

Malt Maniacs E-pistle ***By Paul_Dejong.***

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.



The Cleaning of the Augian Stables

Or, How to tackle an Herculean Task.

I have just finished my Maniacal "end of the year" task, and I'm looking at 171 samples of freshly rated and classified whisky.

Looking at all those sample bottles makes me realize something. Participating, as a judge, at the Malt Maniacs Awards is really not unlike a Herculean task. But a nice one!

Every year, when the Awards have been published, they provoke a lot of controversy. And rightly so!

After all, everybody is entitled to their own opinion, and the Awards is only ours.

However, I noticed that part of the controversy around the Awards is based on unfamiliarity with our "procedure".

So, the "procedure" shall be the scope of this E-pistle!

Keith -who organized the practical, logistical side of this world wide, totally independent, totally blind tasting- already gave insight into his own Herculean task in another E-pistle (a heartily recommended read!!!)...

His task, persuading the whisky makers to part with their best efforts and then distributing them to the judges, could be (maybe with a bit of imagination) likened to the Stealing of the apples of the Hesperides...

The end of summer nears...

And the Malt Maniacs Collective is humming with anticipation... The first messages about the Awards are dropped in my Mailbox. Awards-time is near, and the first remarks, questions etc. are aired:

How many samples are we aiming for?

Who will send in samples?

Are we going to limit the number of samples per participant?

Who will take care of logistics? (Olivier, who normally is our "postmaster" was 'indisposed' due to the unforeseen actions of some deviant weather-Gods)

Who is going to volunteer to be on the judges-panel this year????

Last year was a bit of an exceptional year. Around 260 samples had to be tasted, and no matter how maniacal we are, that stretched our collective livers to the point of bursting!



Blends I made from the leftovers (!) of MMA 2010
...the jar in the middle is 3 liters!

So, action was taken, and this year, a more manageable figure was to ensue.

Keith, our current postmaster, kept us in the loop about the progress, and the weekend of 8 and 9 October was picked to do all the filling... so we all could set our whisky clock !

The samples were due around October 16!

So, I was eagerly awaiting my package, which duly arrived on October 17th.

One day after that, my "sample sheet" arrived.

171 samples... even that is a lot! This "work" has to be done methodically!

First, the rule book.

- Before the arrival of the sample bottles, no information whatsoever is shared on what bottles arrived at the postmasters office. We don't even know which distillers, independent bottlers, etc. are participating! So we have no idea what is going to arrive at our desk. Every distiller is free to send in whatever bottling he deems most appropriate.

- Samples are all in uniform sample bottles (in my case, 3cl) sealed with a "safety" cap, so that we can make sure no sample was tampered with during transport from the postmaster to the individual judges! (a bit anal, I know...but hey, we aren't Maniacs for nothing!)

- They are numbered from 1 to 172 (55 went missing...read Keiths article to find out why)

- Every judge gets a sample sheet. This is a 'simple' excel-file with all the samples organized into flights of 6 (deemed to be the 'ideal' number for a tasting-session)

- Judges are to taste their samples according to the flights they were assigned.

- 2 groups of judges are allotted different sample sheets...meaning, the order of the samples in the flights is different. You have access to

your own sample sheet.

- Absolute radio silence! No judge is allowed to discuss samples...only some mild bragging like 'I've just finished flight 15...' is allowed. Nothing is to be ventilated on the net.
- All judges are to send in their results, at the latest, on November 27th at 23.59h!
- Judges only know the results, and how they compare to the other judges, after all the Math and statistics are done... just like the rest of the world!
- And one last rule: Jurors or Judges are basically not allowed to share samples with other people who are not a Malt Maniac. This may sound a bit antisocial, but the bottles that are send in for the awards, are free of charge for the Maniacs (our gratitude to the industry for such a benevolent gesture is boundless!!!), it would not do them justice if the remainder of the samples would be distributed outside the Maniacs "Hive". Furthermore, there are a number of maniacs who do not (for various reasons) participate in the Awards, but who might be very grateful if they would get the opportunity to give it a go, after the awards are handed out. So it is preferred by the group to distribute leftover samples to another Maniac.

** If people are really curious: No, the Maniacs Collective do not pay for the bottles that participate in the event, however, the jurors do have to pay (this almost goes without saying!!) for the samples they get. The costs for sending the samples, the packaging etc. are payed out of pocket by the jurors! (order of magnitude around 1 to 1,5 € per sample, depending on various things)*

All of the above is done to ensure

- Absolute sample anonymity. None of the judges knows anything about the samples he's tasting. Comparing with other judges is not allowed, and would be very difficult because of the different sample sheets.
- Absolute individuality. Judges are not allowed to discuss their findings, it's every judge to his own!
- Randomization and organization is such that the scores can be compared, and the laws of statistics apply to the final result!

Although "scores" are per definition a personal interpretation of a personal impression of a highly subjective nature, the above "modus operandum" is in fact a very good (if not the only) way to have some sort of objectivity.

Now, to the task itself...

The analogy to the cleaning of the Augean Stables is, like most analogies, far from perfect...but tasting these samples, in order to find the best, is indeed some sort of cleaning, separating the ones you like from the ones you do not, so it'll do.

