

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-07 **By Charles MacLean, Scotland, UK**

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FRESH FROM KAVALAN DOES AGE REALLY MATTER?

Malt Maniacs may recall a flurry of global press interest in January 2010 under the general headline "**Taiwanese Whisky Beats Scotch in Blind Tasting**", inspired by an article which appeared in The Times – and by the fact that it was otherwise a quiet time for news.

I chaired the panel in question. We evaluated six samples - all around three years old, and all strictly blind. The reason for the tasting was to assess the new English malt, St. George's, against young Scotch whiskies, but the result was not what anyone expected, and gave the paper a better story.

Among the samples was Kavalan Classic, the first bottling from the distillery of the same name, at two years old. I asked the panel to describe each sample, for the benefit of the journalist, then to mark it out of ten. When the results were computed, and the samples revealed, the scores were as follows (out of forty): 1) Kavalan 2YO Taiwanese malt (27.5 points), 2) 3YO Scotch blend (22 points), 3) 3YO Scotch blend (20 points), 4) St. George's, English single malt (15.5 points), 5) 3YO Scotch malt 8.5 points), 6) 5YO Scotch malt (4.5 points).



I have just returned from Taiwan, where I was presenting a talk about 'Flavour', and was shown round Kavalan Distillery by Ian Chang, the charming, witty and knowledgeable Director of Production and Master Blender. He admits that it has been a steep learning curve since 2005, when the distillery was first mooted, and acknowledges the contribution of Dr. Jim Swan, the world's leading independent consultant on whisky production and maturation (and, incidentally, my mentor).

The Location

Kavalan Distillery is situated on the Yi-Lan Plain, in the north-east of the island. You reach it via a twisting coastal road from Taipei, the capital, or, more directly, via the 5th longest tunnel in the world, burrowing through the Central Mountain Range, which is Taiwan's steep and heavily afforested spine.

The city of Yi-Lan spreads in comfortable disorder between the Pacific Ocean and the mountains; the distillery is in a crook of the hills, where the Central Range meets the Snowy Mountains – romantically named, since there ain't no snow in Taiwan: temperatures range from 37° - 40° C in summer to 6° - 8° C in winter (15° C warmer than Speyside).

The Kavalan people ('the people of the plain') was one of Taiwan's aboriginal groups. They are of Polynesian descent, arrived by sea from the east and decided to settle when they saw the beauty and fertility of the place, driving the local residents – the Atayal people – into the mountains. A bit like the Anglo Saxons did to the Ancient Britons, although about 4000 years earlier.



The founder of the distillery, Mr. T.T. Lee, is proud of his and Taiwan's heritage, proud to be the first distillery on the island, and proud to name it after the 'people of the plain'.

He founded his company - with the unlikely name (to Western ears) of King Car - in the 1950s, to make insecticides. Soon it diversified into soft drinks, instant coffee (its 'Mr. Brown Coffee' brand is massive in many markets, notably Germany, Czech Republic, Cyprus and North America), powdered soups, biotechnology and health-care. In 1996 he built a bottled water plant on the Yi-Lan Plain, to exploit the exceptionally pure and soft water from the nearby mountains, and ten years later, decided to add a whisky distillery to the site, with a substantial visitor centre. Two things impress one most about Kavalan: the scale of the operation and the quality of the whisky.

The Distillery



The distillery building is a gigantic barn, surmounted by two cosmetic pagodas – a touching nod towards Scotch malt distilleries – about 100 yards long (? metres) and five stories high at each end (to the right is the maturation warehouse; to the left mash-house and tun-room; in the middle still-house – and then all repeated under the same roof for a parallel distillery, Line B). The difference between Line A) and Line B), is that the latter has twice the capacity of the former, and is equipped with Holstein stills.

[Full details of each Line are attached at the end of this E-pistle]

The current output, which is at capacity, is 1.3 million LPA for Line A (the Scottish style, pot still distillery) and 2.6 million litres for Line B (the Holstein stills, which allow for flexibility of spirit character). 3.9 million LPA per annum... in the top quartile of Scotch malt distillery output. The acclaimed Kilchoman Distillery's output, which launched its first bottling at about the same time as Kavalan (to similar acclaim!) has a capacity of 100,000 LPA per annum. Before Roseisle was commissioned, Diageo's largest distillery was Dufftown, with a capacity of 4.5 million LPA per annum.

Advised by Dr. Jim Swan, they take a very narrow cut of the spirit run (10%), leading to an ISR strength which is considerably higher than that at Scottish malt distilleries. Why?

Well, given the average temperatures (37-40C in summer; 6-8C in winter) the maturation process is 'forced', compared with Scotland (Speyside's average temperatures are 15C lower), while evaporation, the Angels' Share, is at 15% a year (in Scotland it's 2% or less).



Under these circumstances, you can't afford to leave the liquid for too long – otherwise you'll have nothing left in the cask! More important, the new-make spirit must be exceptionally clean: there's no time to remove feinty off-notes.

Then there's the wood policy, a subject about which Dr. Swan is the guru (pace Dr. Lumsden!). You gotta have the right casks to do the job in such a short time. The expressions I have tasted have clearly demonstrated good wood, and the 'standard' bottling, Kavalan Classic (see tasting note below), is a remarkable mix of cask types, lending an attractive balance of flavours, a clear 'transparency' to use Mr. Broom's word.

