

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-05 ***By Benjamin Chen***

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 in Singapore

Drams in The Lion City

Introduction

Located at the southern tip of the Southeast Asian Peninsula, Singapore is a vibrant and cosmopolitan metropolis that has prided itself on being modern, affluent and efficient young city state. It has a growing number of foreigners residing here (25% of its 4.5million people in 2009)¹, and a significant number of these foreigners are expatriates from the USA, UK, Australia and France. This growing number of expatriates and affluence amongst locals has started a trend towards appreciation of the finer things in life, and whisky has slowly risen to prominence as the new beverage of choice amongst the increasingly educated public.

Amongst a local clientele, whisky is starting to gain a foothold as well. As early as 2007, La Maison Du Whisky had already reported that locals and Asians comprised 70% of their clientele in Singapore. The Auld Alliance, a new bar in Singapore, places its estimate at a 60% local client base.

This by no means assumes that whisky has earned its good name overnight here in Singapore. The increasing awareness and appreciation of whisky here is the result of the untiring efforts of several far-sighted individuals who have committed the best years of their lives spreading the good word of whisky in Singapore. This E-pistle hence seeks to focus on the growing whisky world in Singapore, and also highlight the individuals who have made this possible.

The Hard Facts

Before delving into the finer details of whisky in Singapore, it would be good to have a quick look at the 'Hard Facts' regarding the growth of whisky in Singapore. In a recent news report that focused on Whisky Investment in Singapore, it was reported that Singapore is the **4th largest** importer of whisky by volume in the world by the Scotch Whisky Association. Giants Diageo reported a net value of \$17billion worth of whisky imports in 2007, compared to \$110million in 2001. These figures, however, are misleading as they do not indicate how much those residing in Singapore actually consume or purchase, as Singapore is a distribution hub for the region.

A more telling statistic is that Whisky is now the **third most purchased liquor in Singapore** now, with 1.109 million litres in Duty-Paid releases recorded for the year 2010. This puts it ahead of all other spirits, and behind only Wines and Beer/Stout, which occupy a much larger market share in Singapore. It is also important to note that whisky sales are rising, with a 9.45% increase recorded from 2009 to 2010.ⁱⁱ

These statistics are also backed up by the slowly growing number of specialist whisky bars that have started to open in Singapore. The first specialist whisky bar, The Whisky Store (since renamed Quaich Bar), was opened in 2006, and within 5 years the number has steadily risen to around 15 bars which count themselves as bars or retailers with a strong whisky focus. La Maison Du Whisky, the famous French whisky retailer, has also chosen to situate its only foreign outlet here in Singapore. Its Singapore outlet has been in operation since 2006, and was revamped in 2011 to include a bar as well.

Conversations with industry leaders during major events like Whisky Live Singapore and during official tastings have also shown clear recognition from the distilleries themselves that Singapore is a new market that has immense potential. The most common observations that these leaders have are that the consumers in Singapore are slowly shifting towards **single malts** as their preferred choice, as well as a movement away from **brand loyalty**, translating to an openness to try new brands.ⁱⁱⁱ

All these facts and figures do point to one promising outcome, that Singapore's whisky scene is slowly but surely coming to prominence, and that there is immense room for growth.

Nature of Whisky Consumption: The Main Trends

Single Malt Whisky

It may be a cliché by now but it is true that the Singapore market can be seen as a microcosm of the world market when it comes to consumption habits of whisky. Whilst the major blends like Johnnie Walker and Chivas Regal still dominate the market in Singapore amongst the casual and social drinkers, single malts are starting to make their presence felt. In many ways, Macallan takes much credit for this, as they pioneered the push for single malt whiskies in Singapore at the turn of the 3rd millennium. Today, flagship single malts from the larger brands names like the Glenfiddich 12YO and The Glenlivet 12 have started to gain a foothold in the whisky market. Local distributors Planet Spirits, which was set up in 2006 – and are agents for Bowmore, Auchentoshan, Glen Garioch, Deanston and Tobermory – place their annual growth in sales of single malts at 20-30%, with larger growth expected this year.

The Peat-Sherry Domination

Within the growing clientele that are more attracted to single malt whiskies, two styles of single malt whisky have seen strong growth: the peated single malts and the sweet-sherried style malts.

