

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-10 **By Nabil Mailloux**

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.



Whisky-Satori

The Diary of a MM Awards Shadow Judge

The Malt Maniac Awards samples. They mock me. They taunt me and they daunt me, all two hundred and ten of them. Are they old? Are they expensive? What score did my fellow maniacs give them? These are the questions that race through the mind of a MM juror in training.

I had just picked these samples up in what can only be described as a quasi-covert operation. A friend of mine in Ottawa met my contact at the Chapter's in Ottawa. "Look for a man wearing a bright red plaid flannel hat", I told him. The hand off was made, and I subsequently met my courier at a Tim Horton's in Smith's Falls three days later. There they stood, on my bar before me, awaiting my verdict. Me, an aspiring whisky judge.



Time to throw away your Whisky Bible. Forget about tasting notes on the label. Serge at Whiskyfun would be of no use to me this time. Davin and I agreed that I would only receive the identity of a sample after he received the blind score. I was on my own, for better or worse. It was time to leverage my accumulated knowledge of tasting.

I had the right glasses, sherry copita (and not tumblers like some hacks), and good quality spring water to open up the samples. I would make notes on colour (C), nose (N), palate (P), and finish (F). I also waited for the kids to be in bed, and for my wife to be occupied reading her favourite novel. Quiet is of prime importance, it is amazing how background noise can make it hard to focus your concentration on your olfactory sensors. A darkened room is also another way for me to concentrate on the nose rather than the eyes. When your brain is deprived of certain sensory inputs, it refocuses on the remaining senses.

This was REAL pressure, but then would the Malt Maniacs' Awards be as respected, if it weren't? Among the first samples to go through the organ grinder were some fairly pedestrian malts, though I did not know it at the time. I quite liked them, but was my scale going to match up? Should they match up?

Elements of Islay 'CI1' (62.9% Specialty Drinks Ltd. 50cl)

C : straw. **N** : Farmy, wet hay, grassy, waxy, complex, medicinal gaudages, faint peat, some sweetness, carbolic soap, mint. **P** : sweet, harsh front burn, lots of smoke, new bandages, minty, waxy. **F** : spicy, smoky, and medicinal.

My score = 90, MM avg = 84.

Glenlivet 15yo 'French Oak Reserve' (40%, OB, +/- 2009)

C: light amber **N:** sweet cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg?, leather candied nuts, linseed. **P:** sweet, oily, spicy, baked apples, toffee, coffee. **F:** long spicy, leather and nuts.
My score = 88, MM avg = 81

Ardbeg NAS 'Blasda' (40%, OB, +/- 2009)

C: white wine. **N:** medicinal, carbolic soap, peat, lemon, farmy compost, vanilla, bubblegum. **P:** dry, front attack, bandages, salty, peat, lemony, mint. **F:** not as long or intense as CI 1.
My score = 80, MM avg = 81

What a relief! I was not off my rocker and my palate was certainly up to the challenge. I had two main criterion for judging a score as a success: I) did my score fall within the range of maniacal scores? II) How close was my score to the maniacal average? And III) how did my taste notes line up between blind and eyes-wide-open samples? Have a look at my notes for Talisker for a comparison between blind and eyes-wide-open tastings:



Talisker 10yo (45.8%, OB,+/- 2009)Blind:

C: deep gold **N:** peat, mint, hint of sherry, apple juice, vanilla, iodine **P:** oily, sweet, peat, drying, spice mid to front palate, bacon, smoked apples. **F:** long, spicy, campfire ash, anise.
My score = 85 MM avg = 84

Same Talisker 10 (45%, OB 2008) - Eyes wide open (previous Epistle):

C: gold-amber hues **N:** sherry, nuts, smoke is subdued. Sweet smoked bacon. Saltiness or maritime air. Some mineral or chalkiness. **P:** Sweeter than usual. A sherried nuttiness. Peat smoke packs a bigger punch on the palate. Fades quickly and combines with the sweet notes and medicinal notes. VERY peppery as expected.
My score = 87

Later on, I actually got BBQed lemons on the Ardbeg...BLIND! Not bad if I do say so myself! The first two flights (out of a total of 32!) really served to build my self-confidence. Ultimately, I decided that I had to trust my gut feeling. What I found interesting was that it was hard to decide whether my nose or my palate would dominate the score. Generally, they followed lock in step but there was one where the nose really put me off.

Bowmore 11yo 1998/2009 (46%, Duncan Taylor NC2)

C: gold, peach tinge **N:** manure, engine oil, rotting melon, red wine gone off, chalky, mineral, gravel. With water intense sulfur, drain being unclogged with acid, rotten eggs. **P:** Thin, citrus, front attack acidic, intense grapefruit, some peat smoke. Not very balanced. **F:** peat, grapefruit.
My score = 68 MM avg = 81.

