

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-04 **By Serge Valentin, France**

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.



SO, DOES AGE MATTER? **A BACKED UP ANSWER, FOR ONCE!**



Chivas Bros' new campaign claims that "age counts" and suggests that "the older the whisky, the better it is." As expected, those statements fuelled some passionate debates on whisky blogs and forums, where both experienced and inexperienced whisky lovers plus various industry types started to cross swords – usually without any evidence, only global feelings.

To tell you the truth, it seems to me that the various takes on this important matter depend mainly on each person's own experiences. Older guys usually repeat what they have always been told since they started their whisky journey: age does matter and indeed, older whisky tends to be better up to a certain point that lies around 30 or 35 years of age. No sure bet of course, as there are many exceptions, but an obvious trend.

Younger guys, that is to say people who started in whisky very recently, also repeat what they are now told by a large part of the industry: that age does not really matter. They can't have any evidence, as their experience is short but let's face it, it's hard

not to repeat what you're now told by a large proportion of the industry and their very engaging brand ambassadors. And yes, of course, it's very easy to organise small blind tasting sessions where a younger whisky will defeat an older one. Even a cheap vodka can defeat an over-oaky old Speysider, and rightfully so! Is that statistically sound? Not quite...

And then you have the professionals. Some experts – not all of them – will repeat what fits the distillers who pay them, which is normal. After all, one of them once told me 'You know, Serge, in this business, you have to go where the money is!' So, it isn't strange at all that some of these cool guys would start to shower praise upon 'a brand new Mongolian distillery that just issued their first glorious 3yo', or 'this well-known Scottish distillery that gives us a fairly young best whisky in the world, year after year.' Business is business. As for the distillers and retailers, they'll sell you what they have, and certainly not what they do not

have (anymore). Why should we be surprised? They're doing their jobs and a few of them do it perfectly well.

So, now that older stocks of whisky are more or less exhausted, and that oceans of youngish ones that were distilled from the mid-1990s on and that bear the label 'wood technology inside' are lying in all Scottish warehouses and are ready to conquer Whisky World 2.0, maybe it's time to try to find some truly independent data that would give a more reliable answer to The Big Question. Does age matter?

Look, why not use the Malt Maniacs' Malt Monitor? It's by far the largest whisky database today and it's totally unbiased (no professionals ever score any whisky for MM, which is hard to do when a database is 'open'). Okay, let's give it a try!

This is what we're going to do:

1 - Select only **recent bottlings**, that is to say whiskies that were bottled from 2002 on. Indeed, the idea is not to find out if whiskies that were bottled in the '70s were better when old ;-).

2 - Within those, select only bottlings that were tasted **100% blind**, each by a panel of 10+ judges during the Malt Maniacs Awards. All in all, 18 various MMs have served. When I say '100% blind', that means that the tasters have no idea as to a whisky's country of origin, its region, its age, its wood type, whatever. Age just cannot interfere, it's never a case of 'you like it because you know it's old'. It's all 100% objective!

3 - We'll keep whiskies from **various origins**. Most are Scotch malts but there are also a few Irish, Japanese or blends.

4 - Final selection: all 865 recent bottlings, which gathers **10,303 blind scores** altogether. 10,000+ scores, that should be representative and reliable enough!

5 - We'll now divide the panel into **age categories**, this way:

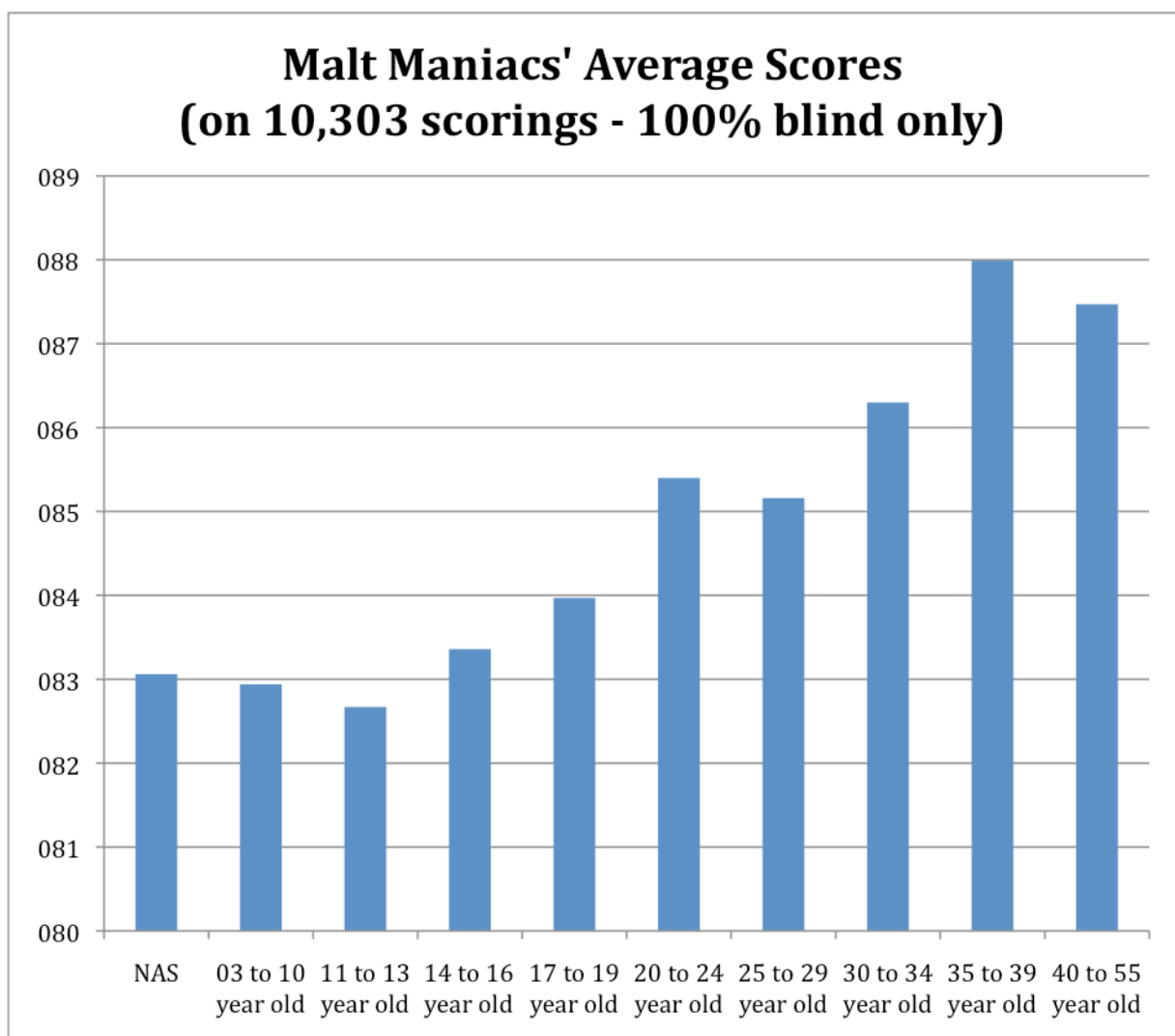
No Age Statement	1232 scores
03 to 10 year old	1099 scores
11 to 13 year old	1391 scores
14 to 16 year old	1731 scores
17 to 19 year old	1128 scores
20 to 24 year old	1027 scores
25 to 29 year old	922 scores
30 to 34 year old	977 scores
35 to 39 year old	462 scores
40 to 55 year old	334 scores

