

WHISK (E) Y

by Sharon Kirkham

the water of life

"Being moderately taken,
It slows the age,
It cuts phlegm,
It lightens the mind,
It quickens the spirit,
It cures the dropsy,
It heals the strangulation,
It pounces the stone,
It repels gravel,
It pulls away ventositie,
It keeps and preserves the head from whirling,
The eyes from dazzling,
The tongue from lisping,
The mouth from snuffling,
The teeth from chattering,
The throat from rattling,
The weasan from stiffing,
The stomach from womblyng,
The heart from swelling,
The belly from wincing,
The guts from rumbling,
The hands from shivering,
The sinews from shrinking,
The veins from crumpling,
The bones from aching,
The marrow from soaking,
And truly it is a sovereign liquor
If it be orderly taken."
Raphael Holinshed – 'Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland' - 16th Century



A cure for all ills – that's how the fiery spirit distilled from malted barley was seen by this famous 16th century historian. And who can blame the rural masses in the cold, damp and unforgiving climate of Scotland and Ireland for agreeing? Whether it was a swig to deal with a dose of smallpox, a tippie to treat palsy, or just a tonic to warm chilled bones after a gruelling day tilling the land, it's little wonder that this 'feel good' beverage was referred to in Gaelic as *uisge beatha* – or 'the water of life'. More than a little corruption of the original pronunciation over the years, and *ooshki-bah* became *whisky* (or *whiskey* outside of Scotland).

But the origins of this national drink actually began on far distant shores, and in even more distant times. In Asia, perhaps as far back as 800 BC, the art of distillation had already been discovered and was being used to produce perfume from flowers, then followed the Arab alchemists of the 10th Century, who were distilling alcohol to make both perfume and cosmetics. The idea of drinking it seems to have hit home later, after the Moors brought the technique to Spain. Here it was picked up on by monks who used it for medicinal purposes, and it wasn't long before the knowledge had spread to their fellow brethren in monasteries across the continent.

While it seems that, by the 11th and 12th Century, Irish monks were already distilling their own 'aqua vitae' or 'water of life' from fermented barley, the first historical record only appears in 1494 where the Exchequer

Rolls (essentially the official accounts of the Scottish royal court) allude to "*eight bolls of malt to Friar John Cor wherewith to make Aquavitae.*"

Happily the secret to whisky making didn't stay closed behind cloister walls, and by the end of the 16th century most rural households in both Ireland and Scotland were enjoying making their own – even if it had to be mixed with water, milk, honey, sugar or butter just to get it down the hatch. At this stage the idea of maturing the spirit hadn't entered anyone's mind, so it's safe to say it was raw, rough and not for the feint hearted!

Harsh on the taste buds it may have been, but by now whisky was an important part of rural life – both socially and economically. A Scottish custom of the time saw the men folk gather around the table, a container of whisky at its centre, and take turns going 'round' filling each others' glasses. This may well have been the humble beginnings of term, 'it's your round' – the words everyone dreads to hear when faced with a large group of mates with a penchant for doubles.

With barley being the main food crop of the time, it makes sense that everyone and his dog was trying their hand at making alcohol. Damp and chilly, the climate meant that dry grain couldn't be stored for long before rot set in, so why waste what could be put to good use? After all, distilling your own *uisge beatha* had more than a few benefits – besides drinking it, you could pay the rent with it, use up your surplus grain, and even feed

your cows with the leftover barley residue or '*draff*', something farmers still do to today.

But just as all good things must come to an end, the same was true of the widespread domestic distillation of whisky. Commercial distilleries may have existed but up until the 1820s they were few and far between. Most production was still done on farms and crofts but this didn't stop the government of the time seeing an opportunity to fill its coffers. And so it set about getting its fingers on a piece of the pie.

1644 saw the introduction of excise duty and roving excisemen in Scotland, with Ireland following suit in 1661. In both countries this sparked an era of intrigue and high drama, as illicit distilleries and smuggling operations sprang up all over the countryside – folk simply weren't happy having to pay to produce something they saw as their birthright and they weren't going to give up without a fight...

And fight they did, quite bloodily at times – that is, until the Excise Act of 1823 put the final nail in the coffin for the moonshine-makers. It clearly stated what kind of production was legal and not, and laid the way for subsequent acts that passed even harsher penalties on illicit distilling and smuggling. This pretty much signalled the end of all the 'illegal' shenanigans and the birth of hundreds of licensed distilleries. By the end of the 18th century there were over 2,000 stills in operation in Ireland alone.