I suppose we have to just agree to disagree! But that wasn't the last one where my scores had become outliers. Look at what happened when I scored samples of old Mortlach and Rosebank. Now these weren't bad scores but I do remember the night I scored them, I said to myself "*I'm not entirely confident in these scores...*"

Mortlach 18yo 1990/2008 (46%, Hart Brothers Finest Collection, First Fill Sherry Butt)

C: amber. N: hint of sulfur, linseed, sherry, spicity, cloves, toffee, brown sugar, old polish, more sulfur and gravel with water. P: sweet, thin, drying, chalky, raisins, with water yields dried fruit, perfumed. F: medium on raisins and spice.

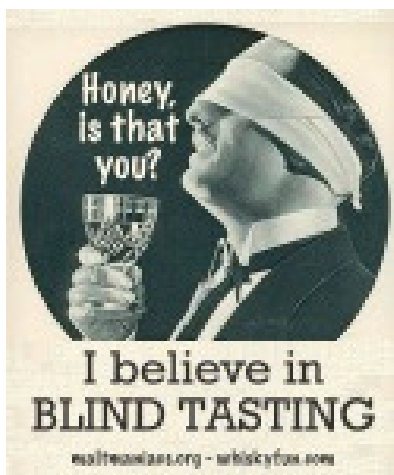
My score = 77 (82 when re-tasted) MM avg = 84

Rosebank 18yo 1990/2008 (46%, Chieftain's, Sherry Butt, cask#614, 312 Bts.)

C: full gold N: linseed, grassy, chalky, mineral, spicity, cough medicine, waxy, vanilla. P: vanilla, malt, anise, young?, lit matches with water. F: short on sweet sulfur.

My score = 75 (80 when re-tasted) MM avg = 84

A lesson in itself! Always go back and taste again the next day if you're not sure. You have to be confident in your judgments. Now, when I did return to taste them on a separate evening, the score did bump up into the bronze range. I still to this day stand firm on the Bowmore score...rotten, sulfury eggs on the nose.



The evenings were now flying by, with no more than 6 samples being scored in an evening. I decided to make up a spreadsheet and document my progress by calculating my blind score against the maniacal average. I also calculated a cumulative average deviation. For comparison's sake, I used Serge's scores as a benchmark (he's sampled over 5000 malts and our palates are quite similar, I find!). By the end of the exercise, my average deviation had converged to 3.14 just a little less than Serge's 3.29.

I also noticed how much more concise I had become in recording my taste notes. As Davin said: "*No literature, just taste descriptors!*" And he's right, there's no time for literature à la Whisky Magazine taste notes. Accordingly, with the volume of samples to go through, my notes had morphed into a kind of shorthand reserved for a family

doctors' prescriptions. On the other hand, I was sticking to the facts, the stream of consciousness coursing through my olfactory organs.

One of the best parts of judging these samples is that many of them are bottles that I will never get a chance to taste again on a teacher's salary. Here are a few "rare malts" that I'm happy to say I had the chance to say I tasted at least once:

Longmorn 30yo (43%, Gordon & MacPhail, +/- 2009)

C: light mahogany N: sharp, sherry, winey, leather, linseed, polish, cinnamon, brown sugar, oranges, cocoa, coffee P: sweet, drying later, good spice balance, black pepper, nutmeg, dried fruit, hint of peat F: long peppery.

My score = 87 MM avg = 88

Strathisla 1957/2007 (43%, Gordon & MacPhail)

C: dark amber N: Peppermint, vanilla, black pepper, coconut, candied cherry, charcoal, with water sherry, floral, toffee, crème brule P: sweet oily, loads of vanilla, coffee, good balance, oak spice, toasted coconut F: long on mint, vanilla, charcoal.

My score = 84 MM avg = 87

Macallan 1970/2009 (46%, G&M Speymalt for LMdW, First Fill sherry cask #8326)

C: dark amber N: olorosso, furniture polish, organics, linseed oil, coffee P: very dry, dried fruit, coffee, eucalyptus, nutmeg, spicy, balanced, no bitterness, cocoa, maple sugar, tobacco.
F: long, spicy, chocolate. My score = 86 MM avg = 90

Bowmore 36yo 1972/2008 (45.4%, SigV CS Collection, Sherry Butt #3890)

C: mahogany N: linseed, furniture polish, chocolate, oolong tea, sherry, dry olorosso, brown sugar, toffee, allspice, coffee grinds, sulfur?, faint peat. P: semi sweet, sherry, raisins, WOW PEAT!, cinnamon, black pepper, coffee, anise F: peat and nutmeg.
My score = 86 MM avg = 89

Obviously, these were the malts that were so old that they are out of the layperson's price range. For the most part, they were not 'better', but rather 'unique' or 'different'. This is probably the result of the prevailing production methods of the day (coal fired vs. gas fired stills) and the quality of the wood. What struck me the most was that I could actually pick up interesting notes like charcoal in the Strathisla 50yo. I suppose this came from all that time in the cask – the interior of which may be charred prior to filling.

