced by the gooeey innards, I once tried to bite into aloe vera as a child. It was a memorable disappointment and one that went quietly unaddressed for years. Clean, juicy, and tannic don't quite cut it. It's like a single drop of lime juice in a glass of white wine. You'll remember Galia melon. The malt here comes entirely from barley grown by Ed Harpur on the dunelands of south Wexford. Despite the name, Bannow is no longer an island but a saline stretch bound to the bay head by



Waterford, "an ugly facility with enough hi-tech kit to send Elon Musk to go farm on the moon"

sand and silt. I assume most succulents can grow in the sand.

Aloe aside, there's a lush, semi-firm, almost gelatin texture under the Waterfords I've tried. A carrageen capillary system binding them together and it's especially apparent in the Gaia 1.1. Drawn from six organic farms, this

was the first of many pending bluff calls on an industry whose whole mystique is built on landscape. Aged like its sisters in a Rubik's barrel of French oak, first fill and virgin American oak, and a proprietary assemblage of sweet fortified wine casks (this may all be where that jelly comes in), the results



Waterford's mash filters, inherited from what was previously a Diageo brewery



are fruitful anyway. Perry on the nose, unripe pear when you taste it, growing sandier as you hold it into white-centred conference pear. Then you swallow and that turns to pastry and pear cobbler with a gush of mushed, inviting, poached – you’ll guess the rest. Oh, and honeydew melon. Oh, and wine gums. And hay...

I could easily go on. Long esterified fermentations, slow distillation... suffice it to say it tastes like it’d come from somewhere where the air was clean. Unlike its sisters, Waterford Lómhar smells like a toddy in the pub. Damp grain. Cold tea. Lemon rind turning something sweet dry. This really is a wet mucky place to live. It’s an unlikely thought but I’ve never quite given up hope that Mark will spend a little too much time in Waterford, breathe too much lobharous local air, hopefully not catch anything too worrying, and take a stab at Irish pot still once.

### AN OUTSPOKEN DISTILLER, A DEFIANT GESTURE

Should that Pauline epiphany arrive (it won’t), the road to Damascus would likelier be the N25 to the south end of the county, where his neighbour Peter Mulryan at Blackwater Distillery is doing something like that now. A former whisky writer himself, Peter has a tremendous understanding of Irish whisky’s past and a healthy contempt for being told to keep hush. He’s in the gadfly premier league and still manages to be the most outspoken distiller in the trade, not only decrying the hamstrung Irish pot still technical file but producing streams of non-compliant stock and hosting public tastings to illustrate the point. It’s thrilling spirit, to be fair.

The sample I have here is from a non-compliant mash ironically originating from a 1953 document signed by the long-gone Irish Pot Still Distillers Association: 40 per cent barley, 40 per cent malt, 15 per cent oats, and five per cent wheat. It’s a defiant gesture but a gorgeous one and probably the closest relative to the pre-70s incarnations now revered. Like Mark Reynier, Peter and his transplanted American craft distiller John have a strong interest in reviving archaic strains of barley, although in Blackwater’s case they’re subbed in as a raw unmalted feature across various mash bill ratios. There’s

a split personality of methodical interrogation and renegade creativity about Blackwater. It’s usually quite loud. Whenever I’ve visited, the two of them always seem to be banging their heads together in what I’m told is a good time. “Finishing isn’t innovation,” John told me loudly when I asked for his thoughts on the trade. “We’ve come and gone past finishing. We’ve come and gone past mizunara. We’ve come and gone past tokaji. We need to get our fingers in the dirt.” The 1953 spirit here, which tastes like something a gardener might want to nurse, is drawn from “Old Irish” barley. Between familiar lipids and oils and oat cream there’s a mossy, green tea streak to it. Are green tea marshmallows a thing? I’m sure they must exist and if they don’t, this does. Speaking of must, this smells like that too.

With hunter barley subbed into that 40 per cent, John claims that the must turns into mango, while Goldthorpe barley smells like Honey Nut Cheerios. He hasn’t gone completely native. John’s background in Oregon’s irreverent craft distilling scene is attuned to Blackwater’s ethos like a tightly strung fiddle (which, along with Irish language lessons, he’s learning to play). The pens and pads projectivism, the irreverence, the willingness to make “Peat the magic dragon” or Maryland style rye while decrying the injustice of “our stolen heritage” in Irish legislation. John, like Peter, is outspokenly forthright but that hasn’t stopped them founding a guild of craft distillers to coordinate resources

and in Peter’s words, “just help each other out”. It’s fitting that the 1953 mash is itself the child of a collaborative document. Themselves and Killowen are working on a collaboration as I write this. Despite anyone’s ambitions, this is still a small island.

### A COPPERSMITH’S ANVIL OF IDEAS

So what is Irish whisky in its second adolescence now? Boann and Blackwater’s historical examinations. Echlinville and Waterford’s re-rooting in the land. Waterford and Blackwater’s old barley strain tests. Grumbling traditionalism. A shedload of distillers unfairly left unmentioned. An awful lot of downright lies. Is it shared precedent? Shared place? Shared tax exasperations? If everybody’s sound it can be a peer group and community. A coppersmith’s anvil of ideas. It can resuscitate, reshape, and reengage with its past, while engaging with the left hand in new and creative ways with single malt and tillage and experimental concepts. It can be in the plural. Whatever gets made will be the drink people call it when it’s all found out about rather soon. Michael, Mark. They will all be a part of it. Because much like anyone in this much muck, they’re stuck here with each other and they breathe the same air. ●

*Fionnán O’Connor is a whiskey expert and author of A Glass Apart, the definitive guide to Irish pot still whiskey.*



**"LISTENING TO THE BAGPIPES – WHILE UNDOUBTEDLY  
PRIMING NOTIONS OF THE HIGHLANDS – WILL BE  
UNLIKELY TO MAKE YOUR WHISKY TASTE BETTER"**  
*PROFESSOR CHARLES SPENCE*

# EXPERIENCE A MULTISENSORY



In July, we asked *Professor Charles Spence* to explain how environmental and atmospheric sensory cues can help to accentuate the flavours you enjoy in whisky – from the sound of a fire, the creak of wood, the sound of a double bass, or even the texture of silk. Welcome to the world of ‘sensploration’

MAIN PHOTO BY SAM FROST

HOW does where we drink affect the experience of whisky? Is it possible to accentuate certain aspects of a whisky’s flavour profile simply by changing the multisensory atmosphere where we drink? These were the questions that my colleagues and I set out to address in the 2013 Singleton Sensorium. The results of this experimental whisky-tasting event, and a number of others that followed in its footsteps, have highlighted just how profoundly what we see, what we smell, what we hear, and even what we feel can impact the experience of drinking a complex spirit.

For the Singleton Sensorium, 500 members of the general public were invited into an old gunmaker’s studio in Soho, London. All those who turned up were given a glass of The Singleton whisky, a scorecard and a pencil. My colleagues and I then led groups of 10 or so people through each of three environments that we had pre-tested to bring out the grassiness on the nose of The Singleton, the sweet taste on the palate, or the textured aftertaste on the swallow. People were invited to rate the taste of the whisky in each of these three environments during a tasting experience lasting no more than 15 minutes. Intriguingly, the results clearly demonstrated that even though the glass of whisky had not left people’s hands over the duration of the experience, what many of them said about the whisky nevertheless changed dramatically as a function of the environment in which they had tasted it. In particular, the relevant attribute of the flavour (ie, grassiness, sweetness, or textured aftertaste) was accentuated by 10-15 per cent.

Overall, those who took part in the Sensorium preferred the Singleton in the woody room, with wood on the walls and floor, and the sounds of a log fire, and any other woody sounds we could think

of (think creaking wooden doors and the sound of the double bass). Hence, sitting in front of a log fire, be it real or virtual (as in the whisky snug in the British Airways lounge at Glasgow airport) is likely to enhance the taste of your drink. I know of hospitality professionals who started serving whisky in their Lake District Michelin-starred restaurant from a wooden tray to try and capture a hint of the woody room where they had enjoyed their drink so much more.

### HIT THE RIGHT NOTES

In terms of what to listen to, to enhance the authenticity of the whisky-tasting experience, one might be tempted to think of some semantically-appropriate Scottish music. However, my guess is that listening to the sound of bagpipes – while undoubtedly priming notions of the Highlands – will be unlikely to make your whisky taste any better.

Rather, based on our latest research, I would suggest that you should go for the music that you like the best. If it happens to have a Scottish theme all the better, but the research shows that what we think about what we listen to often transfers to influence what we think about what we are tasting. Note here also that music is also the easiest sensory attribute of the environment to

change. In order to sonically season your drink, I would recommend some tinkling high-pitch piano music to bring out sweetness, while low-pitched and brassy music tends to bring out bitterness.