For peated whisky, a local distributor in Singapore recorded a 100% increase in sales in 2009-2010 for peated single malt whiskies, and it is no surprise that the names synonymous with this growth are giants Diageo with Lagavulin and Morrison-Bowmore's Bowmore. On the other end of the spectrum, there seems to be a growing appreciation for sherried whiskies, with the common explanation for this being the fact that the flavour profile of such whiskies are more suited to the palates of Asian consumers.

The Japanese Growth

Another clear trend that has been noted in the past few years in Singapore is the rise to prominence of Japanese whisky. As recently as 5 years ago, there were no local distributors or importers of Japanese whisky. Today, big brand names like Beam Global and La Maison Du Whisky are bringing in significant quantities of Japanese whisky into the Singapore market. Leading the charge, of course, are the two giants Nikka and Suntory, and now an increasing number of bars in Singapore carry standard expressions of Yamazaki and Yoichi as part of their whisky range. Specialist whisky bars are also starting to carry a larger array of Japanese whiskies, and there is even one specialist Japanese whisky bar, Coffee Bar K, in Singapore.

Single Cask

The rapid growth of the whisky scene in Singapore, though, has led to an almost 'fast-tracking' of whisky interests amongst whisky enthusiasts in Singapore. This has led to an interesting shift amongst a small group of whisky enthusiasts towards single cask whiskies. In 2009, The Malt Vault, a specialist whisky bar in Singapore, opened its doors with a concept of selling only single cask, non-chill filtered and non-coloured whiskies. It has since been renamed B28, but its focal point is still unchanged, with single cask whiskies from bottlers like Duncan Taylor and Cadenheads.

Another prime example of this shift would be the opening of The Connoisseur Emporium in 2011, a retail outlet that focuses largely on single cask expressions from various independent bottlers, as well as the expressions from Glenfarclas distillery. Its focus on single cask expressions (the Glenfarclas Family Casks can arguably be seen as single cask expressions as well) reflects a shifting focus within a segment of the whisky circle towards single cask whiskies.



The People: The Pulse behind the Growth

These trends are all promising in their own right, but one can argue the success of the local scene is also due to the people who have dedicated their lives to promoting the name of whisky in Singapore. Some of them can be termed 'pioneers', some of them modern trailblazers, but all of them have contributed, and continue to contribute in a large way to making Singapore a 'Dramming' good place! This segment focuses on five such individuals, though there are many more who have also done their part.

Emmanuel Dron

Frenchman Emmanuel Dron is one of the biggest names in the Singapore whisky scene. His relationship with Singapore started when he was appointed as the manager of the local outlet of La Maison Du Whisky in 2008, and he has never looked back since. In 2011, Emmanuel fulfilled his lifelong dream when he opened his own bar, 'The Auld Alliance' in CHIJMES, a historical landmark in the heart of Singapore's shopping and historical belt. The Auld Alliance boasts an incredible 1000+ whiskies, and it has well and truly put whisky on the map, with leading lifestyle magazines and websites showering praise on the bar's extensive collection of whiskies.



To further champion the appreciation of good whisky, Emmanuel has also started 'The Singapore Whisky Club', which is an exclusive club dedicated to the appreciation of classic and old whiskies. The club meets once a month, where it tastes some of the best whiskies ever bottled. During the inaugural meeting in June 2011, the club tried 4 Laphroaigs, including a 1908 Berry Brother's and Rudd expression and the Laphroaig 10YO Bonfanti Milano (circa 1978), which is still Serge Valentin's favourite Laphroaig expression.

To illustrate the point of the growth of Japanese whisky, The Auld Alliance has a selection of over 130 Japanese whiskies, and one of their most popular expressions is the Yamazaki 18, which is also, interestingly enough, a sweet and sherried whisky!

Emmanuel's efforts to promote whisky in Singapore have led him to be dubbed the 'Malt Guru' by local Food and Beverage magazine, Epicure.

Khoon Hui and Joyce

Local couple Khoon and Joyce are the representatives of the 'Locals' in the Singapore whisky scene, and are credited with being the people who set up the first ever specialist whisky bar in Singapore. Exposed to the joys of single malt whisky in 2004, the pair eventually set up 'The Whisky Store' in 2006. It has since been renamed 'Quaich Bar' and is still popular with the local clientele. On top of being bar owners, Khoon and Joyce are also distributors for numerous whiskies in Singapore, from bigger names like Bowmore and Auchentoshan to the smaller names like Deanston and Tobermory. Whisky appreciation does not stop at just sales for them though. They organize annual trips up to the distilleries for interested customers, and in 2010 they sent their staff up as well, as they believed it was necessary for them to have a more intimate understanding of whisky.