By now commercial production was a far more viable proposition. Not only were license fees and taxation more reasonable, but farming methods had improved which meant better barely yields. Maturation was also being practiced after it was discovered, quite by accident, in the mid 18th century when someone stumbled across an old cask of whisky. After sampling its contents, they were shocked to find that rather than being spoilt, the whisky had in fact mellowed and improved with age.

The only problem left now was that the taste and quality of whisky varied so drastically from distillery to distillery, not to mention region to region – there needed to be some way of standardising this if whisky was to succeed commercially, particularly with regards to the overseas market, who were used to the more gentle and refined spirit, Cognac.

In this regard the *Cofey Still* was a major breakthrough. Invented by the Irish, but ironically fully embraced by the Scottish, this new technology allowed for the continuous distillation of grain alcohol, it lowered production costs and allowed for the simultaneous use of malted and unmalted barley together with other kinds of corn. Of course, quantity doesn't always equal quality, and this was certainly the case with the *Cofey Still*. But there was a solution – this lesser quality spirit was simply blended with the better quality whisky from traditional stills.

As for the birth of whiskey in America? Well, we owe that to the Irish and Scottish too. As immigrants from both countries put down their roots in the new world, they were quick to find new ways of making their favourite beverage, even though it meant using the decidedly different raw materials

surrounding them. Corn, rye and wheat were most common, and so a new kind of whiskey evolved – the Bourbons, Tennessee and American Rye whiskeys of today.

Perhaps the only thing more intriguing than the history of this famous amber nectar is its future. With Japan, Canada, India, Spain, Germany, Brazil, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and South Africa all now producing their own – a new legacy is in the making. And if the last eight or nine centuries are anything to go by – it's going to be one that's around for a long time to come.

Whisky Trivia:

- Scotland is divided into six whisky producing regions: Islay, Lowlands, Speyside, Highlands, Campbeltown and Islands. You'll find that the whisky from each of these areas is imbued with its own unique character.
- **Islay** – whisky from this small island west of the Scottish mainland is generally known for being smoky, peaty and salty, with a tang and tar.
- **Lowlands** – This southernmost part of Scotland, this flat region produces smooth and slightly fiery whisky that is comparatively very light in salt, peat and smoke.
- **Speyside** – Recognised as the centre for Scottish whisky, water from the River Spey is used in the production of Speyside whisky, which is quite mild in character yet rich in flavour and complexity.
- **Highlands** – The largest of the regions, Highlands whisky is known as being powerful, rich in flavour and quite smoky.
- **Campbeltown** – While this used to be a flourishing region with 21 distilleries in its heyday, today there are only three.
- **Islands** – Comprising the islands of Mull, Orkney, Jura, Arran, Shetlands and Skye, Islands whisky is seen as a milder version of Islay.
- Besides owning an 'e' in its spelling, Irish whiskey differs from Scotch whisky in that peat is almost never used in the malting process. As a result, it generally doesn't have the smoky, earthy overtones of Scotch.
- Most Irish whiskey is triple distilled (i.e. they go through the copper pot still process three times instead of twice, as is generally the case with Scotch whisky). This tends to create a softer, smoother, easier drinking style of whiskey.
- Because most Bourbon is made in Kentucky most people think that this is a pre-requisite but Bourbon can in fact be produced in any state – so long as it is made in the US, contains at least 51% corn and is stored for a minimum of two years in new, charred oak barrels. The raw spirit may not be distilled to more than 80% alcohol.



WHISKY

FOCUS

The Balvenie

A true and characteristic malt that embodies simplicity, craftsmanship and a rich, full bodied taste.

The Balvenie Double Wood 12 year old – A single malt with a distinctive character acquired from being matured in two woods – traditional oak whisky cask and Spanish oak sherry cask.

The Balvenie 15 year old – Drawn from a single bourbon cask of single distillation. With no more than 35 bottles from any one cask, each bottle is unique and offers notes of honey, vanilla and oak.

The Balvenie Portwood 1993 – matured in traditional oak casks and then transferred to a port cask, for a refined character with honey and spice notes and a long, gentle, nutty finish.



Barclays

Produced and bottled by John McLaren & Sons Ltd, one of Scotland's few, truly independent whisky producers, Barclays 5 year old Scotch Whisky is rated as a deluxe blend. Carefully supervised vatting of 5 year old wood-matured whiskies blended with Highland spring water have produced a rich round aroma, and smooth, full flavour.