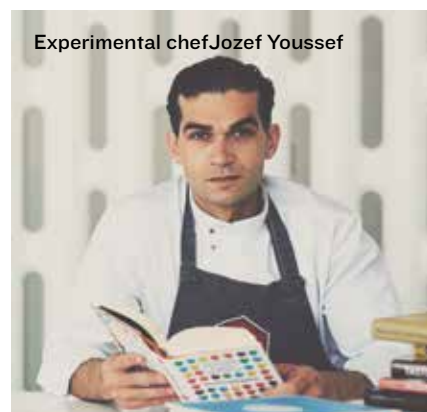
### ALTERED REALITY

Ambient scents can also be used to help augment the experience. For instance, pre-Covid, my friend and colleague, chef Jozef Youssef, of Kitchen Theory, had one course on his gastrophysics chef’s table menu in High Barnet called ‘A Taste of Chivas’. He would spritz a little caramel or vanilla aroma into the air to emphasise the sweetness in the whisky, while a spritz of smoky bacon effectively accentuated the smoky notes.

It would seem that our brains have a hard time separating which aromas originate from the drink and which come from the environment. When the same whisky was served to guests at Jozef’s multisensory events in a rounded glass versus in an angular cut-glass, a number of the diners reported that the drink seemed to taste different. Even rubbing different materials, be it satin/silk or sandpaper, changes the tasting experience for many, with the smoother materials tending to bring out sweeter notes in whisky and wine.

Although there is plenty more gastrophysics research to be done, my sense is that no matter what your preference in terms of flavour profile, there will be a combination of environmental and atmospheric sensory cues that will help to accentuate the flavours you enjoy, while also perhaps suppressing any that you may be rather less fond of. This the intriguing world of ‘sensploration’. ●

*Charles Spence is a professor of Experimental Psychology and head of the Crossmodal Research Laboratory at the University of Oxford*



THE KNOWLEDGE

# BEAT THE BURN

If you're new to cask strength Society bottlings, the alcohol burn you experience when nosing and tasting can come as a bit of a surprise. *Mads Schmoll* spoke to Frances Jack from the Scotch Whisky Research Institute along with some well-known Society ambassadors to demystify this hot topic

YOU know the feeling – you're handed a beautiful glass of amber liquid, raise it to your face and poke your nostrils as deep as possible into the glass. But instead of a gentle waft of delicate and evocative aromas, all you get is a nose full of alcoholic prickle, the urge to sneeze and maybe even a tear in the eye. It's hardly the ideal introduction to whisky, but when you're pouring out cask strength drams, what can you do to avoid putting people off before they've even had a sip?

To beat the burn, you first need to understand what it is and that our reaction to it is something that is linked to our body's built-in defence system. "It's a drying mechanism of the inside of your mouth or nose," says Frances Jack from the Scotch Whisky Research Institute (SWRI), the industry-funded research and technology organisation. "It's similar to if you were using high-alcohol hand sanitiser that dries out your skin. It's the same type of effect – that drying is perceived as a sort of a minor pain sensation."

Global brand ambassador John McCheyne says this awareness is key. "The first thing to remember is that

your body will challenge the attempted consumption of strong alcohol," he says. "Even an experienced drinker having their first of the day will likely have a trigeminal reaction, to varying degrees. A chemist once described it as your body waving a red flag."

## A QUESTION OF PERCEPTION

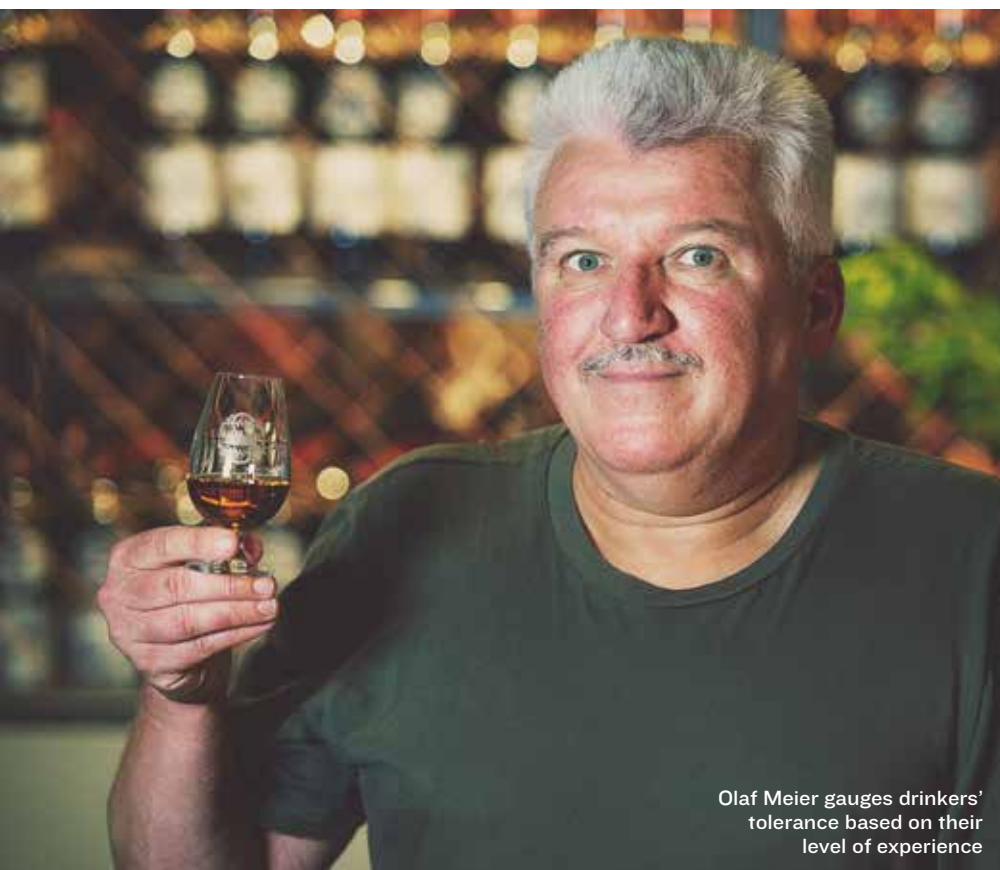
It turns out there's more to it than just your initial reaction, as this sensation is something that you may be more or less sensitive to, depending on a variety of different factors. "We're doing a lot of research at the moment looking at people's individual differences and perceptions," Frances says. "It's not just your personal taste in terms of your likes and dislikes, it's actually differences in perception. You might be more sensitive to particular flavours or particularly sensitive to alcohol burn."

In addition to genetics, your experience with spirits can also change your perception, she suggests. "There are genetic differences and training and experience. If you taste a lot of high-strength whiskies then you're not going to be shocked by the alcohol burn. If





Alan Wood appreciates the uniqueness of cask strength whisky in his tastings



Olaf Meier gauges drinkers' tolerance based on their level of experience

you don't drink whisky or any spirits, then suddenly you go straight to cask strength, that's going to be a shock."

SMWS ambassador Olaf Meier agrees. "My initial question for whisky newcomers is usually, 'what alcoholic drinks do you enjoy?' This is to gauge their tolerance and level of alcohol they're used to," he says. "If they say they like wine, gin and tonic, rum and coke or vodka and lemonade, I know that they have not had experience with 40% abv, never mind cask strength."

#### ACCLIMATISE YOURSELF

But whether you're sensitive to alcohol burn or not, there are ways to acclimatise yourself to it.

John McCheyne suggests that preparation is key. "Nosing with the mouth open helps, and alternating nostrils because each nostril may behave slightly differently," he says. "Swirling in the mouth to allow the saliva to reduce the potency. The second sip, done the same way, should be easier because you've alerted and prepared your senses as to what to expect."

Equally our ambassadors agree on



**“YOU WOULD THINK  
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IT DOWN YOU  
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YOU CAN PERCEIVE  
THE FLAVOURS  
MORE READILY”  
FRANCES JACK**

what not to do, namely sticking your nose straight in the glass.

“People tend to swirl the glass,” says John. “So you’re activating alcohol fumes to the top of the nosing glass and spending 30 seconds with your nose in it will then potentially numb your ability to nose.”

What about water? Does adding it minimise the burn? “As soon as you’re diluting, you’re going to change the flavour perception,” says Frances Jack. “You would think that if you diluted it down you would perceive less flavour, but if you dilute it down you can perceive the flavours more readily. The first thing you perceive is that burning sensation so if you remove that and get rid of that a bit then it becomes easier to perceive other flavours.”

The scientists at SWRI aren’t alone in this, as Frances points out. “You’ll see this across the industry. Blenders, for example, will generally dilute samples. It means they can nose and taste more samples, as the burn causes sensory fatigue as well.”

Another reason not to fear adding water is that it offers up new and surprising possibilities for flavour. “When you add water to your whisky, the flavours separate in a different way,” says Frances. “Some flavours are released from the whisky – specifically things like esters and fruity types of flavours.”

And as John points out, even the act of adding water depends on what environment you are in. “Adding water should be done carefully in small amounts until you get to the point which is best for you that day, at that moment,” he says. “Bear in mind your reaction may be different in another moment, on the same or a different day.”

#### **BOLD AND SPIRITED**

Ultimately, part of what makes cask strength bottlings special is this higher ABV. “The amount of alcohol present influences how other flavours are then perceived, so I suppose what that’s really saying is your flavour perception in a cask strength whisky is going to be different to how you perceive flavours at standard bottling strength,” says Frances. “There’s a uniqueness there. Maybe it’s about coming at it from that angle – that uniqueness.”

