



# Malts and Mates

“Whisky, like a beautiful woman, demands appreciation. You gaze first, and then it’s time to drink,” wrote Haruki Murakami. **Suneeta Sodhi Kanga** learns the inherent truth of these lines as she attends a single malt appreciation evening

**W**HILE I have always been known to be partial to wine, I am now facing a tough time sticking to my old favourite. I was well into my '40s and a mother of two teenagers when I tasted my first single malt. It is a taste I'll keep returning to. Once upon a time, single malt snobs around the world would sink into leather-backed chairs; sip the golden liquid and chuckle over that dictum: no water, no soda, no ice. Drink it neat, and, no, it's not for women. Now I, like many other women I know, pick up a bottle or two whenever I travel out of the country, and like most single malt connoisseurs, open it when I spend time with close friends.

So there I was in the company of a small group of friends, warmly welcomed and hospitably escorted to our canopy by our very glamorous and charming hostess Sanam Sippy. Primarily a vodka drinker, Sanam was excited about attending her first single malt appreciation evening.

A warm, balmy summer evening in Mumbai and single malts? They don't seem to make the cosiest bedfellows, do they? However, shift the

*diwan* to Asilo, on the 40th floor of the Palladium hotel and you will have your tresses caressed by the cool breeze wafting through your canopy and the molten liquid caressing its way through your throat to gently warm your insides while completely satiating all your senses.

We settled down comfortably to be ably guided through the pleasures of blind tasting and appreciating six single malt whiskies with just the right accompaniments thanks to Asilo. “Adding just a few drops of water to the malt changes the composition of the spirit and unlocks more flavours and aromas,” says my good friend, Keshav Prakash, who started the Oak League Club in Mumbai some years ago. Keshav, who is also the Director of The Vault, distributors of fine spirits, sure knows his malts and takes them more than seriously! We were all instructed to tone down our perfumes and deos to ensure our senses were entirely receptive to the warm, sensuous caresses of the smoky and not-so-smoky aromas. Keshav also helped us choose our bites as our palates had to be just adequately titillated and not overly consumed by strong flavours like those of blue cheese.

We set off on the blindfolded journey sans bottles and labels. It will prove to be the most satiating path we have ever embarked on, the only guide being the warm, golden liquid trickling down our throats.

As they say in the world of single malt whisky, great things come to those who wait!

The get, set, go call was marked by:

**Nose:** Starting neat and without swirling the special nosing glasses take a deep breath with your nostrils just an inch away from the rim. Now let the aromas waft their way to every nerve that was asleep to waken to receive the molten, golden fluid.

**Palate:** Take a small sip and feel the heady malt make its way from the tip to the centre of the tongue and down the throat to warm the heart.

**Finish:** Savour and appreciate the layers of taste in the finish of the malt. Let it gently glide its way like a smoothly landing airplane from paradise into the deep recesses of the gut.

It was a very long flight indeed. One that took us through different regions of Scotland with grain that was sowed in the Lowlands, Campbeltown, Islay, the Highlands or Speyside. Occasionally, it journeyed into a used barrel of sherry or bourbon and after cruising through a decade or more of a very mature upbringing, it finally works its way to your palate.

Our appreciation journey started out with the **Glenlivet 12 year old** from Speyside. Translated from Gaelic, Glenlivet means 'valley of the smooth-flowing one'. It is the oldest legal distillery in the parish of Glenlivet, and the production place of the Scottish whisky of the same name. Its packaging and advertising hails it as, "The single malt that started it all". Founded in 1824, it has operated almost continuously since except during World War II. Its devotees are legion. Company lore has it that actor Robert Taylor even wrote to the distillery to ask how to procure a case of Glenlivet for the set of the epic film 'Quo Vadis'.

**Nose:** Oak, malt, floral, vanilla, fruity.

**Palate:** Smooth, very malty and oaky, honey, nutty, orange marmalade, with hints of mint and liquorice.

**Finish:** Long, honey and oak.

We were instructed to clean our palates with cool cucumber slices in between the different tastings.