Black Bottle

A newcomer to South Africa, this beautifully crafted blend dates back to 1879, when it was created by Gordon Graham to satisfy his own discerning palate. As the only whisky that blends all of Islay's malts, it is a smooth, sophisticated and dramatic blend with a unique, full bodied and smoky flavour. This is the blend with the heart of Islay.



Bell's

Extra Special – A blend of 35 mature malt and grain whiskies from the Highlands, Islands and Lowlands of Scotland, Bell's is aged for five years, and has remained true to itself for the past 180. The core of Bell's, Blair Athol single malt, gives it that distinctive nutty, full and spicy flavour and aroma.

Special Reserve – A sophisticated pure malt that uses whiskies that are all older than 8 years to achieve a warm peppery finish, mellowed by a rich honey complexity.



Bunnahabhain Single Islay Malt

Dating back to 1881, this single malt hails from the renowned Isle of Islay. Distinct from its island counterparts, it is known for its gentle taste profile which is created by using lightly peated malted barley in a time-honoured distillation process, along with pure island spring water.

Varieties include: Bunnahabhain 12 Year Old, Bunnahabhain 18 Year Old, and Bunnahabhain 25 year Old.



Bushmills

In 1608, King James 1 of England granted the very first license to distill whiskey in county Antrim, Ireland – still the home of Bushmills today. Within a few years, the Old Bushmills Distillery was producing whiskey that was a firm favourite with the Royal court. Distilled, blended and matured under one roof, every drop is distilled three times and then matured in four types of wood. Sherry butts, American bourbon barrels, Madeira Drums and Port Pipes are used to achieve a complexity of flavour.

Varieties include: Bushmills Original, Black Bush, 10 Year Old Single Malt, 16 Year Old Single Malt.



Chivas Regal

The Chivas brothers were pioneers of the art of blending and succeeded in creating consistently smooth, high quality blended whiskies. Near the turn of the century they created a premium blend called Chivas Regal. The gentle smoothness and richness that forms the backbone of this 12 year old whisky stem partly from the Speyside single malts that lie at its core. A warm amber in colour, Chivas Regal 12 is renowned for its full and rich taste of honey, ripe apples, vanilla, hazelnut and butterscotch notes.

Other varieties: Chivas Regal 18 Gold Signature.



Dalmore

Granted to the head clansman by the king of Scotland, the Mackenzie family crest sits on every bottle of Dalmore. The twelve pointed stag symbolises the aristocratic pedigree of this fine highland malt which boasts the smooth and traditional flavours of marmalade, Seville oranges and gentle spices.

Varieties include: Dalmore 12 Years Old Single Malt, Dalmore 21 Years Old Single Malt, and The Dalmore Cigar Malt.





Dewar's 12 Year Old Special Reserve

Created from carefully selected, finest quality 12 year old malt and grain whiskies. After blending, Dewar's 12 is returned to oak casks for a further period of 'marrying'. Launched in 2000, this award-winning deluxe blend is a rounded, medium to full bodied whisky with a long, full flavoured, lingering finish.

Varieties include: Dewar's White Label, and Dewar's Signature.



Firstwatch

A 100% genuine Canadian Whisky, Firstwatch is distilled, blended and matured in Canada before being bottled in South Africa. It achieves its velvety smooth and mellow character by blending 3 year old rye whiskies with double rye potstilled blends, and is known for its versatile mixability.



Glen Grant

Produced in the famous Glen Grant distillery in Scotland since 1840, this single malt Speyside Scotch whisky is distinctive in both flavour and colour. Light yet complex, it is distilled in tall slender stills, purified in special purifiers, and then carefully matured in oak casks. The result is a clear, fresh, natural whisky with a single malt taste.

Varieties Include: Glen Grant Ten Years Old.



Glendower

Hand crafted, additive free, and natural, this 8 Year Old Pure Malt Scotch Whisky is a product of dedicated craftsmanship. Monitored throughout, distilled with soft water and carefully matured in oak casks for a minimum of eight years to develop a distinctive character, Glendower promises lingering enjoyment and the taste of vintage quality.



Glenfiddich

Originating in a small town in the Scottish Highlands and made by a process little changed in over a century, Glenfiddich Special Reserve 12 Year Old is now enjoyed in over 180 countries world-wide. Aged for 12 years in oak casks, it is the only Highland single malt to be distilled, matured and bottled at its own distillery.

Varieties include: Glenfiddich Solera Reserve 15 Year Old, Glenfiddich Ancient Reserve 18 Year Old, Glenfiddich Grand Reserve 21 Year Old, and Glenfiddich 30 Year Old.