This singularity is something that





John McCheyne says to avoid swirling and sticking your nose straight into the glass

SMWS ambassador Alan Wood cites as being particularly special when he talks about trying his first Society bottling. “My introduction to SMWS whisky and cask strength was a lovely bottle from distillery number seven, a first fill bourbon cask, 15 years of age,” says Alan. “With trepidation, I leant in to nose the whisky, expecting a breeze of vanilla, cinnamon, and all things sweet. This was not the case. The whisky came roaring out the glass, big bold flavours assaulting the senses. Then came the drinking part, and the first sip, there was the now-loved alcohol kick, that gentle reminder that you are drinking something uniquely different and spirited.”

#### BEAT THE BURN WITH SMWS AMBASSADOR ALAN WOOD

**NOSING:** Holding your nose just off the glass and taking a gentle sniff will give you notes of subtle flavours but also a key indicator that there is something lurking there.

**SIPPING:** Go in with both eyes open, and especially if this is the first whisky of the night as your palate will be

getting used to the sensation of drinking something that demands attention.

**TASTING:** The whisky will start to unravel in the glass, with the ‘burn’ washed away with softer subtler notes as your palate becomes adjusted to the percentage.

**ADD WATER:** Adding water can reveal a whole new level of mystery that is waiting for you. ●

#### A WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE

There’s always something to discover about the drink that ends up in our glasses and what could be coming next from the whisky world. Every month in *Unfiltered* we explore different aspects of whisky’s production, how to savour it and where its astonishing range of flavours come from. Dive into a world of online whisky knowledge (see overleaf).





## WHISKY'S LOW CARBON FUTURE



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## THE RETURN OF DIRECT-FIRED STILLS



## OLD BOTTLE EFFECT







## HOW TO DEVELOP TASTE



## BEYOND REGIONAL BOUNDARIES



## SINGLE MALT IN THE 1960S



# THE BARD IS BACK

ROBIN LAING  
.....

Despite being unable to perform in person during the pandemic, SMWS Tasting Panel chair *Robin Laing* found the inspiration to write and record a new album of whisky-fuelled songs and poetry

ROBIN Laing is Scotland's Whisky Bard – he drinks whisky and sings for a living, not too shabby a niche. During the Covid lockdown he was still able to drink whisky, but singing, at least to a live audience, was definitely out (although he did keep Society members smiling with some online performances).

With five albums of whisky songs and four whisky books behind him, Robin clearly has a passion for the cratur and is frequently inspired by it to compose songs and poems. However, he says: “Without the buzz of going to gigs and interacting with people, I think I had begun to lose interest and energy for writing new material.”

Then along came an unexpected call from Thomas Ewers, the CEO of Malts in Scotland, from Germany. Thomas is a fan of Robin's music and had previously invited him to ‘sing the whisky’ in his hometown of Paderborn and at various German whisky festivals. Thomas said: “Robin, I love your whisky songs and I



know you enjoy my whiskies – so why don't we do something together – a wee creative project of songs and poems inspired by decent drams?” Robin wasn't doing much else thanks to Coronavirus, so he agreed (provided Thomas would send him some bottled inspiration).

The end result was a collection of nine songs and one poem. Thomas was so pleased with this collection he insisted a CD should be made. So, the fruits of a number of weeks of songwriting were taken into the studio in April 2021. Producer (and guitarist) Steven Polwart and sound engineer (and drummer) Mattie Foulds distilled Robin's raw material into an accomplished album of listening pleasure, with the help of Stuart Nisbet (electric guitar, dobro, banjo), Kevin McGuire (double bass) and Jackie Macdonald (backing vocals).

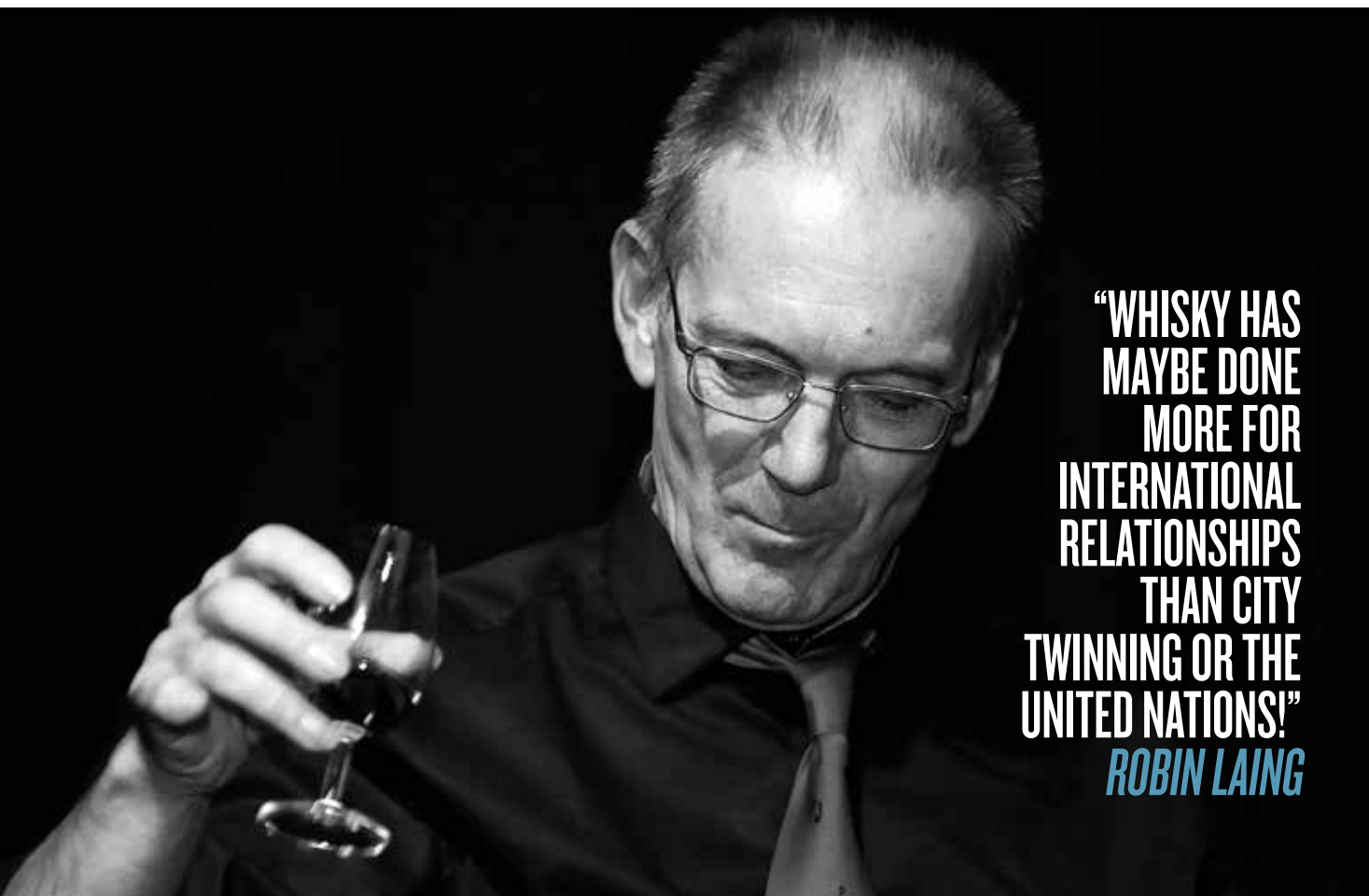
## THE INSPIRATION

Thomas says his work of importing good Scotch single malt into Germany, “is like building a bridge between our



Robin missed the buzz of gigs and interacting with people





**“WHISKY HAS  
MAYBE DONE  
MORE FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS  
THAN CITY  
TWINNING OR THE  
UNITED NATIONS!”**  
**ROBIN LAING**

two countries”. The first track *Building bridges* takes up this theme and plays with it. In Robin’s opinion: “Whisky has maybe done more for international relationships than city twinning or the United Nations!”

Two corn whisky liqueurs called *Onkle Joe’s Hütte* and *Miss Sunshine* gave rise to two matching songs; *Uncle Joe* is about “a guy a bit like me”, says Robin. “He’s had an interesting life but is now getting a bit old and tired and likes to take it easy in his rocking chair with a good dram and a fine cigar.” *Miss Sunshine* is one of those enigmatic songs – it could be about a woman, or it could be about a corn whisky liqueur – take your pick.

Other Malts of Scotland series also inspired songs – *Angel’s Choice* is one and *Images of Scotland* is another. The song *Angel’s Choice* is about – you guessed it – distillery angels, and the chorus has a line that goes: “*Whisky and music’s a wonderful thing*”; who could argue with that?

*Images of Scotland* bottles have sketches of Scottish places on the label and Robin’s song of the same name imagines German whisky lovers enjoying the dram, looking at the image and remembering or planning a whisky pilgrimage.

*The Dark Side of Islay* is a series of old Islay malts, mostly matured in sherry casks, showing sea monsters and dragons on the bottle and mentioning some of the island’s lost distilleries. Robin was inspired to write *The Dark Side of Islay*, an atmospheric poetic tribute to the Island of Islay, recited on the CD with wistful musical accompaniment.