Believe it or not, we try to do our job responsibly!
The industry mostly values our efforts, and we value their cooperation...and are grateful for it!
The Malt Maniac friends also value our efforts, and our enemies are probably looking to find a kink in our armor...
Therefore we try to do the best job we can! To much is at stake!

The newbies were asking advice on how to tackle the job, and I tried to pay attention... since I'm a relative newbie myself!

Sound advice is always given, such as:

"Indeed, My advice would be: take as much advantage of a good nose day if you can. Especially on weekends with little social engagements, you could work through 4 or 5 flights (even without too much spitting... ;-)" (Johannes)

or

"never waste a "good nose day". :)" (Rich)

or

"Something to share: even during the award tasting, I didn't stop tasting or dramming other whisky , it is a way to "against" blind tasting to "re-build" confidence that I may score too high or too low."
(Ho-Cheng)

or

“And also being quite honest, for the first round I tend to spit out all the samples, for the second round, I tend to drink some of the good ones. Tasting should be fun.” (Ho-Cheng)

Armed with such wisdom I felt up for it!

As soon as the samples arrived on my desk, and as soon as i had received my sample sheet, I started to `organize`...

I ended up with a number of flights, 29 in total, 27 with 6 samples in them, one flight of 4, and one of 5 samples, and very curious as to how the selection would turn out.

The flights are ready for round 1



I was curious in two ways.

Curious about the selection the industry had sent us...

and also curious about the choice the `logistics-team` made in allocating the samples into flights.

Those questions would be answered over the course of the coming weeks.

After having told my wife she should find herself a temporary replacement husband...

(if you really need to ask... first: all free time goes into tasting...so leftover time to

spend with her is minimal, and second: after tasting several flights of whisky's, alcohol levels in my system tend to be such that other marital tasks are reduced to a minimum also...just kidding!)

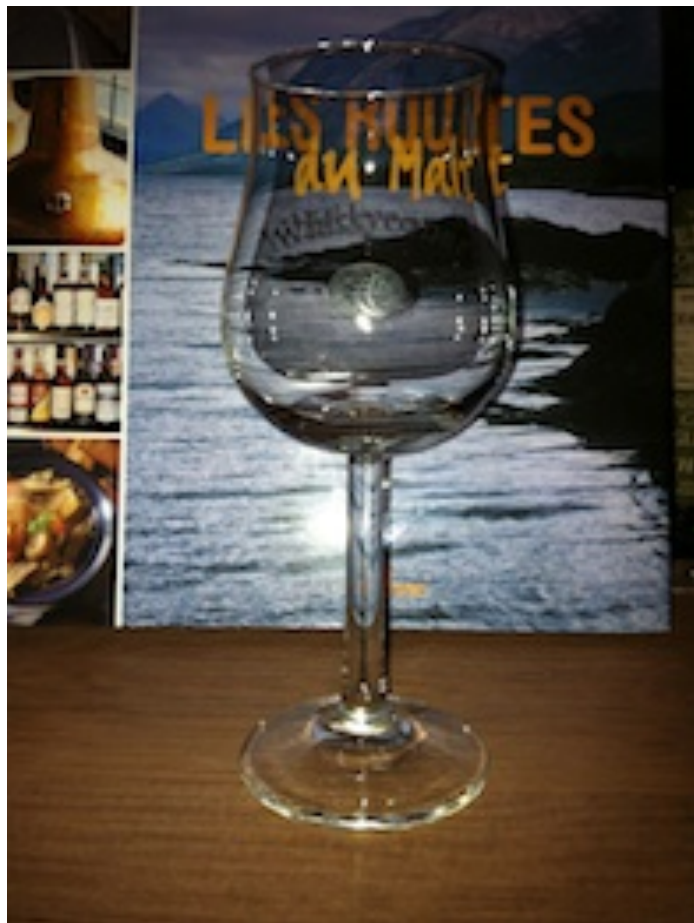
... every free and available moment is then dedicated to tasting!

For me personally, the time to do this tough task in is further reduced by ...my job.

I'm a physician, and have promised myself long ago that I would not drink any alcohol, during times I could be called upon by a patient. (average working day is from 8am till 8pm....If I'm lucky.)

Luckily, in my neighborhood, we have a system where a Doctor who is not 'on call' can rely on his colleagues to fill in... I have not been on call very often the last month, so once the day was finished, I could dedicate myself to tasting without feeling guilty.

Whiskycorner-glas



The job: progress report.

Round One.

I tried to taste at least one flight a day, and if time and senses allowed, even two...on weekdays. On weekend-days I tried to do at least 3 or 4 flights a day.

I pour about 1 CL of a sample into a clean "whisky-corner" glass (the type of glass that I always use, look above.) and then put the sample next to the glass so no mistakes are made in the set-up.

So I end up with six pairs.

Six glasses with the accompanying samples.

Then I nose each glass twice...writing down first impressions.

Did I mention we are encouraged to take tasting notes, as well?

Those first impressions let me separate the ones that I like and the ones that I like less.

It also gives me an impression of the type of whisky in the glass.

I write that down with each sample as well.

