

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2011-02 ***By Davin de Kergommeaux, Canada***

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THE TROUBLE WITH TRADITION

The trouble with tradition is knowing where to start. At one time, tradition meant that Scotch malt whisky was diluted to 37% abv, bottled, and sent out into the marketplace. A few of these old 37% bottles still surface, but most of the current whisky crowd is quite unaware that these were once common.

Historians tell us that at one time whisky was consumed shortly after it was distilled, sometimes before it had even had a chance to cool to room temperature. It was probably pretty awful stuff to drink, but adding flavourings and colour made it more palatable. In fact, depending on what had been added it could be sold as brandy, cognac, gin, or yes, even whisky.



It wasn't long, though, before someone noticed that when they transported their whisky in wooden casks it arrived at its destination discoloured by the wood. Moreover, it picked up new flavours from the wood that disguised the most brutal ones that more traditionally had been covered up by adding herbs, spices, molasses, berries, burnt sugar

and the like, a practice called compounding. Soon a new dishonest practice sprang up and it involved wood.

Distillers, sneaky folk that they are, began deliberately to store their whisky in wooden casks, specifically to hide the harshness of the newly made whisky which had been distilled from God knows what grain they might have had at hand. There was no Internet then, no bloggers to police the whisky makers, so no movement sprang up for honest whisky. But had there been, it most certainly would have demanded an end to the *trompe-d'oeil* created by barrel ageing, and a return to more authentic means of adding colour (and flavour), usually in the form of caramel and burnt grain. "Honest whisky" they might have opined somewhat stridently, "means following traditional practices, so please, no adulteration with oak."

There has long been an air of deception around the art of creating whisky. Some might suggest this dates back to 1643 or 1644 when first the British and then the Scottish parliaments imposed excise duties on whisky. Perhaps it was this legislation that catalysed the adoption of secret stills and, with the need to sell the illicit whisky quickly, led to the practice of compounding. But most contend that the addition of colouring and flavouring long preceded the introduction of covert stills. And this new-fangled business of using barrels and ageing in order to infuse the whisky with colour and flavour could be explained as a trick intended to "fool" the buyer. These historic questions, and many others, need answering before anyone suggests that modern distillers should abandon the judicious use of E-150 spirit caramel on the basis that it deceives the buyer's eye, or that it somehow besmirches flavour or flouts tradition. Those who don't know history are damned to repeat it.

We know that overwhelmingly, the core customers for official bottlings of malt whisky value colour consistency. Certainly some smaller distillers and independents can afford to pander to a vocal segment of the blogosphere that demands an end to colouring. In doing so these distillers reap the rewards of glowing word-of-mouth. But for the most part, whisky's most reliable customers may never visit a whisky blog in their lives. So those who make their living selling whisky might want to know if those who protest so vociferously are likely, in their whole lives, to purchase more than a couple of bottles of standard OB whisky. Or, are they more likely to drink independent bottlings (the more obscure the better) and samples picked up at whisky fairs, clubs, and exchanges, along with their aggressively sought-after review samples.

A case in point is the recently released Fettercairn 40 year old (which I have not knowingly tasted - no hint intended). It seems to me the producer is stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to adding E-150 to this old-timer. They can satisfy the

overwhelming majority of their customers – those who actually buy their whisky by the bottle – by adding a few drops of caramel for consistency. Or they can bottle it as it comes from the cask, not only risking loss of sales to core customers due to inconsistent colour among batches, but in all likelihood initiating a campaign in the blogosphere to the effect that the casks must have been knackered to have imparted so little colour to the whisky in 40 years. In either case, Fettercairn loses.

In truth though, it seems somewhat moot to be discussing colouring (and many other long-established practices for that matter) at this point in the history of whisky. For never has there been such enthusiasm, particularly for single malts. With such gigantic new markets opening up, many distilleries simply can't keep up with demand. This creates an entirely new playing field. Producers need to cater to the average buyer, those consumers who are their core customers, as well as to newcomers. In the face of rapidly increasing sales to others, they certainly don't want to disaffect their long-standing cash-in-hand customers. Thus, they are faced with several options.

One choice is to change nothing, maintain the *status quo*, and let the market sort out this burgeoning demand. Thus, as supplies dwindle relative to that demand, despite daily production at the distillery, their whisky will become available only sporadically in some key markets. Sometimes this will be at the whim of distributors. Other times it will be driven by major wholesalers intent on buying up complete lines of product. Retail customers will become grumpy, while continuing to demand their no-longer-available favourite malts. Retailers, in response, will raise their prices, tempering demand somewhat until it matches the available supply. Caught somewhere in the middle, distributors will respond similarly by raising prices and adjusting delivery schedules accordingly. Soon, the distillery will have little influence over what their most loyal customers must pay.

Would it be preferable, producers might ask, to raise the price at the distillery and, perhaps, to soften the blow by sprucing up the packaging to give the whisky a "new and improved" look? Ultimately the market sets the price anyway. With undersupply it is only a matter of whether producers push or customers pull it up. Either way, some retail customers will complain, others will go begging, yet distillers will still sell every drop they can produce. And no matter what the producers do, those who seem to view every move the distillers make with skepticism, if not disdain, will curse and swear and find examples to prove that once again the distillers are out to screw their customers.

A preferred option is to increase the supply. Even though it takes eight, ten, twelve years or longer for new make to reach bottling age, this sounds easy enough. Just install new stills and run them 24/7. In the interim, release some younger malts, perhaps matured in smaller casks, to take the pressure off the old faithfuls, and problem solved. In recent

months though, it has become clear that there is not an unlimited supply of that most basic of all whisky ingredients: water. Yes. Water! William Grant and Sons, for example, have reached capacity and are not sure that their water source will provide enough of its particular kind of water to open Kininvie this year. What water they can get is more urgently needed for their hugely popular Glenfiddich and Balvenie brands.