*Magic Ship of Dreams* is a fantasy booze cruise from Scotland to Germany, the title track *Up in the Dram Room* is about the joys of experiencing great drams up in Thomas’s tasting emporium and *Barley bree for Charlie-o* is a song story about a Scotsman who got carried away in the Dram Room and in his exuberance, inadvertently answered the

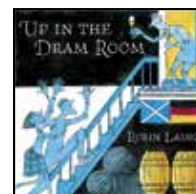
question: “What does a Scotsman wear under the kilt?”

“The biggest challenge for a Scotch whisky snob like me,” says Robin, “was to write a song in praise of German whisky, but Thomas supplied a bottle of The Westfalian Masterpiece, matured in an ex-Laphroaig port cask – inspiration flowed and *Masterpiece* is about whisky as art.”

*Up in the Dram Room* will shortly have a sister bottling of 18-year-old Bruichladdich from a Duoro wine cask, which will be number six in the series of Robin Laing’s *Inspiration* bottlings of Bruichladdich. ●

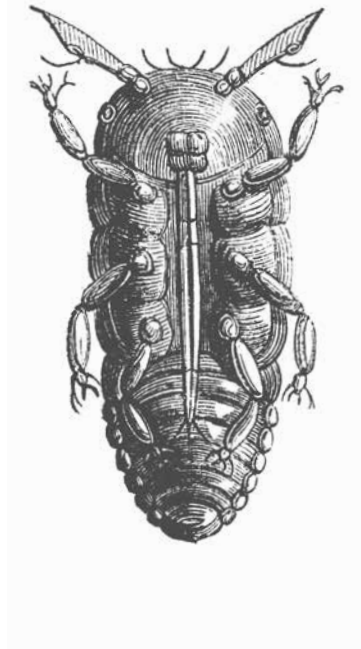
To order your signed copy of *Up in the Dram Room*, contact Robin at [robin@robinlaing.com](mailto:robin@robinlaing.com).

CDs are £10 plus post & packaging. You can also order the album directly from [www.musicscotland.com](http://www.musicscotland.com)



From the Malt Tax Act of 1725 to the rise and fall of Campbeltown as ‘Whisky City’ in the early 20th century, the world of whisky is full of fascinating stories. In *Unfiltered* each month, *Gavin D Smith* turns his attention to a specific event or moment that changed the course of the whisky world. Among the stories we’ve told in the past year is the incredible tale of a tiny insect with a passion for the leaves and roots of grape vines, and how its appearance in France in the 1860s would lead to a huge boost for the Scotch whisky world

# DEATH ON THE VINE



BLENDED whisky was a burgeoning business by the end of the 19th century, as a result of William Gladstone's Spirits Act of 1860. That made it legal to blend malt and grain whisky 'under bond' and followed on from the Forbes-Mackenzie Act of 1853, which allowed vatting, or mixing, of malt whiskies from the same distillery while 'under bond'.

Unofficial blending of batches of malt whisky had been routinely carried out by merchants and publicans to achieve greater consistency for their customers before the initial piece of legislation was enacted, and one of the first people to exploit its possibilities was Edinburgh wine and spirits merchant Andrew Usher. He was far from alone, however,

and William Robertson, William Sanderson, W P Lowrie and Charles Mackinlay were also early blended Scotch entrepreneurs.

Working with his son, also Andrew, Usher launched Usher's Old Vatted Glenlivet (OVG), a vatting of Glenlivet malts from different years, within months of the 1853 Act coming into



force, though Andrew Usher Snr was to die in 1855. The search for ultimate consistency came in the wake of the Spirits Act, and Andrew Usher Jnr changed OVG from a 'vatted malt' to a true blended whisky.

Blended Scotch offered an easier drinking and less variable alternative to pot still whisky, which was somewhat mistrusted south of the border. There, it was perceived as a rather fierce and unpredictable drink, better suited to a deer stalking expedition or a fishing session in the Highlands than as an alternative to a snifter of brandy in the gentlemen's clubs and drawing rooms of 'polite' society.

Indeed Andrew Usher Jnr's son, Sir Robert, noted that comparatively little whisky was sold in England prior to 1860. However, after that date "...the trade in Scotch whisky increased by leaps and bounds, the reason being, to my mind, that the blend is lighter and more easily digested, and thus more suited to the public taste. My personal opinion is that the pot still is improved and made more wholesome when blended with patent."

### THE DEVASTATOR ARRIVES

So it was that while blended Scotch began to establish itself in the 'public taste' of the English, grape phylloxera arrived in Europe on specimens of vines collected in the United States, where the insect originated in the Mississippi valley. It had been hoped that these vines would prove resistant to mildew – a problem for European viniculturists during the 1850s – but instead they caused a far greater problem.

British vineyards were the first to be affected, but in 1863, vines in the high-profile Rhône valley region of southern France inexplicably began to die. And the devastation continued, spreading throughout Europe. The small but deadly insect began to be referred to as *Phylloxera vastatrix* (devastator of vines), and by 1889, total wine output in France was less than 28 per cent of that in 1875.

It followed that the amount of brandy on the market fell proportionately to that of French wine, leaving English gentlemen with nothing to accompany their soda water. Enter the buccaneering Young Turks of the blended whisky revolution, with the likes of Tommy



Cognac production was badly hit by the devastating phylloxera insect

Dewar, James Buchanan (of Black & White) and Peter Mackie (of White Horse) proceeding to take London by storm, before heading abroad to find new markets to conquer.

However, the situation is not entirely as black and white as has sometimes been portrayed, as it was 1875 before the brandy-making regions of France were affected, and in particular the Cognac and Charente heartlands of production. By this time, blended Scotch had already established a strong following both in Britain and in some export markets, while rum was a casualty of the blended Scotch 'boom' almost as much as brandy. Nonetheless, the fact that the

availability of brandy was dramatically curtailed, and the price of any that was available increased beyond the pockets of most drinkers, most certainly played very conveniently into the hands of the blended Scotch entrepreneurs.

The extent to which the blended Scotch whisky industry was aided by phylloxera may best be demonstrated by a few statistics.

During 1872, three and a half million gallons (16 million litres) of brandy were imported into Britain, but by 1890 the effect of phylloxera had reduced this amount to below one and a half million gallons (6.8 million litres). Meanwhile, output of Scotch whisky increased from 7.8 million gallons (35.4 million litres) in 1872 to 20 million gallons (91 million litres) in 1890.

The effects of phylloxera were mitigated by grafting American rootstock onto European vines, with the first laws allowing this to happen being passed in France during 1878 and 1879, and wine and brandy sales began to recover in time. By then, however, blended Scotch whisky had firmly established itself as one of the great drinks of the world. ●



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# YOUR

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OPEN

MIND



A century ago whisky cocktails were all the rage, and it's time to take a fresh look at Scotch in mixed drinks, says *Inka Larissa*. Here's how to take the plunge

FOR some, the idea of using a single malt in a cocktail is sacrilege, so if you are that way inclined, bear with me for a moment, as I think it's something you should reconsider.

Often in the summer we end up sipping lighter whiskies to match the season, but what if we were to turn them into refreshing long drinks instead?

Most people don't realise that whisky was the key ingredient in many cocktails during the 'Roaring Twenties'. During Prohibition, for example, it was common practice to mix peated Islay whisky with fruit, sugar and bitters to disguise the smell of the whisky, and this led to its extensive use in cocktails. Once the

quality of single malt Scotch improved, the cocktail making faded away. Scotch was now seen as a 'high end' product, which created reluctance to 'water it down' or to use it in cocktails.

This slightly misplaced elitism was often driven by the whisky producers themselves. Many considered their product to be too pure or too precious to be polluted in mixed drinks, and for the longest time this kept Scotch largely off our cocktail menus. Luckily, times have changed, and more and more people appreciate that single malt Scotch as a category is full of diverse and complex flavours, which can be presented in many ways, including through cocktails.

If you're still aghast at this suggestion, can I encourage you to take a wee step out of your comfort zone and try something new?

#### FINDING THE RIGHT WHISKY

Because of the unique nature of single

casks, The Scotch Malt Whisky Society frequently bottles whiskies that don't fit in with the regional stereotype, let alone matching a specific distillery's classic profile. For this reason, the Society has created a very convenient categorisation system which splits its whiskies into 12 groups based on flavour. These work as great indicators of the characters and Tasting Notes in each bottling, coming in handy when you try to match the whisky with the right kind of cocktail.

As an added bonus, the higher strength of the Society's whiskies contributes significantly to the body of the cocktail, adding texture and bringing different notes from the whisky to the forefront. Navy-strength gin and rum are regularly used in cocktails, therefore stronger whiskies shouldn't be any different. The higher ABV will help create long-lasting flavour. They will also stand up to other ingredients with strong flavour profiles.

You just need to keep the alcohol percentage in mind when enjoying a cocktail



or two to drink responsibly.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE

My key piece of advice is not to over-complicate things. The best whisky cocktails are simple, two-to-three-ingredient serves.