That way I can 'divide' the samples in some categories.

The categories that I use are these:

Peaty,
Sherried,
Fruity,
Mineral,
Grain,
Other.

These categories are of importance later on, because they are what I use to compare whiskies a second time...

(The second time I make my own flights, comparing just similar whiskies, only peaty whisky, or only sherry whisky, etc...)

But back to the first tasting-round. After initial nosing I start tasting. I always have a few familiar bottles at hand to compare if I'm not sure about myself. When tasting, I write down some more notes on taste, and try to formulate an opinion. If I think a whisky is not giving away all its secrets, I will add some water, and taste again.... Thus I come to a final impression, and only then do I give a score. After giving the scores for that particular flight, I additionally highlight the samples that I like very much

The above is what I do for all the flights.



My setup: spittoon on the left, waterglas to the right, whisky in between.

Round Two.

Once I've finished all the 29 flights, I re-arrange the samples according to my own categories...all the peaty samples from low to high numbers, then the sherried ones, etc...

Then I start the second round.

The rationale behind arranging and tasting my own categories is that in my opinion, a whisky is greatly influenced by the place it has in a flight. A sherried whisky can give the impression to be very dry or even bitter, when tasted after a very fruity and sweet one, or a very fruity whisky may be drowned by the previous sample if that was a peaty whisky.

Therefore I rearrange the samples and compare likes for likes.

This, I feel, gives me a better idea of how whiskies of similar styles compare to each other.

It also makes it a bit easier to detect subtler differences and it helps me to fine tune the scores.

The second round also provides me with a second set of scores...which are very, very important!

I can now compare the scores from the first round with the scores for the second round and see how much difference I get from whiskies in a different "environment"!

How much do the scores differ?

Keep in mind that i do not check my first scores while i am doing the second round...

Years of tasting whisky, and the resulting mild case of Korsakov prevents me from remembering my scores from the first round, so no influence from that. ;-)

Round Three.

For those whiskies where I get a difference of more then 4 points, I do a third round, where I retest and compare my notes, and try to understand why this difference came to be, and what my final score will be.

So all whiskies and all samples get nosed and tasted in two rounds, with different "opponents", and some whiskies will get the nosing and tasting treatment a third time if I'm confused about my results....or, I have to admit, if I find a whisky particularly good!!! ;-)

Didn't Ho-Cheng give the advice: Tasting must be fun!?

All those rounds provide me with a score that i feel confident with.
Or at least confident enough to share with others!

The sample sheet is then completed with the scores, and for a number of whiskies i try to formulate a remark that pinpoints what i feel about that whisky.

Once that final piece of work is done, i sent my completed sample sheet back to Johannes for some statistics wizardry, that will hopefully distil into a great Awards page!

I started tasting on October 19th.

The first round was finished on November 10th...

The second round was finished on November 17th and

The final round was completed on November 20th....

7 days before the deadline...

but I'm "on call" from the 21st till the 27th...

so, no whisky for me that week!

I was able to perform a decent amount of tasting work the weekend of November 12th...because November 11th is an official holiday in Belgium...so 3 days of uninterrupted tasting!



Finished...just leftovers now!

The bottom line...

All in all...a fun job, a lonely job and a job that teaches humility and incredibly broadens the spectrum and knowledge about whisky!

Keep one thing in mind.

The report you just read, is my personal way of doing this job...it may differ from what the other judges do, but it is the way I like to do it. It may be far from perfect, and other people may have a much better way of doing things, but this is how I do it.

All I hope for is that it sheds some light on what I think is one of the biggest and best organized drinks-competition on the planet!

Our (the Judges) part, is the fun part!

We get to indulge ourselves Big Time in our favorite hobby!

Nevertheless, it IS a responsible job, but the really hard work is done by people like Keith, Johannes, Krishna, Davin, Olivier, Serge and others, who make sure we can do this each year!!

My conclusion?

There is a lot of very good , nay excellent whisky out there, some that i do not particularly find to my liking, and unfortunately I also found some where I asked myself: "who -in the name of all that is tasteful- ever thought this was ready for bottling?" ...

Yet I always try to remember the following:

"de gustibus et coloribus,... yep!"

and

"It's only whisky",

That is why I mostly try to be considerate or munificent! ;-)

Sweet Drams!



Paul Dejong was born in 1965 in a small village in the North-east of Belgium. Completely ignorant about Whisky, but full of admiration for Scottish scenery he and his wife traveled through Scotland in 1989...visiting no distillery whatsoever! To make up for that he bought a bottle of Cardhu Single Malt as a souvenir for his dad. Dad shared the bottle and for Paul that was the start of a maniacal journey into the world of whisky. In 1993 he co-founded a whiskyclub called "Slainté" -believed to be one of the oldest whiskyclubs in Belgium- and remains one of the driving forces behind that club until today. Being a Physician he has a special interest in the 'technical' or 'chemical' side of whisky. Scottish Single Malt is his favourite tippel, but he also forages extensively into the world of American Bourbon and Rye. Over the years he has sampled over 4000 different whiskies. His other passions, other than his work, include Motorsports, fast cars, Cinema and reading.