Our journey continued and we readied our palates to receive the next tasting which was the **Glenmorangie Original 10 year old** from the northern Highlands. This is the predominant geographical feature of Scotland and also the biggest area in terms of production of Scotch whisky.

Considered the real backbone of the Glenmorangie range, this single malt

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PIC: NALIN SOLANKI





is produced by marrying the delicate spirit that emerges from Scotland's tallest stills, with first and second fill American white oak casks. The range of ex-bourbon casks such as the famous slow-grown and air-dried 'designer casks' from Missouri, helps develop a perfect balance between sweetness and complexity.

**Nose:** Chocolate and sweet orange, caramel, blackcurrants, raspberries and pears.

**Palate:** Sweet, lush raspberries, milk chocolate and slightly peppery.

**Finish:** Lingering, rich flavors, oak, chocolate, warm and elegant.

From there on the palate index steadily climbed forming what seemed like a J-Curve. As the colours glided from golden to amber to a mild brown, the intensity of the malt increased dramatically...

It was now time for the next dram pouring and we were swayed away by the **Aberfeldy 12 year old** from the Highlands.

**Nose:** Fresh and fragrant, with subtle notes of vanilla, sweet oak, some tannin and a light smokiness.

**Palate:** Flavourful, with lively oaky notes, loads of salty caramel and a bit of liquorice.

**Finish:** Nicely dry, a bit spicy, medium length and warming.

The **Macallan 12 year old** fine oak, triple cask matured was served next and had reddish hues. The Macallan whiskies were originally matured in oak seasoned with sherry brought to the distillery from Jerez, Spain.

Beginning in 2004, The Macallan introduced a new product, the Fine Oak Series, with whisky matured in seasoned American oak casks (sherry as well as bourbon), as well as sherry casks from Spain.

**Nose:** Sherry, woody spice, citrus, fruity and smoky.

**Palate:** Rich vanilla, hints of raisins and peat.

**Finish:** Long, fruity and faintly spicy and smoky.

We were happy to welcome Glynn Tomlinson, Chief Operating Officer, Bars and Restaurants at JSM Corporation Pvt. Ltd. to join us for the tasting.

A malt aficionado, Glynn's favourite was the inimitable island malt whisky, **Talisker 10 year old**. It is the only distillery on the Isle of Skye, in the eastern part of the Highlands and takes its name from a farm some miles away near the village of Carbost.

**Nose:** Fruity, butterscotch and light peat.

**Palate:** Bold and full bodied, sweet and dry sherry.

**Finish:** Long, quite smoky and a hint of malt.

Another intriguing aspect of single malts is the trivia, the stories and the legends that surround it. For example: the name of Lagavulin is an Anglicisation of the Gaelic *lag a'mhuilin*, meaning 'hollow by the mill'. The **Lagavulin 16 year old**, is a much sought-after single malt with heavy peat-smoke typical of southern Islay. Offering richness and a dryness that turns it into a truly interesting dram, it offered us the perfect next stop on our malt appreciation journey.

**Nose:** Ripe berries, peaty and maritime.

**Palate:** Slightly sweet, some peat, liquorice, walnuts and hints of toffee.

**Finish:** Long and quite dry.

Our journey culminated with a surprise dram from the hip flask of Rukn Luthra, MD, Remy- Cointreau Asia who is also a Scotch Master.

What happens when you take the world's most heavily peated whisky, and let it mature in a Limousin oak? Magic...You experience a grand old diva that tantalises, scandalises and caresses every nerve and pore and leaves you with a feeling of sheer delight and stupendous satisfaction at the pleasure of having spent a few moments with someone so capable, gentle, pleasurable and divine. The **Octomore 6.2 cask strength** is the epitome of the most graciously aging, elegant diva who was at total peace with her body, status and personality. This Islay beauty is your "bridge over troubled water". Regardless of what the world throws at you it will be there to uplift and inspire.

Contrary to the popular belief that single malt is a man's drink, India has seen an increasing number of women preferring single malt over other spirits. My dear friend Bina Trivedi, who is a senior finance professional, loves her malts. She is one among a growing number of women who are taking to single malts, and who are not far behind in the snobbery game.