Take a classic Whisky Highball, for example. It works well with various flavour profiles and is best suited for Scotch and Japanese whisky. In fact, it is the most popular way of drinking whisky in Japan. Creating Highballs is an art form for the local bartenders as they consider every aspect, from the shape and size of the ice and the ideal soda to whisky ratio, to garnish combinations. Based on the whisky, the Highball is enhanced with a slice of cucumber, citrus or even a sprig of mint or thyme.

Whisky Highball is a very refreshing serve throughout the year.

### SWEET, SOUR AND SPICY

If you like your cocktails more on the sweet side, another perfect thirst quencher is a Scotch-based version of the Mint Julep. The added sugar will amplify the flavour and balance any



bitterness, and a good measure of mint gives the drink a fresh touch.

A Lightly Peated SMWS whisky works well in a sour cocktail, although you can experiment by adapting the recipe with different styles of whisky to change the flavour profile. Traditionally, sour is made using three elements: spirit, sweetener and souring agent. The balance between the sweet and the tart is what makes the cocktail so enjoyable.

The Spicy & Dry category includes whiskies with a bit of heat, bite or just a mix of wintery spices followed by a

drier mouthfeel and finish, making them an ideal match for ginger ale and a squeeze of fresh lime juice. Simple. Or try whiskies from the Sweet, Fruity & Mellow category, which is full of fruity, jammy whiskies ready to be paired with ginger beer or even cloudy apple juice.

If you prefer something more complex, Rob Roy is the cocktail for you. Named after the Scottish folk hero, it is basically a Scotch version of a Manhattan. Choose a whisky with a Deep, Rich & Dried Fruits flavour profile as you'll want something mighty to match the sweet vermouth.

I hope to have inspired you to take the leap and give Scotch whisky cocktails a chance. Start with something simple, like the Highball. You'll have fun playing around with the garnish and whisky combinations, similar to how you would with a G&T. ●

*Inka Larissa is a spirits blogger, taking a largely female perspective on all things drink-related from around the globe. Her blog, On the Sauce Again, covers everything from gin to whisky to grappa.*



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-HIGHBALLS





Charlie MacLean is one of the whisky world's leading writers and experts, and this year saw him honoured as a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire – better known as an MBE – in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. *Unfiltered* editor Richard Goslan caught up with Charlie at 28 Queen Street to find out about the award and his long-term connection with the SMWS



# ALL AGLOW FOR CHARLIE

PHOTOS BY MIKE WILKINSON  
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“IT’S A very considerable honour and I’m hardly worthy – but I have served my time,” says Charlie MacLean when I congratulate him on becoming Charles MacLean MBE. And whatever he may think of his own worthiness, there’s no doubt that Charlie has served his time.

He traces his whisky-writing career back to 1981, when he wrote a short pamphlet for Bell’s. With distilleries closing in droves and an unwanted ‘whisky loch’ of spirit, it may have seemed a precarious time to throw in a potential career in the law and turn his back on any relevant qualifications – much to his father’s dismay.

“He was proud that I’d become a lawyer and would introduce me by saying: ‘This is my son Charles, he’s a Writer to Her Majesty’s Signet, don’t you know.’ And I’d say: ‘Dad, I gave up the law three years ago!’ He never quite understood what I’d done.”

Whisky at the time was just one area that Charlie was writing about, but a course in The Sensory Evaluation of Potable Spirits run by Dr Jim Swan and Sheila Burtles at Pentlands Scotch

Whisky Research [forerunner of the Scotch Whisky Research Institute] in 1992 was to prove pivotal.

“That course changed my life,” Charlie says. “I had more or less finished my first whisky book, but after the training in sensory evaluation I had to go back and rewrite all my tasting notes!”

“Shortly after that, the Society’s then-managing director Richard Gordon asked me to chair the SMWS Tasting Panel. The Panel’s Tasting Notes had always been provocative and exuberant, and my role was to encourage the Panel but rationalise its structure – don’t talk about taste until we have talked about the whisky’s appearance, that kind of thing.”

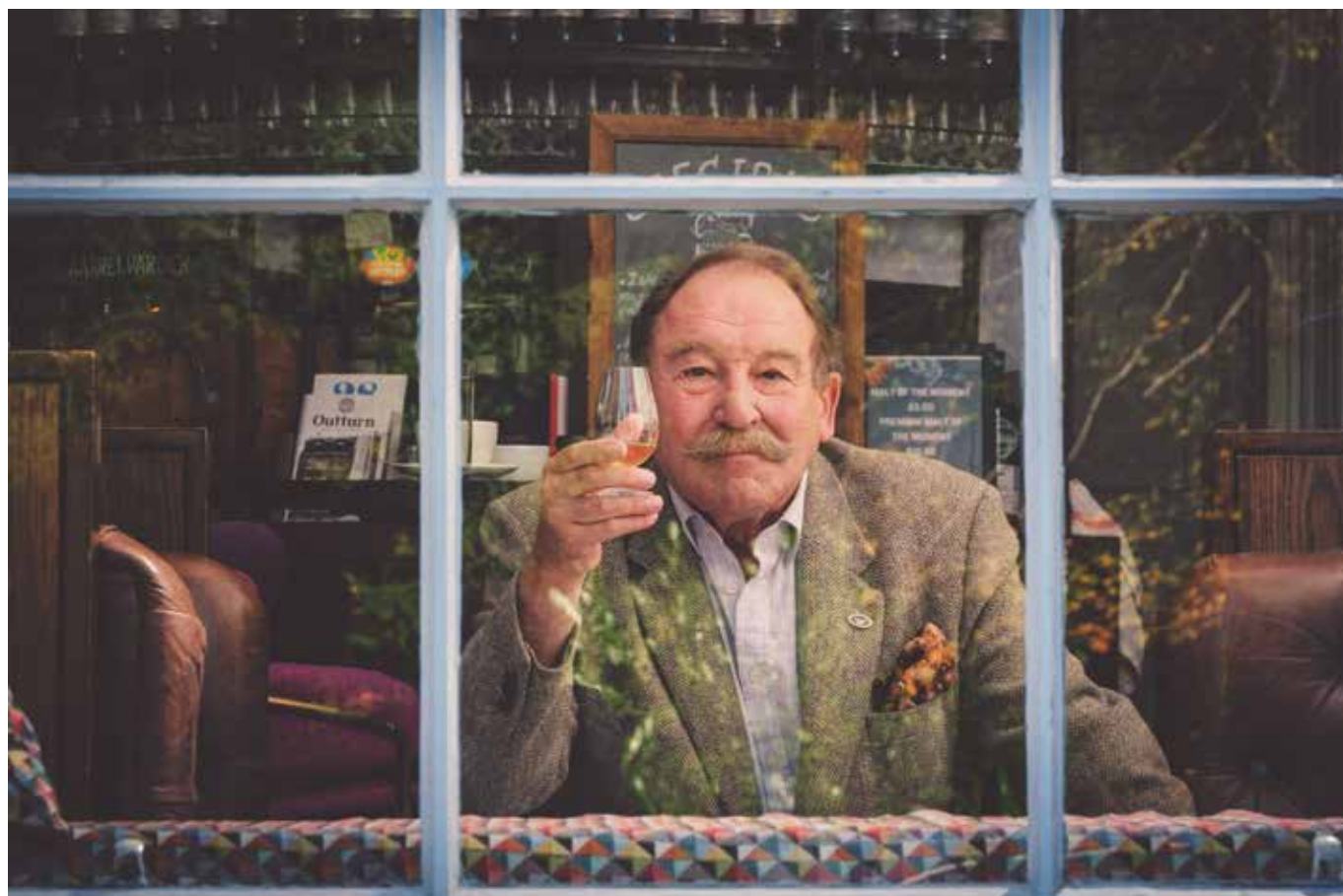
Charlie had seen the Society develop as a member, drawn to The Vaults in the early 1980s by chat going around Edinburgh about an intriguing new

whisky club in Leith, of all places.

“I remember going to a 21st birthday party in The Vaults, when it was being restored,” he says. “There was scaffolding all over the place, and no furniture at all, except for a desk against the back wall with a few bottles. You could go there, meet people, share a dram and then just put your money in an honesty box. At the time, the concept of tasting single cask whisky, at full strength, un-chill filtered and at its natural colour, was a brand-new idea. Brand new! This produce wasn’t available until the Society came along.”

As well as contributing to the Society’s Newsletters, a forerunner of what would develop into *Unfiltered* magazine, Charlie has been writing consistently about whisky since he started out in 1981, now with 18 books to his name, and more on the way.

“I’ve written or updated five books during the lockdown of the past year and





a half. The industry has kept me going, but it's hard to survive by writing."

Charlie's MBE specifically mentions his services not only to Scotch and UK exports, but to charity. He has always conducted tastings for various charities, but his most recent enterprise came out of a collaboration with his three sons, and their record-breaking rowing expedition across the Atlantic. Ewan, Jamie and Lachlan MacLean became the first three brothers to row across an ocean, as well as the youngest and fastest trio to cross the Atlantic, more than 3,000 miles from the Canary Islands to Antigua and Barbuda over the course of 35 gruelling days as part of the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge in 2019.

