

THE LAST KINGS OF SCOTLAND

Aged for decades and distilled to perfection, the myriad regional Scotch whiskeys are sure to please even the most discriminating enthusiast.

BY CHRIS CASWELL



Macallan 1926.



Dalmore 62-year-old.

If you think that wine aficionados are passionate about their spirits, well, you obviously haven't encountered Scotch whisky devotees. Where wine lovers rhapsodize over the *terroir*, or geography, of the land where grapes are grown, Scotch drinkers grow rapturous over such earthiness as peat (as in peat moss), smoke, heather, barley and malt.

If you weren't aware that Scotch had achieved a status like wine, consider that a bottle of 1926 Macallan Fine & Rare whisky recently sold for \$75,000. There is also a not inconsiderable list of Scotches that will set you back from \$10,000 to \$50,000 a bottle.

Scotch whisky has been recognized since the 15th century, but it was probably a well-kept moonshine secret long before that. In Gaelic, it is called *uisge beatha* or "water of life," and it was the struggle of early invaders to pronounce the first word, which sounds like "whishka," that led to the very name.

Today this amber-colored drink has become an international favorite, but like wine, you need to understand the basics to truly become a Scotch lover. A word to the wise: Scotch whisky is never, ever, spelled "whiskey." Whiskey is what comes from Ireland or America (as bourbon), and you'll label yourself an infidel if you don't remember this.

Since many parts of the world, like Scotland, couldn't grow fruit to ferment into wine, they learned to distill what they had, which was grain. The process is lengthy but straightforward, with the grains allowed to soak to germination, then kiln-dried with the starches converting to sugar. Once dried into a grain called malt, they are ground up and infused with hot water. Yeast is added to launch the fermentation, and the liquid is distilled at least twice (required by law to be called Scotch) in huge copper pots. It is then matured in casks for at least three years (again, by law) to add sweetness. Some whiskies will be bottled after just three years, while others may

mature for half a century.

There are two basic types of Scotch: single malt and blended. Many consider single malt, which comes only from malted barley, to be the premium Scotch, but the blend, which can combine a range of malts and other grains from several distillers, is not necessarily inferior; like champagne, it's all about the blend.

As with French wines, there are different whisky regions in Scotland, and each is said to have its own flavor. Campbeltown was once the whisky capital, and Scotch from the Highlands is said to have the faintest essence of heather, while that from the Isle of Islay bears the salty aroma of the sea—so they say.

In the end it comes down to personal taste. For many, Scotch is too strong a drink even in its mildest form, and many enjoy it only as part of a mixed drink such as a rob roy (with vermouth). A mixed drink, for a Scotch purist, is heresy: At most, true believers will only mix a few drops of pure spring water with their Scotch.

Glenfiddich lays claim to being the best-selling single-malt Scotch in the world, although many connoisseurs feel this Highlands spirit is bland. But that absence of coarseness may be what appeals to many, as well as its reasonable price. One critic damned it as "a good cooking Scotch."

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Among popularly priced single malts are Macallan 12-year-old (the choice of England's House of Commons), which is aged in sherry casks (priced at about \$42), Glenmorangie, aged for 15 and 18 years (from \$64), and the sometimes hard-to-find Rosebank Signatory (\$55). A step up would be Caol Ila (pronounced "cool eel ah"),



Macallan 50-year-old.



Black Bowmore 1964.

an Islay 24-year (\$125), the Dalwhinnie 24-year-old Highland (\$300) or Lagavulin 21-year (\$330).

When it comes to blended Scotch, Johnnie Walker Red (\$22) is the world's best seller, although it has a number of competitors, including Dewar's White Label (\$49), the best seller in America. Johnnie Walker comes in several other "colors," with 12-year-old Black (\$29) being more complex, 15-year-old Green (\$49) appealing to both

Black Bowmore 1964, which was bottled and offered in 1995 for about \$200; today it sells for as much as \$6,000 a bottle. Don't you wish you'd bought a case? Another example is the Macallan 50-year-old that was offered in a Lalique-crystal decanter housed in a leather box for less than \$6,000 in 2006. Two years later it has appreciated to a street price of more than \$12,000. So it's no surprise that many Scotch aficionados are buying two bottles of rare spirits: one to sip and one to tuck away as a rainy-day investment.

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single and blend drinkers, Gold (\$82) being more upscale with 18 years of aging, and high-end Blue (\$180), in numbered editions. Other popular blends include Chivas Regal 12-year-old (\$35), The Famous Grouse (\$35) and, at a higher price point, Ballantine's 17-year-old (\$90).

Further up the scale is what might be called "investment grade" Scotch, such as

Or you could be generous. One bottle of 1943 Dalmore auctioned for \$58,000, and the buyer, it has been reported, promptly shared it with five of his lucky friends.

Whether you prefer single malt or blend, the taste of heather or peat or salty air, a \$30 bottle or a \$30,000 bottle, there is a Scotch out there for you, because, as the Scotch lovers' motto says, "There's no bad Scotch—only good Scotch and better Scotch." ■



Ardbeg Double Barrel.

SCOTCH SUPPLEMENTALS

Scotch from Old St. Andrews distillery comes in a golf ball-shaped decanter (osawhisky.com).

Ardbeg distillery offers its "Double Barrel" gun case crafted in leather and featuring two bottles of Ardbeg 1974, eight sterling-silver Hamilton & Inches drinking cups, a bespoke oak/sterling-silver Omas pen, and two hand-stitched leather-bound books for tasting notes. Only 250 cases available (about \$20,000).

You can have a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue custom-engraved to commemorate an occasion by contacting the distiller at johnniewalker.com.

Friends of Laphroaig, the fan club for this Islay distiller, are given a one-foot-square plot of land along the river that provides their water. As "rent" for the use of the plot and water, owners visiting the distillery are paid one dram of Laphroaig each year (laphroaig.com).