"I did not begin to appreciate single malts till about five years ago. Once you are done with your sweet fizzy drinks, you want something that you can appreciate for its mature taste," she says. Laphroaig was her favourite brand...until she met Octomore that evening!

The golden nectar, honey was known to be the ambrosia of the Gods by the Greeks but they sure had not woken up to single malts!

*Slaandjivaa!* (Gaelic for "to your health") ☺





## WHISKY TRIVIA

The world's most expensive bottle of Scotch whisky is Isabella's Islay (\$6.2 million).

The oldest Scotch whisky on the market is the Aisla T'Orten 107 years old, distilled in 1906. It costs \$ 1.43 million.

Glenfiddich is the world's best-selling single malt.

Johnnie Walker Red Label is the world's best-selling Scotch.

The Famous Grouse is the best-selling whisky in Scotland.

Glenmorangie is the best-selling single malt in Scotland.

The world's fastest growing Scotch today is Black Dog. India is a major contributor to its sales.

The five most popular single malts globally are Glenfiddich, The Glenlivet, Glenmorangie Original, Aberlour and Laphroaig.

Bruichladdich's The Octomore is the most heavily peated whisky in the world (167ppm).

The three oldest single malts currently sold are Glenturret, Oban and Glenlivet.

The oldest distillery in Scotland is Glenturret (1775), followed by Bowmore (1779).

With each bottle of Laphroaig that you buy, you are entitled to a lifetime lease of one sq. inch of the distillery's land, along with a personalised certificate of ownership.

Cadenhead's Whisky Shop on Canongate, has a unique selling point: customers can have a bottle poured straight from a cask and labeled with their name. When sealed it has a label with the 'born on date', as whisky stops aging as soon as it leaves the wooden barrel, so each bottle is a unique blend.

The highest price paid at an auction for a bottle of Scotch was \$631,850 for a 6-litre The Macallan 'M' single malt, in a decanter by Lalique. The highest price paid at an auction for a standard sized Scotch was \$460,000 for a 64-year-old Macallan malt whisky.

Edradour is the smallest distillery in Scotland. The entire operation is run by just three people.

The Glenmorangie distillery is one of the smallest in the Highlands and employs just 16 craftsmen, called 'The Sixteen Men of Tain'

The most expensive country to buy Scotch, ironically, is the UK, where it is made.

In the UK, its home country, the five most popular blended Scotch whiskies are The Famous Grouse, William Grant's, Bell's, Teacher's and J&B Rare.

Johnnie Walker does not feature in the list of best-selling blends in its home country.

A closed bottle of Scotch can be kept for 100 years and still be good to drink. After opening, a bottle of Scotch whisky will remain good for five years.

The Australian Wine Research Institute has introduced a measure called a standard drink. In Australia, a standard drink contains 10 gms (12.67 ml) of alcohol, the amount that an average adult male can metabolise in one hour.

Although their proof differs, standard drinks of beer, wine and spirits contain the same amount of alcohol: 0.6 ounces each. They're all the same to a breathalyzer.

18,000 litres of Scotch whisky worth over \$800,000 were accidentally flushed down the drain at Chivas Brothers' Dumbarton bottling plant in 2013.

Experts advise you to drink single malt with just a dash of water. The water supposedly 'releases the serpent' from the whisky.

If there is a serpent, there is also an angel. As it ages, 2-2.5 % of the whisky maturing in a barrel is lost to evaporation every year. Distillers refer to this as the 'angel's share'. The whisky absorbed by the wood of the barrel during maturation is stoically known as the 'devil's cut'.

Some sources claim that the Irish whisky distillers brought the Irish custom of triple distillation with them to Scotland.

Auchentoshan was probably started by Irish settlers, led by the MacBeathas. The source of the name Auchentoshan is Gaelic. It means 'corner of the field'.

The United States spell it as 'whiskey'. A simple way to remember the spelling: if it comes from a country without an 'e' in its spelling, then it is spelt 'whisky'. (e.g., Scotland, Canada, Japan, India, etc.)

Indian 'whisky' is technically flavoured rum, because it is essentially made from sugar.