"Well, they say that OBE stands for 'other bugger's efforts', and I say that MBE stands for 'my boys' efforts'!" laughs Charlie. "Before they undertook their expedition across the Atlantic they wanted to do a practice row on the west coast of Scotland. They got me to approach all of the distilleries along the way and see if they would donate bottles to the cause, which was for a charity called Feedback Madagascar, which digs wells for the poor people in Madagascar. Along with [Whyte & Mackay master blender] Richard Paterson, I ended up creating two bottlings, one called MacLean's Pillage and the other MacLean's Spillage. They went like snow off a dyke and raised more than £200,000.

"Now the boys are planning a new expedition, rowing from Australia to Madagascar across the Indian Ocean. It's more than 4,000 miles and apparently there are 19 species of man-eating sharks out there. I'm trying to dissuade them!"

In the meantime, Charlie's getting back on the road for the first time in an age, continuing his writing and editing, and looking forward to receiving his MBE at a special ceremony in Edinburgh.

"People say to me, you must have the best job in the world, just drinking whisky, talking about it and writing about it. How do you get a job like that? I say practice, practice, practice." ●

*Tune in to Whisky Talk to hear our chat with Charlie about his MBE and his role as Tasting Panel chair with the SMWS*



**"THEY SAY THAT OBE STANDS FOR  
'OTHER BUGGER'S EFFORTS'...I SAY THAT  
MBE STANDS FOR 'MY BOYS' EFFORTS!"**

**CHARLIE MACLEAN MBE**

IRVINE WELSH  
.....

PHOTOS BY  
PETER SANDGROUND  
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# DRAMA SPOTTING

Irvine Welsh at The Vaults  
in Leith, in front of Cables  
Wynd House – better  
known as the ‘Banana Flats’



His ground-breaking 1993 novel *Trainspotting* centered on a bunch of heroin addicts in Leith, but these days whisky is more likely to be a plot point in author Irvine Welsh's work. He's now a member of The Scotch Malt Whisky Society, and sat down with *Unfiltered* editor Richard Goslan at The Vaults over a few drams to discuss his whisky journey, the influence of mind-altering drugs on the work of Robert Burns and why Scotland in general and Leith in particular will always be an exotic location for his fiction

THE Vaults feels like the most appropriate of locations to sit down for a few whiskies with Irvine Welsh. He was born in Leith, after all, and stayed here until he was four and his family moved out to the prefabs of Pilton and then the maisonettes of Muirhouse on Edinburgh's periphery. After a spell in London he returned to Leith, where he wrote *Trainspotting* and put the location on the world's literary map.

From the door of The Vaults today we can look directly across to the brutalist bulk of Cables Wynd House, better known as the 'Banana Flats', where the character Simon 'Sick Boy' Williamson was born and raised in *Trainspotting*. You could draw some comparisons between the building and Irvine himself. Both were derided in their early days by their respective architectural and literary establishments, but with the passage of time they've become celebrated rather than scorned. The Banana Flats are now protected from possible demolition, with A-listed status by Historic Environment Scotland. Irvine, meanwhile, has gone from Edinburgh's unwelcome literary upstart to being hailed by the Lord Provost as "an iconic chronicler of our city", and A-list status of his own.

#### GET THE JUICES FLOWING

Today though, we're settled in by the fireside in the Society's Members' Room

at The Vaults, to pour a few whiskies and let the conversation flow. By his own admission, Irvine has come to whisky relatively late in life, and we kick off with a dram of Cask No. 113.15: *An apricot jamboree* from the Society's Light & Delicate flavour profile, something to waken the palate and get the juices flowing, which immediately meets with Irvine's approval.

"You could go nuts on that, it's very easy to drink," he tells me. "I've never been a whisky drinker, although I used to write a wine column for a magazine called *Marmalade*, where the idea was to get people to write about stuff they knew nothing about. I really got a taste for wine, but whisky is one of these things that when you get past a certain age, people seem to get back into it. When I was young, I thought it was an old guy's drink. Then you see all your mates when they get past 40, and they just start suddenly having wee drams here and there.

"A friend bought me a membership to The Scotch Malt Whisky Society and I've been down [to The Vaults] a few times. But I'm one of these people who rely on other people's guidance. I do so much travelling, and get the opportunity to sample loads of great food and loads of great wines and local drinks everywhere I go, so I tend to put myself in other people's hands for these things."

With Burns Night on the horizon, talk

turns from our national drink to our national bard, and their equal parts in promoting Scotland to the world.

"Whisky is a big part of our culture, going way back," says Irvine. "Burns is an international poet of the world, and whisky is so much of a part of his repertoire. And whisky's just something that's there, and ubiquitous. Because I've not been massively exposed to it at any level, it's quite interesting for me to see the reverence that people have for it, and it's a huge thing, a huge defining thing for Scotland.

"But there's also a whole shift in the landscape. It's like you've got Burns saying '*Whisky an' freedom gang thegither*', the romanticisation of whisky. Then you have [Hugh] MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, the horrible abyss of alcoholism. So I think it has a huge kaleidoscope and it's represented all the intricacies of Scottish culture, all the positives and all the negatives, and I think it's a proper national drink in that sense."

#### IT'S THERE TO BE DRUNK

Time for something completely different – and that means a dram from an ex-loroso sherry matured whisky, Cask No. 68.52: *Death by chocolate cake*. We're all transported to places by a whisky's aromas and flavours – in this case, Irvine is suddenly back in Jamaica.

"It's almost like if somebody put that in front of me and said that this is whisky, I wouldn't quite believe them," he says. "I would think this is some kind of rum, it reminds me very much of the rum that I was drinking in Kingston, and it's got that after-dinner digestive thing going on. That's a very interesting drink!"

Irvine has even turned to whisky in his fiction, notably with the pursuit of a trio of ultra-rare bottlings in his 2015 novel *A Decent Ride*.

"The character [I created] was a sort



Richard Goslan and Irvine Welsh

of Donald Trump kind of American businessman who has that very American rich guy's conception about what Scotland is. It is golf and whisky, and he wants to play loads of golf, and gets interested in whisky and he wants to collect these bottles. He doesn't particularly even like whisky. It becomes a status thing that he's determined to get, and I liked the idea of these guys not really valuing it. It's just another drink for them in the pub, mixing it up with the crappy stuff that they have, or keeping it like some kind of ornament. The point is that ultimately it's not there as an investment – it's there to be drunk."

### A STORY-TELLING TRADITION

We're singing from the same songbook, and as with everything the Society does, the whisky in front of us is very much for drinking. Next up is a bottling even older than *Trainspotting*, from Cask No. 46.95: *Tripping in the Blue Peter garden*, a 27-year old Speysider distilled in November 1992.

"Aw, my God, this is fabulous. It's funny how they just get more and more out there with the descriptions of things," says Irvine, appreciating both the name and the whisky's taste sensation. "On the palate it burns, and you think this is gonna burn all the way down. But it just... it just evaporates, then you've got the taste lingering. So smooth."

Drinking such a mature whisky gets us reflecting on his old days back in Leith, where Irvine's mother worked in the whisky bonds. Now, he says, it's a place of recreation for him more than anything else, but still rich in connections and memories.

"There's a diversity in Leith and you can see it down at the Shore, or up Leith Walk, and the Central and all that. It's an interesting community. It's always had that. Even when I was a kid, my dad used to take me to Hares, which was like the old North British Hotel above Leith Central Station. You would get this big kind of three-course meal served by the waitresses with the black and frilly white hats and all that stuff.

"It was really old school, but it was kind of quality, and even then, there was just a hint of the old kind of mercantile wealth in the area."

It's also an area he returns to in his

fiction, wherever else he may be located at the time of writing.

"When you grow up in a place you always think: 'This is boring. I want to get out.' And then when you travel, when you go to different places, you realise that where you come from, it's actually quite exotic. People are kind of strange and weird and crazy – in a good way – and they have a completely different way of looking at it. And you grow up thinking you come from the most boring place in the world, and then you realise that you come from the most quirky, exotic place in the world, when you actually start to compare all these things.

"I'm always drawn to writing about here because people are natural storytellers. You can walk into a pub in Leith and sit down beside somebody and you can walk out with enough material

**"WHEN YOU TRAVEL,  
WHEN YOU GO TO  
DIFFERENT PLACES, YOU  
REALISE THAT WHERE  
YOU COME FROM, IT'S  
ACTUALLY QUITE EXOTIC"**  
**IRVINE WELSH**

for a novel. People just tell stories all the time."

### BURNS, PORN AND DRUGS

Irvine tells me he's currently working on a screenplay looking at revisiting the narrative around the life of Robert Burns, challenging some of the preconceptions we may have about Burns as the gifted 'ploughman poet' and digging into aspects of his biography that haven't been tackled or publicised.

"There's so much rich material about Burns's biography that hasn't been incorporated into popular culture," he says. "One of the interesting things about him is when you see a guy who was the oldest of 10 children, and he lives in one room with his mother and father and siblings, they're basically knocking out siblings all the time, so he's

kind of growing up what we would now describe as inappropriately sexualised by that kind of experience.