The Site

But it doesn't end there. Directly opposite the distillery building is the visitors' centre, capable of feeding and entertaining 7,000 people a day – which numbers they regularly receive at weekends. Indeed, an average of 24,000 people a week visit Kavalan Distillery – around a million people a year! Glenfiddich, Scotland's largest distillery-visitor destination, and the best known malt in the world, welcomes around 80,000 visitors a year. Two hundred yards away, through newly-planted and well-tended orchards, is the massive neo-Classical 'Convention Centre and Guest House', all lined with marble internally and dressed stone externally, like a French chateau with a Soviet twist.

Yet, typical of the Taiwanese people, the management of Kavalan Distillery – or maybe King Car Distillery, they seem uncertain about the name, and may use the latter for the product of Line B) – are modest, polite, ambitious but realistic and conscious that their success will depend upon the quality of the whisky, not on marketing hyperbole. And I can assure you, the quality is first rate – as exemplified by the MM ratings it has achieved and by international awards in blind tastings. The company is building up a huge stock inventory and will have to shift it to keep going at this level of production. The whisky is highly priced, even against imported Scotch malt in Taiwan: they tell me this is a fair reflection of production costs. Hopefully the price will become more realistic as volume sales increase. Their mighty neighbour, China, is obviously their prime target, and it will be interesting to see how the mainland takes to a 'local' product. It may be that Chinese consumers are too wedded (currently, at least) to the glamour of Scotch, but this may change as consumers become more aware of flavour rather than image – as has happened in Taiwan itself, a comparatively mature market. This is particularly interesting in regard to Chivas Bros. recently launched campaign pegged upon 'Age Matters'!

Oh no it doesn't when you have the right spirit in the right casks for the right length of time! Go figure!

**Tasting Note:**

Currently, the distillery offers four expressions, all at around 3YO:
Kavalan Classic @40%Vol, Kavalan Concertmaster (port-wood finish) @40%Vol,
Solist ex-Bourbon @58.8%Vol, Solist ex-Sherry @58% Vol. A single ex-Fino cask
@58.5%Vol was bottled to celebrate Chinese New Year 2010 and sold out in 3 days.
The bottle shape for Classic and Concertmaster was inspired by Taiwan's iconic Taipei 101
Tower, once the tallest building in the world.

Kavalan Classic

Rich amber in colour, the nose is light and fruity, led by tropical fruits (mango, papaya) and ripe peaches. More perfumed than Scotch, but would pass for same in a blind tasting. A little water immediately raises estery notes – vinyl and pear drops. Would now be taken for a Speyside. A return to fruitiness after a moment, with a suggestion of warm wood. Light bodied, to taste. Sweet, with fresh acidity, drying in the medium-length finish. With water a trace of fennel, and peach-cream chocolate in the aftertaste.
Comment: No trace of immaturity, and not overpowered by wood-derived flavours. Enjoyable and very easy to drink. Peach notes to the fore.

KAVALAN DISTILLERY, Yi-Lan, Taiwan

Raw Materials

Soft water from the mountains behind the site, via bore-holes (PH 7-8; 8-18 calcium content). This water is also bottled by the company for drinking.

Unpeated malt mainly from U.K.

Dried yeast, added to own strain of distiller's wet yeast for added complexity.

Line A – capacity 1.3m LPA per annum (3million 70cl bottles @40%)

Mashing

4 tonnes per mash in a semi-Lauter tun

Fermentation

60 hours in 8 stainless steel fermenters

Distillation

2 pairs of lamp-glass shaped stills: wash stills of 12,000ltrs (charged 11,000 ltrs); spirit stills of 7,000 ltrs (charged 6,000ltrs), all made by Forsyth of Rothes.

Shell and tube condensers with very cold after-coolers.

Maturation

35,000 casks in warehouse currently; plans to build more warehouses on site.

Mainly 1st fill US ex-Bourbon barrels, plus a small number of ex-sherry butts and hogs, and some ex-port barriques.

Line B – capacity 2.6m LPA per annum (6 million 70cl bottles @40%Vol)

Mashing

8 tonne full-Lauter tun

Fermentation

60 hours in 12 stainless steel washbacks, with double the capacity of line A

Distillation

4 pairs Hostein stills, 2 pairs with extra plates; all charged at 21,000 ltrs. By altering the numbers of plates, can make two distinct styles of spirit. Currently they are not doing this.

Bottlings

Line B began operating in August 2008; some was released as single malt (with a very light character) in August 2010.



Charles MacLean has spent circa three decades researching, writing and lecturing about Scotch whisky. He is the author of nine books on the subject, including the standard work on whisky brands, *Scotch Whisky*, and the authoritative *Malt Whisky*, both of which were short-listed for Glenfiddich Awards. His *Scotch Whisky: A Liquid History* won Wine & Spirits Book of the Year in the 2004 James Beard Awards, as well as Best Drink Book in the World at the Food Media Awards. More information: <http://www.whiskymax.co.uk>.

Charles is a consultant to the whisky industry, and to Bonhams International Auctioneers, and sits on the panel of the International Wine & Spirits Awards. Charles MacLean joined the Malt Maniacs in 2004.