Glenmorangie Single Highland Malt 10 Year Old

The Glenmorangie Distillery remains one of the smallest in the Highlands, employing just sixteen craftsmen – 'The Sixteen Men of Tain'. The traditional distilling methods, preserved through the generations, are still employed today. Matured in bourbon casks, this single Highland Malt offers a unique and delicate taste, one that appeals to both novices and connoisseurs. The fragrance is delicate, sophisticated and clean, the finish clean and salving



Grants

William Grant & Sons began as a family company in 1887. William Grant's Family Reserve is as a premium blend containing single malts such as Glenfiddich and The Balvenie. It boasts a beautifully balanced aroma and deliciously complex taste. Full and rich in flavour, it leads on to a long, smooth and lingering finish.



J&B Jet

Named after the precious gemstone, this whisky is mature and rich in taste. A 12 year old with a distinctive Speyside character, it has been made from a blend of 32 malt and grain whiskies for a full-bodied taste. Look for the iconic jet black bottle and striking black, red and gold packaging.



J&B Rare

First created in the 1800's by Justerini & Brooks Limited, many of the finer malts used in this unique blend of 42 whiskies are reserved and matured for greatly-extended periods to add fullness and depth of flavour. J&B is produced and bottled exclusively in Scotland. Being balanced and robust in nature, it is ideal for mixing.

Varieties include: J&B Reserve, and J&B Jet



Jack Daniel's:

Single Barrel Tennessee Whiskey - Is the world's only charcoal-mellowed single barrel whiskey. Twice distilled, charcoal-mellowed and aged for six to eight years in white oak barrels, this whiskey is tasted and selected by Master Distiller, Jimmy Bedford and hand-bottled a barrel at a time. Dark in colour and distinctively rich in taste it is full-bodied with a complex character and heightened flavours of toasted oak, vanilla and caramel.

Old No. 7 Tennessee Whiskey - Enjoyed since 1866, this brand is characterised by the unique charcoal-mellowing process which involves slowly dripping newly made whiskey through giant containers hard-packed with ten feet of sugar maple charcoal. This intricate process refines the spirit and together with the American White Oak barrels which store the whiskey, gives Jack its unique and smoky flavour, aroma and amber tint.



Jameson

Hailing from Ireland and triple distilled in the age old Irish tradition. Jameson is characterised by an inimitable smoothness, with hints of spice, toffee, vanilla and a sherry nuttiness.



Johnnie Walker

Black – This 12 year old blended scotch whisky combines over 40 whiskies to achieve a malty smoothness with a slight fruitiness. A 12 year old Caol Ila malt delivers the lingering rich and smoky peat flavours for which Johnnie Walker Black is renowned. For a 'Classic' serve, it should be taken with ice, water or soda water.

Red – Originally known as Old Highland Whisky until it was relaunched in 1909, this popular blend contains 35 different malt and grain whiskies. Smooth and quite sweet, with lots of malt balanced by sweet vanilla and hints of spice, Johnnie Walker Red is generally consumed "long" with a variety of mixers and lots of ice.

Varieties include – Johnny Walker Gold, Green, and Swing.



Kilbeggan

This blended Irish whiskey is made from natural resources such as pure clear water and barley, in the only independent distillery in Ireland. It is gently matured in oak casks for a smooth, mild, sweet taste with a malt nose. Enjoy neat on the rocks or with water to taste, or alternatively in coffee, cocktails or with mixers.



Laphroaig

A true single malt Scotch Whisky from the remote island of Islay in the Western Isles of Scotland, Laphroaig is made from malted barley that is dried over a peat fire for a unique and rich flavour. It's best savoured neat or with a little cool water to release its pungent, earthy aroma of blue peat smoke, nuttiness and heathery perfume.

Other varieties include: Laphroaig 10 Year Old, Laphroaig Quarter Cask, Laphroaig 30 Year Old.



Longmorn 16 Year Old Single Malt Whisky

Chivas Brothers has launched Longmorn 16 Year Old in South Africa, to replace its widely-reputed Longmorn 15 Year Old. Dubbed 'Speyside's best-kept secret', Longmorn has been prized for its mellow and complex character. Described as the perfect expression of a luxury malt, this rare and desirable whisky is presented in sleek, contemporary packaging which combines glass, metal, paper and leather.



