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By Riannon Walsh

A Primer for Malt and Handcrafted Blend Whisky Fans:

The most oft asked question I hear from so many whisky lovers when I pick up the phones at the CelticMalts office is: 'How do I decide which single malts to try and what do all the different things on the labels actually mean???'

It's easy to find a large selection of single malts in better liquor stores. Knowing which to select...well that takes a bit of an education. This information is well worth pursuing and something I can happily and quickly help you with in this short article. After reading these words, not only will you find yourself capable of bringing home some amazing whisky, but your ability to appreciate this aristocrat of the ancient world of distilled spirits will be remarkably enhanced by this brief bit of knowledge.

There is whisky and... there is whisky worth exploring in depth. Without a doubt, single malt whisky, great vatted malts and handcrafted blends all fall into the latter category. As with wines, understanding the distiller's language and intricacies of the creative process will make a fundamental difference in your ability to choose a memorable and unique bottling. Here's your primer. Study it and take your time experimenting and enjoying what is, without question, the true art that is handcrafted whisk(e)y.

Definitions to get you started:

Blended whisky: Consists of both malt and various types of grain whisky blended in one bottling. Blended whisky is almost always high volume, continuous production distillate. **There are also a small selection of hand crafted all-aged grain whiskies on the market now.**

Vatted Malts: These whiskies are actually more than one single malt (see next definition) mixed together in one bottling. They have been around since the early 1800's and are often really excellent examples of the blender's art.

Single Malt Whisky: Made ONLY from malted barley –without question generally thought of as the sweetest, smoothest and most complex of all distilled grains. All the whisky in each bottling is ONLY from the specific distillery listed and made ONLY in SMALL BATCH POT STILLs. This is a hands on product and each of the 90 or so active malt distilleries in Scotland produce a distinctly different whisky. (Single malts are made world wide, but the majority of them come from Scotland) Recipes are carefully guarded and slight changes in environmental conditions, strains of barley and yeast, as well as the different water used in the process are the beginning of these differences. Most single malts are made from malted barley that has been dried over peat smoke fires, so varying degrees of smokiness exist in each whisky according to recipe. The more extreme and incredibly complex differences in the whiskies result from the aging process and are affected by the wood casks as well as the location and environment surrounding the cask aging facility.

Single malt, as are all aged whiskies, is a living product as is the wood in which it is aged. Both the wood and the final aged whisky are heavily affected by the air (inland/seaside/mountain etc.) as time mellows the spirit. All single malt whisky is aged in oak barrels and most of that oak has previously held bourbon. Some single malts are aged fully or partially in sherry casks and more and more distilleries are experimenting, with amazing results, with aging in port pipes, cognac casks, Madeira and others. These casks impart a range from subtle to kick-you- in-the-face flavors into the whisky as it grows older and mellows in the embrace of the wood

Your Cheat Sheet...Regions and Flavor Profiles:

Here's the easy way to know what you're about to buy. There are three major categories of single malt 'style' with two 'sub-styles' that fall into the Highland grouping.

If the bottling you are checking out doesn't mention the region, grab yourself a copy of Michael Jackson's Complete Guide To Single Malt Scotch which is broken down distillery by distillery and will tell you everything you need to know in vast detail about every single malt out there! This book is extremely easy to find at all major bookseller chains or on the internet.

Highland; sub categories Speyside& Island

The Highland category includes the largest number of distilleries and these whiskies are, in general, full flavored, smooth, complex, sweetish, mellow and very approachable. Many of the creative cask finishes employed come from distilleries in this region and the sherry finishes in particular are extremely delicious and enjoyable drams.

Lowland:

Lowland whiskies are fewer in number and tend to be softer and less bold than other regional malts. Some are triple distilled (all the others are double distilled) which, in laymen's jargon, strips a 'layer' from the final distillate and results in a lighter less complex spirit.

Islay: (eye-lah, please)

If the Highlands are the symphonies of the whisky world and the Lowlands the chamber ensembles, the Islays are the rock stars. With 8 distilleries along a 12x25 mile stretch of lower Hebridean isle, Islay produces some of the most differentiated and bold expressions of the single malt range. With smokiness ranging from low key to overwhelming and sea air wafting through each one of these gems, the Islays are the undisputed passionate choices of malt fanatics worldwide. All are amazing in personality and uniqueness.

The Almost Final and Very Necessary Word:

Distillery Bottlings versus Independent Bottlings

When you stop in a shop to begin your single malt journey of discovery, you will notice that almost every bottling has a distillery name boldly displayed on its label as the name of the whisky itself. These are the single malt bottlings that each distillery produces under their own brand label with pride from their chosen casks.

BUT...almost all distilleries sell off individual casks to what are known as Independent Bottlers (or Merchant Bottlers as they are called in the U.K.) These are individuals who spend countless hours 'nosing' casks in numerous distilleries. They then purchase the most unique and individualized casks (remember...every cask is it's own personality!) and bottle them under their own company name. Reputable 'indie' bottlers will always put the name of the distillery from where the casks originated when they are given permission by the distillery to do so. If they cannot do this, they will list the region where the whisky was distilled. Independent bottlings truly represent the ultimate in excellent whisky variations. Try several and you'll soon find that there are some companies where the nose (yes, that's what the person's title is!) selecting the casks is one that you appreciate more than others. While you are experiencing the Expo, you can meet and learn from many of these highly skilled noses in person!

Now the Last Word: AGE

That word we all dread has in the past been associated in a positive way with single malt. But don't get stuck in that stereotype! Although you do want your whiskies to generally be older than 7 years, there is no reason to use extreme age (over 15 years) as a guideline to 'better' whisky. Many whiskies 'fall off' after a certain number of years in cask and those exorbitant sums you pay for them represent the scarcity and time spent basically evaporating away, not necessarily the quality. Of course there are some whiskies that hold up remarkably to age (the bolder Islays & Islands especially and the more complex of the Highland whiskies), but as a rule of thumb, trust your palate...not a number.

This rather quick and simplistic look at the very complicated world of single malts should help you dive in with enough skill to do a few laps in complete enjoyment. Experimentation is the key to true whisky enjoyment. Exercise your palate and learn as you go. And if you ever want to just chat whisky or continue your education, surf your way to www.celticmalts.com or give me a call to chat over a dram one chilly afternoon. Slainte mhor!

Riannon hosts North America's largest single malt tasting and educational exposition each March in San Francisco. She invites you to join her at the Whiskies of the World Expo and to feel free to call her to ask any whisky questions or find out about some wonderful new bottling. She's tucked in for the winter on her farm in Pennsylvania on 610.326.8151 or can be emailed on: Riannon@celticmalts.com