"Then he goes out as a young guy into this world where he can't have access to the farmer's daughters, otherwise they're gonna shoot him, and his mates are the same. So they have these Masonic kind of drinking clubs, and his early poems were very sexual in nature, you know, and it was basically a kind of pornography club for young men. They all basically started out as pornographers and he became a poet as a result, he fell in love with poetry, and poetry was almost like reality TV. It was a way you could become famous then. And he had that thing about him, he wanted to become famous, he wanted to get out of that environment.

"Another interesting thing about him was that when he went to the port at Irvine, and had a kind of malady and a breakdown. I assumed that it was some kind of venereal disease that had crept up on him for getting involved with the prostitutes. But apparently when he died, they've done some retrospective tests of his DNA and established that he had no venereal diseases at all. But an interesting thing, that's actually in the Robert Crawford biography [*The Bard*], is that he took 'Peruvian bark' to cure his malady. It came off the ships, and contains [hallucinogenic drug] DMT, which is the most powerful sort of drug known to man and can transport you into a different reality. So you can see a lot of Burns's poetic visions, not as alcoholic visions, like the mad DT [withdrawal] hallucination of *Tam O'Shanter* and his whisky, but as being drug-induced. All this is opening up a different thing for me with Burns."

### FROM SCOTLAND TO THE WORLD

At this point we're ready to tackle the peatier end of the Society's flavour spectrum, with a dram from Cask No. 53.323: *Cheshire cat* and a taste of Islay's coastline. It immediately returns us from hints of Spain or Jamaica right back to Scotland, as Irvine says when he noses and tastes this dram: "It's just the soil, isn't it?"

As we swill our glasses and let the smell of peat fill the air in The Vaults, we return to the theme of Burns – and how he has influenced Irvine's own work.



“If you look at all the influences that someone like me must have had, Burns would be one of the biggest, and there’s no getting away from that ‘cause he permeates all aspects of Scottish culture. He permeates the ways that people express themselves, and he came from that whole Knoxian tradition of universal education. When I started writing, every single writer from Scotland, from Alasdair Gray and James Kelman and Janice Galloway in the west, to people like Barry Graham and Kevin Williamson and Duncan McLean, they all came from a council scheme. Whereas every single writer I knew in England all came from Oxbridge.

“I think that whole Knoxian democratic tradition continues right through the culture. So I think, yes, there is an influence, but I’m not aware of it in terms of the construction of anything, in terms of the linguistic constructions, because you’re so involved in the process of actually writing something that you don’t really reflect on what your influences are when you’re doing it.”

Like Burns and his use of Scots,

Irvine’s uncompromising Edinburgh dialect can also pose a challenge to the reader, especially outwith Scotland – or even Edinburgh. Did he feel any pressure to compromise his use of language, to possibly appeal to a wider audience? “I wasn’t really thinking about that,” he says. “When the first book [*Trainspotting*] came out, I thought it’s going to sell to a few people in Edinburgh, and they’re going to love it, and vibe on it. And then the London cognoscenti got into it, and I thought, ‘Well, they would ‘cause it’s druggy, so they’ll enjoy it.’ And then, it just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

“The book got passed around the prisons, and everybody liked it there, and then the play pulled people in, and then it went national, and then the film went international, and it just kind of went on and on. But I didn’t really have any sort of big ambitions. I thought I would be somebody who wrote the occasional book and had a job doing something else, basically. I never thought I would become a kind of, for want of a better term, a professional full-time author. Certainly not an

international one. What is interesting to me is when it came out, people enjoyed it very much – from England and South Africa and America and Canada and Australia and all that – they found it a challenge, but they loved it. They loved getting to 30 pages in and the voice was embedded in their heads, and then they were shouting at each other in Scottish accents and all that, calling each other ‘radges’ and ‘gadgie’ and all that kind of stuff. They loved the challenge of that.”

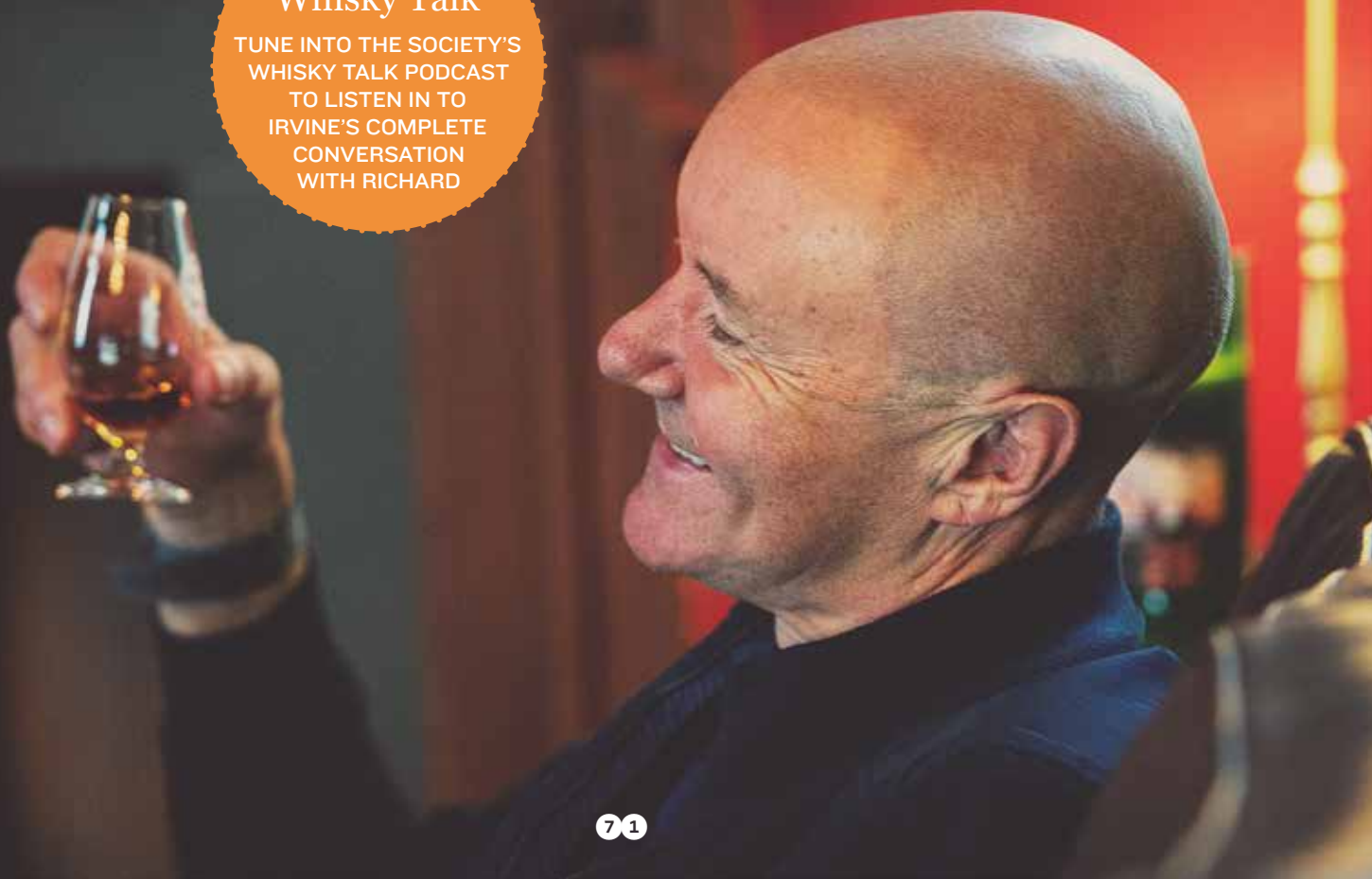
Again the comparison with Burns comes to mind, with people around the world coming together at Hogmanay to sing *Auld Lang Syne* – possibly without knowing what all the words actually mean. Does it matter?

“You know, there’s just a vibe of togetherness about the whole thing,” says Irvine. “He’s written the world’s national anthem, basically, which is a bizarre thing for a Scot to be able to do, from such a small place.”

The same small place has also produced the world’s most popular spirit. On that note, we drain our glasses of 53.323: *Cheshire cat* and head back out onto the streets of Leith. ●

## SMWS Whisky Talk

TUNE INTO THE SOCIETY'S  
WHISKY TALK PODCAST  
TO LISTEN IN TO  
IRVINE'S COMPLETE  
CONVERSATION  
WITH RICHARD



MAIN PHOTO BY  
MIKE WILKINSON

# NICE TO MEET YOU

Every month in *Unfiltered* we like to introduce a different member of the SMWS team and put a friendly face to our names. Settle down and share a dram with *Mads Schmoll*, the Society's very own social media guru

**First whisky memory:** Being at my grandparents for Christmas in Virginia and my granddad drinking Dewar's over ice. It's the sound of the ice clinking in the rocks glass, the colour of the liquid glinting in the glow of the tree and the smell of woodsmoke from the fire in their living room.