Royal Salute

As a gesture of respect and allegiance from the Chivas Brothers, Royal Salute was presented as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth II on her coronation in 1953. The manufacture of this super premium whisky involves the careful selection of the finest rare whiskies from a unique inventory of aged malt and grain whiskies, individually oak-matured, for at least 21 years, before a three-phase blending process. With its satisfying, soft nuances of complexity and balance, this long flavoured whisky comprises hints of sherry, cocoa, toffee and hints of smoke.



Scottish Leader

First introduced to South Africa in the 1980's, this successful blend contains up to 30 Scotch whiskies – 25 single malt and 5 grain, some of which are up to 8 years old. Single malts from Islay, Speyside and the Highlands combine to produce a soft nose and a long, dry finish with a lingering peaty finale.



Slate

This smooth and timeless blended Bourbon whiskey tastes like a real old Chicago Bourbon should. Carefully distilled for character, gently blended for complexity and smoothness, using the original Chicago recipe, Slate is matured in charred American Oak barrels for a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 8 years before being carefully blended.



Teacher's

With a minimum of 45% malt content, Teachers contains a blend of at least 35 different single malts from all over Scotland and grain scotch whisky. The trace of smokiness in its taste is derived from the Ardmore Highland malt which lies at its heart. Enjoy with ice, soda or water.



The Famous Grouse

Originally created in 1896 by wine merchant Matthew Gloag in the Lowlands of Scotland, this blend contains The Macallan and Highland Park as its lead whiskies. Full golden, clear and bright in colour, it is medium dry in taste with a good, clean finish.



The Famous Grouse Malt

A blend of some of Scotland's most famous and award-winning single malts, including The Macallan and Highland Park. In the case of the Famous Grouse Malt Whisky Range, introduced in 2005, these acclaimed single malts are blended without the addition of grain whisky to attain a marvelous depth and character. Mellow and accessible in taste, with a creamy-malt sweetness balanced by oaky dryness, rich fruit and a hint of citrus.

Other varieties: The Famous Grouse Malt 12, 18 and 30 Year Old



The Glenrothes

The first spirit flowed from The Glenrothes distillery in December 1879. An immaculate Speyside Malt Whisky, it draws its flavours from the prime barley of the region, the careful creation of the spirit, and the resulting richness of both American and Spanish oak casks.

Varieties include – The Glenrothes Vintage Malt, The Glenrothes Select Reserve.



The Isle of Jura Single Malt Whisky

As the name suggests, this unique range originates from the isolated and supremely beautiful island of Jura. A lightly malted dram, it is carefully distilled and quietly matured for a minimum of 10 years of mild wet summers and damp cold winters on the beachfront in Ceaighous. *Varieties include: Jura 10 Years Old, Jura Superstition, Jura 16 Years Old, and Jura 21 Years Old.*



Three Ships Whisky

Launched in 1977, this world-class South African whisky is produced at the state-of-the-art James Sedgwick Distillery in the Cape Winelands. Expertly distilled, matured and blended from the finest malt and grain, Three Ships is a smooth-tasting blend of both South African and Scotch whiskies.

Varieties include: Three Ships Select, Three Ships Premium Select 5 Year Old, and Three Ships Bourbon Cask Finish.



Tullibardine

This Highland single malt is produced by a small, independent distiller in the southern Highlands. It has been matured by a combination of bourbon and sherry casks, and uses local spring water from the Ochil Hills in its production. Smooth and mellow with a fruity flavour and crisp finish, it's best enjoyed with a small splash of water.



Two Keys

Produced using the finest distillation and maturation processes, Two Keys is made from selected malted barley, grain and the softest Highland water. This easy drinking whisky offers smoothness, quality and value of money.



Whyte & Mackay Special

Originating from Glasgow, this blended Scotch is produced using the double marriage process, and is best enjoyed neat, over ice, or with a wide variety of mixers as a long drink. Held in sherry butts and left for several months during its first marriage, this blended malt is then mixed with six different grain whiskies and returned to another set of sherry butts to complete its second stage of maturation before being bottled.

Other varieties include: W&M 13 Year Old blend, W&M 19 Year Old Luxury blend, W&M 22 Years Rare Edition and W&M 30 Year Old.



Wild Turkey 101°

Smooth and richly colored, this genuine super-premium bourbon is carefully crafted in the heart of Kentucky. Made in the 'old-fashioned way' and using a totally natural process, Wild Turkey 101° has an exceptionally soft, but rich aroma for a high proof bourbon. The taste is an American classic with caramel and vanilla and notes of honey and oranges. The finish is very long, rich and full-bodied, powerful, yet soothing.

