

## **Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-03**

**By Louis Perlman, USA**

This article is brought to you by 'Malt Maniacs'; an international collective of more than two dozen fiercely independent malt whisky aficionados. Since 1997 we have been enjoying and discussing the pleasures of single malt whisky with like-minded whisky lovers from all over the world. In 2010 our community had members from 15 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Taiwan, Australia and South Africa. You can find more details on: [www.maltmaniacs.org](http://www.maltmaniacs.org).



# **Grumpiness**

One of the fringe benefits of being a Malt maniac is the daily e-mail exchange. Some of the discussions eventually become e-pistles, other times it's just the usual stuff that single malt scotch enthusiasts typically discuss. At the end of 2008, one maniac declared that he was particularly grumpy about something, and then other maniacs jumped on the grumpiness band wagon as well. A couple of these topics rubbed me the wrong way, and as I wasn't going to win any of the internal arguments, I have decided to go public. This is not an attempt to embarrass anybody, no names are mentioned, but as these are topics often discussed by single malt scotch fans, I would like to add a little bit of perspective.

To help illustrate my point, I will begin with several things that ARE worth being grumpy about IMHO, and then I will move on to the supposedly grumpiness-worthy whisky items.

1) My father passed away on December 3rd, 2009, after a five month bout with pneumonia. The whole thing started with a broken hip back in May 2008, and the ordeal included a bypass operation, multiple hospital stays, and four stays in nursing homes for rehab. This is not about my father, but rather, the whole experience revealed a side to the medical system that most of us don't get exposure to. Modern medicine can do some truly amazing things, but the last few years of life are often accompanied by a severe decrease in quality of life.

Hospitals are not so bad (usually), most people leave better off than when they entered. But nursing homes are another story. When a person loses their mobility, life as we know it comes to an end. And when they are no longer able to get dressed, bathe, or go to the bathroom by themselves, all human dignity can be lost. Imagine needing someone to get you your favorite bottle of single malt scotch from the cabinet. Now imagine not even being able to get a drink of water without assistance.

That is what life in a nursing home is about. Aside from rehab patients, most people don't last more than a year in a nursing home, and they don't die from the condition that they came in with. My father came down with pneumonia in two out of four homes he was in, and contracted the [MRSA bug](#) in a third.

And in another way, my father was very lucky. He had a steady stream of family and friends come to visit. Some people in nursing homes have only one or two relatives who come by, and some don't have anybody. In a day and age where health care facilities are barely adequately staffed, you can imagine which patients get more attention from the staff. I could go on, but you probably get the point by now.

2) Do you remember the Mumbai attacks back in November 2008? Two hundred innocent people lost their lives, just because some terrorist figured out how to pull it off. By now the outrage has worn off, if there was any to begin with. The truth is that there are hundreds of terrorist attacks in the world every year. Most are in out of the way places, so the Western

world doesn't really have any leverage to get involved. The real root of these attacks has nothing to do with politics; there are just certain individuals who love to hate everybody else. If they can get hold of enough money, usually via the drug trade or by infiltrating charities, they are in business. And the terrorist only has to succeed once out a thousand times to claim victory.

3) Has anybody not noticed that we are in a worldwide recession? A lot of people are suffering. Just about every other week, it's another country. Greece, Spain, Iceland, who's next? I read that The Republic of Ireland has to cut spending by over \$3000 (or was that GBP?) PER PERSON in the country to balance the budget. What a wonderful idea it was, to lend tons of money to people who couldn't afford to pay it back. And the guy who dreamed up the whole scheme was close to winning the Nobel prize for economics, except that he never figured that real estate prices could actually drop.

And it is everywhere. There are clothing drives in RICH neighborhoods for people who are barely hanging on, and wouldn't have any place to go if they lost their houses. Food banks are reporting that their own employees and volunteers are asking if they can take some food home. And you probably don't have to look very hard to find someone in trouble. People are often embarrassed to admit that they are having trouble, but look for the telltale signs. Are they suddenly wearing (non-designer) jeans instead of nice clothing? Maybe they are shopping at Wal-Mart instead of at the fancier stores. Or maybe they are suddenly driving an older car when the lease on the [Acura](#) was up.

Now let's take a look at the single malt scotch grumpiness issues.

1) The Macallan Fine Oak line. This was the original grumpiness topic. As we all know, The Macallan used to be synonymous with first fill sherry cask aging. But maybe a decade ago, the distillery realized that there weren't enough sherry casks available to satisfy ever increasing demand, so they came up with the Fine Oak series. The FO expressions had a good bit of bourbon casked malt, and are now the only Macallan expressions sold in some markets. So the howls of protest rolled in. After all, the old packaging proclaimed: *'whilst other distillers no longer insist on using oaken sherry casks, at Macallan, this costly tradition is maintained'*. Yeah, like that is a legally binding, permanent commitment. It is diluting the brand name. Well, that's their decision. I might even point out that NOT selling the Fine Oak series would dilute shareholder value. SMS newcomers will no longer associate Macallan with sherry casked malt whisky. This happens. IBM once sold mostly mainframe computers and software, now they make most of their revenue thru consulting services. Hewlett Packard started out making scientific instruments, now they are the world's largest computer vendor. Abercrombie and Fitch used to appeal to the [preppy](#) market, now they sell to high school and college students.



But wait a second, I countered. There has always been bourbon casked Macallan spirit, previously intended for blending. And those bourbon casked bottlings were usually quite the objects of desire among SMS enthusiasts. I even managed to snag a couple of them myself over the years. Oh no, came the reply, as the Rule of Original Intent was invoked. Since the malts went into the cask to be used in blends, they absolutely cannot be sold as a single malt years later. Really?!?!? How about those 25 and 30 year old Taliskers that went into the cask at a time when Talisker was only bottled at 10 years?