Whereas an advanced connoisseur might get more out of a venerable and old whisky, the average consumer would probably be just as happy with a younger good quality malt. For example, below are a few more accessible malts which I scored almost as highly as the older ones, and provided me with a great deal of pleasure:

Adelphi's 12yo Laudale 'Batch #1' (46%, Adelphi)

C: Mahogany N: candied orange, old leather, furniture polish, olorosso sherry, coffee, mint, thyme, cocoa, toffee P: sweet, brown sugar, nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, spice tea, leather, candied pecan, orange-chocolate F: long, spicy, leather, cocoa.
My score = 87 MM avg = 87

Glendronach 15yo 'Revival' (46%, OB, Oloroso cask matured, +/- 2009)

C : Amber N : Wood, antique shop, oranges, coffee, linseed, dry olorosso sherry, cough medicine, cloves, perfumed, maple syrup P : viscous, mouth warming, nutmeg, powerful, spicy, balanced, dried fruit, lather, tobacco, cinnamon, malty, hint of smoke F : very long, tobacco, malt, raisins.
My score = 88 MM avg = 87

Tyrconnel 10yo Sherry Finish (46%, OB, +/- 2009)

C : amber-gold N : linseed, ginger, christmas spice, citrus, sherry, vanilla P : sweet, syrupy, spice mid-front, vanilla, sherry, cinnamon, nutmeg, prunes, coffee F : long, dried fruit, nutmeg.
My score = 85 MM avg = 84

Clynelish 12yo (46%, OB, +/- 2009)

C: gold N: thyme, overripe apples, old furniture, polish, ginger, sea salt, lit matches-sulfur, fish, maritime. P: good oak spice mid palate, gingery, peppery, vanilla, apple juice F: long, peppery, fading peat.
My score = 82 MM avg = 80

Ardbeg 10yo (46%, OB, +/- 2009)

C: pale gold-greenish tinge N: burnt grass, heather, new tires, minty, vanilla, carboloc soap, bread dough, yeast, big lemons, PEAT P: ash tray, thin, spice, vanilla, tar, peat, dough, yeast, anise, malty, lemony, BBQed lemons F: malty, medium long, mint, peat, and lemons.
My score = 85 MM avg = 83

As I continued to score, I experienced a kind of *whisky-satori*, as the Zen buddists would describe it, a moment of sudden enlightenment. I simply sat back one evening after scoring to contemplate the drams. It is one thing to accept the principle that expensive whisky is not necessarily better. However, it is quite another to live the experience, to feel that truth with every fiber of your olfactory senses. Whereas buddhists use meditation and intellectual riddles, I had come to my realization by tasting over 150 whiskies blind. And that is the key...breadth of experience.

Much of what we think we know about malt whisky has been taught to us by sophists - or marketers in layspeak. These are the folks who tell us what to expect from their product. However, what I discovered about quality and whisky, was achieved by hiding the identity of that which I wished to measure. Hiding the bells and whistles, the mythology, the brand. I can't help but be reminded of Obi-Wan Kenobi telling Luke to lower the blast shield and "*...let go your conscious self and act on instinct...Your eyes can deceive you...Don't trust them...Stretch out with your feelings.*"



There's a reason why scientists use "double-blind" methodology, they know that they can't even trust their own senses for fear of polluting the results with preconceived notions. Judging whisky is no different from any other scientific study, and I daresay, even more of a challenge because we have been "contaminated" by the marketing pollution inside of our heads.

The Malt Maniacs recognize this aspect of evaluation and are as rigorous as any scientist in carrying out their scoring. Our awards tastings are double blind because you have no idea what you're tasting; is it a grain whisky, a Taiwanese whisky, a blend, a blended malt, a single malt, cask strength or not? Whatever the sample might be, you need to score it fairly. We also didn't shell out the money for the bottles, and so we don't feel all that bad when the chips fall where they may.

I encourage all whisky enthusiasts to undertake blind tastings regularly. You learn a lot about what style of whisky you *really* like. You also learn a lot about how bias can creep into your judgments. The real irony is that in the face of the all the challenges in whisky scoring, it took a blind tasting to really open my eyes.

Now, I can't end this piece without expressing my profound thanks to Davin de Kergommeaux. Davin was, in truly maniacal fashion, generous enough to offer me his awards samples so that I might put my organ to the test. He agreed to meet a friend of mine at the local IKEA to make the drop. I want to also thank Edan Williams for meeting Davin on my behalf. Throughout the scoring process, working with Davin was akin to having your dad, your favourite teacher, and the soccer coach (whose players adore him) at your beckon and call. Davin, you are a true gentleman and a natural teacher. Thanks.



Nabil Mailloux hails from Kingston, Ontario, Canada, a town that likes to celebrate *almost* becoming our nation's capital. He is originally from southwestern Ontario, a town that is also known as South Detroit (Windsor), the automotive manufacturing capital of Canada. He holds a Master's degree in organic chemistry from Queen's University, Canada. While in the Quiet Pub at Queen's University, he was introduced to the world of single malt whisky by his good friend John Morgan. That very same Morgan also convinced him to buy a hogshead of whisky with him, thus forever changing his life. As a result, he has become obsessed with nosing, tasting and evaluating whisky. He eagerly awaits 2014, the bottling date for his cask. He also wonders what he's going to do with his share of the whisky...