Another alternative is to stretch supplies by bottling the whisky at the minimum abv allowed. That's not 37%, as it was once, but now 40%. The supply of a malt whisky that was formerly bottled at 43% increases by several percentage points if the abv is reduced to 40. That's a lot of whisky when you're selling hundreds of thousands of cases and can't keep up with demand. To a drinker who otherwise might no longer be able to buy a favourite malt this might seem a pretty small compromise. While malt fans in some markets complain that Laphroaig has dropped the abv of their ten year old from 43% to 40, for example, here in Ontario, Canada, there are those who would rather buy Laphroaig 10 year old at 40% (where it always was in this market) than not have it at all. But they have been cut off. Even at 40% there is no longer enough Laphroaig 10 year old available to serve all markets. Its absence from liquor store shelves in Ontario is the result of increased demand elsewhere. It burns their socks to know that in some Asian markets Laphroaig 10 is freely available to be mixed 50:50 with soda to create a popular refreshment while hard-core Ontario Friends of Laphroaig can't get any at all.

Of course some see the idea of reducing the abv from 43 (or worse 46)% to 40% as an unconscionable dumbing down of the whisky. And they want distillers to take their cries seriously despite the fact that those complaining most loudly may be spending more time complaining about a particular whisky than money buying it. They'll sample it once then move on to something else. Or does this mean they have to taste those everyday malts once again (drat!) – with predictable results.

Finally, distillers can increase supply by selling as single malts, whiskies they had originally matured to become components of blends. Suddenly new markets can be served

and supply can begin to keep pace with demand. Of course, some people will disapprove. "If these were not good enough for malt drinkers in the past, what makes them good enough for us now?" they might demand. But as increased volumes of whisky sell, more people than ever are enjoying the brand and, not surprisingly, coming back for more.

When Macallan released its Fine Oak range, for example, the whisky web (*mea culpa*, including my own comments) was aghast. We had already noted a decline in the quality of their 18 year old, the result of prime casks being shared among more bottles. But Macallan matured in bourbon casks? We had no idea it even existed and felt somehow betrayed when it first appeared. But there they were: Macallans as old as 30 years matured in bourbon barrels, and suddenly all those people who had bragged that they could taste Macallan in Famous Grouse realized how foolish they looked. No wonder they were mad. Thank goodness some respected palates tasted the Fine Oak range blind (and were suitably unimpressed). Thank heavens the distillery listened and adjusted the vattings in subsequent bottlings to improve the quality of the whisky. It's still not the old Macallan of course, it's not even close, but more people than ever before are grateful to be able to buy it.

Other distillers have turned "blending-whisky" into single malts by reverting to the ancient tradition of adding flavouring to less palatable whisky. Do they add honey, spices, herbs, molasses or burnt sugar, as tradition would support? Of course not, this tradition has been forgotten. Instead, they add wine, and lots of it. It has been estimated that a fresh empty wine barrel may contain up to 7 litres of wine in its staves. Whisky that really wasn't fit to drink can be spiced up quickly, rendered palatable and richly coloured, by short periods of "finishing" in these wine casks. Do we hear a backlash against wine flavouring? Other than little murmurs, not really. Does the Scotch Whisky Association remind distillers that there are supposed to be only 3 ingredients in whisky? Well, no. It's selling like crazy to legions of buyers, and besides, maturing in wine casks though it changes the colour and disguises many faults, is not a deceptive practice. It is, in fact, a traditional one. Or is it?

The campaign, if it can be called such, for "real whisky," "honest whisky," or "traditional whisky" is based on two hoary old assertions: 1) Whisky was better in the old days, and 2) Distillers deliberately deceive their customers in order to squeeze every last dollar out of them.

Sure, from time to time we hear of marvelous old bottlings of 8-year-old whisky from the 1980s or beyond, but isn't this natural? Besides the possibility that a huge glut of ageing whisky in the 1980s led some bottlers to dispose of much older stock in their 8-year-old bottlings, don't we hear more about good bottlings than bad ones anyway? When they find a good one, whisky enthusiasts want to let the world know. But they generally don't

seek out and write about those bottlings they know will surely disappoint. Allt a' Bhaine anyone? I didn't think so.

Many people decry "spiraling" prices and perceived loss of value. But before we start pointing fingers at distillers should we ask ourselves, if we were selling our home – our largest asset – in a sellers market, would we charge market price, or would we hold firm at last year's prices just to be nice to someone we have never met? If we were investing money, as distillery owners do each time they make another batch, would we invest it in the highest performing stocks we could find, or would we invest in lesser performers in the interest of democratic access to investment dollars? But more than that, if it's reaction to rising prices that fosters this dissatisfaction, might it not be better to look at the largest contributor to the price of a bottle of whisky – taxes – and how these constantly rise and how wildly they vary among jurisdictions?

Since the first dram was distilled, whisky has constantly been changing, some would say evolving, in response to changes in regulations, taxes, supplies, production methods, markets, tastes, fashion, war and so on. And the fact is, consumer demand is now at unprecedented levels. If whisky is to revert to its roots, in a quest for a real or an honest product, one that deceives no one, someone is going to have to decide what "traditional" really is, and then explain when and how it was that tradition was abandoned. And they will also have to give some sense of what remaining traditions we can still abandon and what old ones we can now bring back without making it – not-whisky. Oh boy, and then will the fighting begin!



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