6 - Okay, all that's still to be done is to calculate the **average score** for each category, and we'll see if, yes or no, age does matter. If age doesn't matter, the averages should be more or less the same for all categories....

Results: (*over please...*)

AGE	SCORE
No Age Statement	83,06
03 to 10 year old	82,94
11 to 13 year old	82,67
14 to 16 year old	83,36
17 to 19 year old	83,97
20 to 24 year old	85,40
25 to 29 year old	85,16
30 to 34 year old	86,30
35 to 39 year old	87,99
40 to 55 year old	87,47

Right, it would be nicer to have a chart...



What do we notice? That, unsurprisingly, aged whisky is indeed 'better' than young whisky. The widest gap, 5,32 points, lies between 11-13 years and 35-39 years. It's not totally huge, but it's very significant. 5,32 points within the usual '70-95' scale represent more or less **20%**. It is also to be noted that peaty whiskies tend to get sold at younger age than unpeated ones, which may boost the lower ages a bit in the graph.

7 – What, there’s a 7th point? Yes, **prices!** Granted, as with any kind of food, drink, car or even art, something that’s 10% better usually costs double. But with whisky, it’s much more than that.

That’s the problem, most distillers are so much aware of the fact that older whisky’s significantly better than younger whisky, that they’ll charge you ‘exponentially’. Let’s see to what extent...

Let’s settle for these average street prices in Euros, we shouldn’t be way off the marks:

AGE	Price	Price/Year
No Age Statement	35,00€	-
03 to 10 year old	30,00€	4,00€
11 to 13 year old	35,00€	3,00€
14 to 16 year old	50,00€	3,33€
17 to 19 year old	75,00€	4,00€
20 to 24 year old	120,00€	5,50€
25 to 29 year old	160,00€	6,00€
30 to 34 year old	300,00€	9,50€
35 to 39 year old	500,00€	13,50€
40 to 55 year old	1 000,00€	22,00€

That’s right, for example, a further year above 40yo will cost you almost TWENTY times the cost of a ‘normal’ year (100€ vs. 5€).

Globally, I believe that following the ‘+10% quality costs double’ rule, it would be normal that a whisky that’s 20% ‘better’ would cost, say four times more. In other words, a new 35yo – not talking about old collectables here - should cost four times the price of a 12yo, that is to say $35 \times 4 = 140€$, and certainly not 500€. In truth, 140€ is actually the price of an excellent 35yo Strathisla or Glen Grant at G&M’s and that’s why I always insist on the fact that those are the best deals.



A short conclusion: if older whisky is indeed globally better than younger whisky, no question about that, I can certainly understand why such statements would infuriate many whisky lovers, especially newcomers or guys who are on a budget, as a large part of the whisky industry uses the age selling point as a lame excuse for putting very heavy price tags on bottles that are certainly better, but not hugely better globally speaking.

Well, maybe age is still a better excuse than Barbara-Cartland-esque crystal decanters or cheapo Chinese wooden boxes? Santé! – *Serge, July 2010*



Serge Valentin was born in 1960 in Alsace, France. He joined the Malt Maniacs in the early 2000s and launched satellite website whiskyfun.com in 2002. Serge also writes for Whisky Magazine France but always insists on keeping a strictly independent amateur profile. Serge’s revised whisky motto: ‘Whisky is not important enough to matter to people other than those who make or sell it or who drink way too much of it.’