**Favourite whisky-drinking music:** Depends on the moment and the mood, but most likely an eclectic mix of big band interspersed with a bit of older soul and funk when entertaining. Fleetwood Mac, Pink Floyd and New Order are staples for solo dramming. I love pulling together our SMWS playlists from time to time and *Coorie In With The SMWS* and *A Very Merry Little SMWS Christmas* are both pretty good encapsulations of my taste in music.

**Best box set:** *Six Feet Under*. I studied film and TV at university having already seen the series, and then was blown away learning about its impact on contemporary television. It's not an easy watch, but it's packed with incredible storytelling that captures the nuances of life in the early 2000s while also exploring life, death and grief in a way that hadn't been done before.

**Fantasy whisky tasting companions:** I reckon former Laphroaig owner Bessie Williamson would have some great stories.

**Most memorable dram:** The day I found out I got the job at the SMWS was

on American Thanksgiving. My dad was over and I was cooking turkey and all the trimmings when I got the call. The next day, after I'd come down to earth a bit, I handed in my notice and we popped out to the Pot Still and enjoyed a dram of Cask No. 88.16: *Deliciously decadent dessert*. That moment felt like the start of something big!

**Guilty pleasure:** Ketchup! I was the world's fussiest eater when I was younger and it was the only way I would eat most things. I've moved on to more adventurous foods (thankfully) so it's a firm favourite for the usual suspects, but sometimes for old times' sake, I still eat it over buttered pasta.

**Dream destination:** After reading a travel feature about Cognac, I'm desperate to take a trip there and take my time trying both the food and drink. I drank cognac before I drank whisky, so I'm curious to come back to it with a bit more knowledge.

**Strangest food:** Although I now consider Glasgow home, I still can't quite get behind the idea of a pizza crunch (battered and deep-fried pizza).

**Favourite bar:** I have a special spot in my heart for the Auld Alliance in Paris, a proper Scottish pub which happens to be just around the corner from where my dad lives. We usually go for a pint, and I remember standing there all dressed up drinking pints after his wedding. Closer to home, I've always loved the Pot Still in Glasgow. It feels quite magical to tuck yourself away in a booth in the corner and catch up on life with a dram in hand – usually with friends who I haven't seen in a while (or who don't live in Glasgow).

**If you were a flavour profile, what would you be, and why?** Some variation of Peated. I find the smell of woodsmoke particularly soothing as it's linked to quite a few memories. It's living above a teasshop and constantly smelling lapsang souchong, the smell of woodsmoke while pumpkin picking as the weather turns colder and more recently, my first trip to Islay with the Society in 2019. ●



Mads on Islay



UNFILTERED



Get to know more of the  
Society team in our regular  
'Share a dram with' feature







Bar Fable reflects the owner's passion



# HOME TIME

Since we started releasing *Unfiltered* as a monthly digital magazine, we've been able to give more time and space to profiling the Society's amazing selection of partner bars around the world. Wherever you find yourself, you shouldn't be too far from finding a warm welcome and access to a selection of SMWS bottlings. Our partner bars range hugely in style and look, but they all have one thing in common – a huge passion for whisky in general, and The Scotch Malt Whisky Society in particular. Here's a few of the bars we've visited virtually over the past year...

## WHISKYBROTHER BAR, JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

To bar manager Valentine Maseko, WhiskyBrother Bar offers something special for whisky drinkers. "The bar for me is a sanctuary for the whisky lover, there is a bit of everything for everyone – including SMWS bottlings that span both new and older releases," he says. "You also get a chance to try harder-to-find whiskies that are no longer available at retail, or are just not accessible to most drinkers due to pricing. We love to see new and familiar faces and talk whisky with our patrons. We are honoured to join the SMWS family."

## BAR FABLE, CHANGSHA, HUNAN PROVINCE, CHINA

"Bar Fable was born in August 2015. The excitement I felt at that moment is still fresh in my mind," says Wang Han, owner of Bar Fable in Changsha. "I have more than 1,700 bottles from

different brands and across many years. Among them, there are 131 SMWS bottlings. Each one brings me so much joy and excitement, which it's my job to share. I would like to offer my special gratitude to the SMWS for awarding me the honour of being an SMWS partner bar, which has been the best reward for the job that I have been doing. The question I hear most often these days is why on earth I want to open such a bar. My answer is that I did it to share, to be romantic, and to present my original version of 'joy and excitement'. Above all else, I've found my true passion – let me share it with you."

## KISMET, NELSON, NEW ZEALAND

"Being a partner bar with SMWS is a perfect match for our ethos," says Nick Widley, who owns and manages Kismet in the New Zealand town of Nelson with his wife Kymberly. "It's creating experiences through great service and sharing knowledge. It's explaining to someone that we're interested in what's in the bottle, not in buying a brand name. Being able to take the time, sit down with a guest and a bottle in hand and explaining everything from the code, to what the Outturn number means, to where the name for that bottling came from – it's not something you find in many bars, let alone a bar from a small



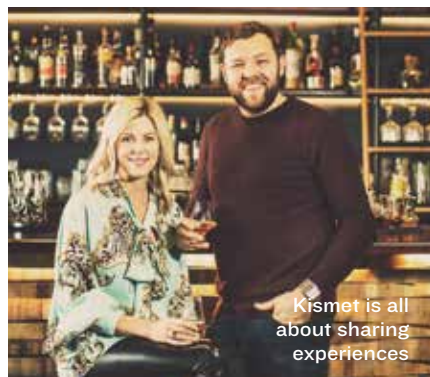


Salón Rosario is a mix of Mexican and Scottish cultures

town in the middle of a country at the end of the world.”

#### **SALÓN ROSARIO, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO**

Salón Rosario is owned and run by Hardey Martínez León and Katri Walker, the couple behind the Society's first branch in Latin America. “It’s a combination of a traditional Mexican ‘salón’ and the essence of a Scottish whisky bar,” says Katri. “Dark wood, dark blue, touches of gold and art deco details are the foundation of the interior design. We have two main spaces, the Bar and the Lounge, which gives us a lot of flexibility for events. We’re extremely proud to be the first partner bar in Latin America and we hope that it’s the first of many, across the rest of the continent!” ●



Kismet is all about sharing experiences

# NEED TO KNOW

## **MEET YOUR DRAM-CIERGE**

To help you make the most of your SMWS membership, we’ve introduced a whole new level of tailor-made member services and personal guidance. With our members at the heart of everything we do, our DRAM-cierge is here for friendly advice, whether it’s a question about us, your membership or if you’d like us to share some whisky wisdom and recommendations. And if we don’t know the answer – we’ll track it down like a whisky ninja!



## **GET IN TOUCH**

We promise we’re not robots. We’re a small team, all of us members, and would love some chat from kindred spirits – if only to hear what you’ve been doing and what you’re drinking. Call us on **0131 555 2929** or email **thedram-cierge@smws.com**

## **GET INVOLVED**

One of the best ways to get the most out of your membership is to join a Society tasting. We are always active, both in person and online. Bring your whisky to life at **smws.com/events** or check in with your local branch.

## **MEMBERS’ ROOMS AND PARTNER BARS**

If you’re in the UK, you can find us at The Vaults and 28 Queen Street in Edinburgh, 19

Greville Street in London and 38 Bath Street in Glasgow, as well as at various partner bars. Internationally, we have partner bars everywhere from Australia to the United States.

**smws.com/venues**

**https://smws.com/venues/partner-bars**

**https://smws.com/venues/international-partner-bars**

## **OUTTURN**

In the UK and around the world, we release a new Outturn of whiskies every month. By its nature, whisky from a single cask is limited in nature, so you may have to be quick off the mark to secure a bottle. But don’t worry – there’s always something new and exciting on its way, so make sure you’re signed up to our email mailing list.

## **A GLOBAL SOCIETY**

We’re a truly international community of whisky lovers – find out more about our global branches and how to contact them online at **smws.com/about/around-the-world**

## **GET SOCIAL**

Keep up to date with everything that’s happening at the Society and become part of the conversation by joining our social media accounts. We’re online all the time at:  
**Facebook:** thesmwsuk  
**Twitter:** SMWSUK  
**Instagram:** smws\_uk  
**YouTube:** SMWS  
**Silverscreen**





## THE SCOTCH MALT WHISKY SOCIETY

A KICK UP THE OLD BODEGA • PYROCLASTIC FLOW • BOG  
• PLEASURE GARDEN • CONVERSATION LUBRICATION  
• PASSIONATE AND ROMANTIC • PEAT FIRE TALES  
ON ORKNEY • TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE • CHARMING  
AND ENTRANCING • TABANCO TIME • WHOLESOME  
AND SUBSTANTIAL • STUCK TO THE FRUITY VELCRO •  
MYTHICAL AND MAGICAL • MERMAID KARATE • WORLDS  
COLLIDE • THE OAK HAS SPOKE • ODDBALL FUNK •  
GLUE GLORIOUS GLUE! • AN OLD SOUL IN NEW SHOES •  
CELTIC REMIX • PAPAYA THE SAILOR • PEATY PENINSULA  
• THAIFALUTIN • CLEMENTINE CONFIT • A ROCKING  
CHAIR WHISKEY • AS MAD AS A BOX OF FROGS! • LET  
THE WORLD FALL APART • **ALL TOGETHER UNIQUE**