And as long as the Whisky Crimes Tribunal was in session, other charges were brought. There were those horrible Macallan 18 year old vintages from the 1980's. What that had to do with the Fine Oak series is beyond me. And then there was the Gran Reserva series. Specially picked casks that went for about three times the price of the regular 18 year old. Surely that was the cause of those lousy vintages, watering down the product for 'the rest

of us'. Except for one thing, the first Gran Reserva vintage was the 1979. Also, some people actually welcomed the idea of a super premium Mac 18, and were ready and willing to pay triple the price. And while there were indeed later vintages of the Gran Reserva, they were not as highly rated as the 1979, so no dilution of the standard 18 year old due to the Gran Reserva.



2) The Highland Park 1977. This was a 21 year old bottling released in 2000 for a bit over \$100, about double the price of the standard HP 18 year old. I did buy a bottle, and found it to be maybe a two point improvement over the 18. Worth the money? If you had the spare cash and liked Highland Park. So here is the story. Somebody found several hundred bottles of 1977 in a warehouse, and decided to repackage them, and charge around \$400. How dare they do that!! Well, I don't like the idea either, but if some sucker wants to pay that much, let them. The 1977 was on the shelves long enough that anyone who wanted to put away a few bottles had plenty of opportunity. But no, 'they should remember the customers who supported them thru the years'. So how does that work? Does anybody save their sale receipts from ten years ago? Do we exchange an empty bottle for one of the newly found ones? What if more than a few hundred original customers are interested? Will there be a lottery, or will it be first come, first served? And here is the best part. Right before this announcement, the distillery released a NEW 21 year old Travel Retail bottling, for the same \$100 price as the original. It was even initially bottled at 48% ABV, but later cut back to 40% to meet the very enthusiastic demand. Maybe not as convenient as going down to your local liquor store, but not all that difficult to snare a bottle.

3) And now we come to the most heinous crime of all, something called [The Last Drop](#). TLD started out as a 12 year old blend of seventy malt whiskies and six grain whiskies, which was then further matured in several sherry casks for an additional 36 years. A total of 1347 bottles resulted, bottled at 52% ABV. The price was set at \$2000, which unleashed the fury of the masses. Now wait a second, \$2000 isn't that much. Even back in 1998/1999, there was the Highland Park 1958 forty year old, and the Macallan 1946, both for around that price. And I took a quick look online, and found a dozen or so \$2000 bottles at [www.binnys.com](#), which I picked because they don't mark up desirable bottles.

No no, came the reply. A Malt Maniac is by definition against ANY very expensive bottle, no need to rail out against each one individually. Hold on a minute. I won't be spending \$2000 on The Last Drop, I haven't even spent as much as \$200 on a single bottle. But if I won a decent lottery, I just might spring for an expensive bottle, and my FIRST choice would be TLD. The truth be told, I do not covet the typical \$2000 bottle, which is likely to be from some tired out 40 or so year old cask and bottled minutes before the ABV drops below the legal minimum 40%. TLD is still fresh and vibrant, and comes in at 52% ABV. It also got great reviews from both The Malt Advocate and Whisky Magazine. And finally, it really is a unique item, something that may never come along again.



Now before I go any further, I would like to say that I do sympathize with the original issue. There are a few expressions I would love to still be able to purchase, particularly the Springbank official bottlings from the late nineties. But I think that the grumpiness was mis-directed at the Fine Oak series, and ended up being a case of shooting the messenger. If the Fine Oak series did not exist, the Sherry oak 12 year old might go for \$100 per bottle by now. And we are going in that direction anyway, as the Sherry Oak 12 sells in the NYC area for a 40%

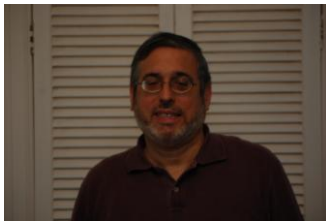
premium above the Highland Park 12 year old, from another top tier Edrington distillery.

So now I will explain why all of this grumpiness got me upset. First of all, this is all supposed to be fun. Listening to whining and moaning stops being fun after a while. If your favorite dram is no longer available or costs too much, look for something else. There are plenty of quality drams out there, my want list is NEVER empty, despite of all the stuff I can't get or can't afford.

Second, every hobby seems to have its 'old goat' section (usually middle age, actually) who are constantly complaining that 'nothing is as good as it used to be', or that everything expensive is overpriced and 'they are just ripping us off'. Single malt scotch is not something that can be made 'offshore', in a part of the world where people are paid \$3/month. The laws of supply and demand do come in to play for older and/or more desirable bottlings. So in the words of Don Henley, 'Get Over It'. Let's allow SMS newcomers to develop their own value system, and eventually, the market will find its proper level.

And if after all of this you are still grumpy about these things, then I have a suggestion. Step away from your computer for a while, and volunteer at a hospital, nursing home, or food bank. If you know someone who needs help, ask how you can help out. Invite him/her and their family over for a summer bar-b-que. Or offer to help out with some repairs they can't afford. If you really don't know someone in need, go down to your local house of worship, and ask the clergy there, They will know someone, guaranteed. You can (and should) certainly make the donation anonymously, but ask about the situation that the recipient is in. And when you get back home, pour yourself a dram of Macallan Fine Oak 15, it will taste pretty good. I promise.

Slainte.



Louis Perlman was born in 1959. He got hooked on single malt scotch whisky in the late nineties. After stumbling around various web pages, he came across the announcement introducing the original Malt Madness page, and started exchanging emails with Johannes. Suddenly one day, the Malt Maniacs were introduced, with Louis being one of the original three.