Jack Ong

If one calls Emmanuel, Khoon and Joyce 'pioneers' in the Singapore whisky scene, Jack Ong can be considered more of a trailblazer. He set up a liquor distribution business in 2004, and it has developed a focus on whisky. Today Jack's company, Drinks Fellas, is the distributor for BenRiach, Tullibardine, Diageo's Classic Malts and Beam Global's whiskies in Singapore. What makes him a real 'trailblazer' though is his procuring of exclusive single cask releases for Singapore's market. His efforts have culminated in 3 exclusive releases, 2 from BenRiach and 1 from Tullibardine. The Tullibardine expression in particular, is a 45YO expression, and was distilled in 1965, the year Singapore gained its independence. For a budding whisky loving country like this, such expressions bring a personal slant to whisky that generates immense interest in the local community.

Matthew Fergusson-Stewart

Another newcomer to the Singapore whisky scene who has shown himself to be a trailblazer is Matthew Fergusson-Stewart. An Australian with Scottish ancestry, Matthew settled in Singapore in 2009 and has dedicated his efforts towards putting whisky on the Singapore map ever since. He started Singapore's first ever Whisky Consultancy in 2010, which focuses on whisky appreciation and education. He also helps bars in Singapore build their collections of whiskies so that good quality whiskies make their way into the mainstream bars in the country. Matthew's crowning achievement though would be the 'Whisky Recommender' (www.whiskyrecommender.com), a web-based application he created which recommends whiskies based on individual flavour preferences. Though still in its infancy, the Whisky Recommender has shown much promise, and plans are being made to make it a mobile app that can be used by all around the world.

Collaboration: The Stuff of Growth

Whilst these individuals have certainly contributed individually to the success of Singapore's whisky market, the tag line for Singapore's whisky industry is most certainly collaboration. The extremely small market and limited amount of distributors and agents for whisky brands mean that companies form a symbiotic relationship with other. They largely help each other by helping push brands that fellow companies are distributors for and usually aid other agents with additional stock should they suffer from diminishing stock.

In essence, hence, the growing success of Singapore's whisky scene is due in a big way to people power, not just individually, but collectively as well. Their ability to harness the growing affluence and interest in whisky of an increasingly aware populous has been invaluable, and their willingness to work together rather than engage in outright ruthless competition has ensured a stable platform for this growing industry.

Conclusion: Challenges and Looking Ahead

Looking forward then for a growing industry like whisky in Singapore, the stars are indeed aligned for continued growth. Nevertheless, challenges loom over the horizon. To end this e-pistle, it would be prudent to have a quick look at these challenges.

Giants and Their Focal Points

One major challenge that faces the whisky industry is the focal point of the giants that have the predominant market share of the industry such as Diageo and Pernod Ricard. In the current market blends still dominate, but the more pressing concern is the neglect of certain single malts in favour of others. A prime example would be Ardbeg here in Singapore. Diageo has chosen to focus on Glenmorangie (possibly due to the slightly lighter style), with the 10YO, Lasanta, Quinta Ruban, 18YO, 25YO and Signet all officially available in

Singapore. Ardbeg on the other hand is grossly neglected, with only the 10YO being imported in by Diageo. This may be just one example, but it reflects how growth and appreciation of specific single malt brands can be stunted by marketing focal points.

Overheating

Another potential problem looming over the horizon is the danger of overheating what is still inherently a very small local market. The recent boom of single malts in Singapore may be encouraging, but too many specialist whisky bars and retailers can lead to overheating and saturation within the market itself. This is all the more important for Singapore as its consumers are very dynamic. If whisky does not gain a proper foothold and whisky outlets just keep appearing uncontrollably, it may just become a fad that will eventually wear off, to the detriment of the entire industry.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the signs today are hugely promising. Favourable factors like a rapidly growing industry, passionate individuals, increasingly educated clientele and increased affluence have created an environment that is highly conducive for growth. The future is bright here in Singapore, and with any luck, it could be the next big place for whisky to grow and become the drink of choice.

Slainte!

Benjamin Chen, Singapore, 2011

ⁱ Figures from Singapore Board of Statistics

ⁱⁱ Figures as of 2011, obtained from Singapore Board of Statistics

ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals interviewed include: James Cowan (Regional Brand Manager BenRiach/Glendronach), Thierry Benitah (CEO LA Maison Du Whisky), Ian MacWilliam (Marketing Manager Glenfarclas distillery)