

SPIRITS News

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JULY 17, 2017 FEATURES

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Cask-Strength Value and New and Unusual Finds

By David Driscoll

For the past seven years we've been traveling to Scotland to find interesting, unique and exciting single barrels of whisky to arouse the taste buds of America's single malt connoisseurs. During that time we've traveled the country extensively—north and south, east and west, and the islands off the coast—in search of the sublime. But I have to be honest here: while we've always trusted our palates and followed our hearts, it wasn't our talent or our experience that recently pushed our spirits department forward and catapulted our company into a position as the nation's top single malt retailer. It was a political vote on June 23, 2016 that opted to remove the UK from the European Union and sent the British pound into a free fall as a result. All of a sudden, the cost of doing business in Scotland dropped by nearly 25% and the whisky became that much more affordable. We were thrilled to be able to offer our customers the same great whiskies at a discount—but apparently we were the only ones! While the price of K&L's exclusive single malts reflected the new Brexit pricing, the general Scotch import market absorbed that currency savings and maintained its price points, keeping the margin for itself rather than passing it along to the consumer.

Now K&L's prices for single-barrel, cask-strength, mature Scotch whiskies look downright unreal. Halfway into 2017, the story remains the same: we're tearing up the American whisky scene with top-quality selections, exciting new discoveries, and now pricing that can't be beat from coast to coast. The most successful of our exclusive labels has been Old Particular, a partnership with Douglas Laing in Glasgow that's resulted in a consumer frenzy unlike any we've experienced since we began buying our Scotch directly in 2010. It's not uncommon for a single barrel of Old Particular whisky to sell out within twenty-four hours, leaving some K&L customers dazed and confused by the insane demand.

The combination of age, rarity, and price we've been able to provide has sent whisky drinkers from all over the country flocking to our website (almost more than we can handle at times!). We're pleased to report that a new crop of casks has come in for 2017 and the same great Brexit pricing we began offering in 2016 will continue through the current year as well. Take a look at three of our new editions and see what you think. Just don't sleep on this newsletter, as history has a way of repeating itself each time we release a new batch of Old Particular barrels.

2001 Auchroisk 15 Year Old "Old Particular" K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$59.99) Most people still think of sherry-matured malts when they think of the Speyside district, but the region's bread and butter is still the soft, fruity, charming, malt-driven style you'll find inside this bottle. Part of the Johnnie Walker empire, Auchroisk is occasionally seen here in the States as a limited-edition release, but rarely as a consistently bottled single malt expression. This particular specimen is like a fresh blast of summer, with a huge dose of peaches and apricots on the nose that continue to emanate from the bottle once opened. The palate is seductively sweet, but also light on its feet, with flavors of stone fruit, maple syrup and bit of compote on the finish before it turns malty once again and beckons another taste. Bottled at 54.5%, you'd never know this whisky was running at full proof. It's as relaxing and airy as a summer breeze, making this the perfect dram for your backyard barbecues and July campfire evenings.



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1988 North British 28 Year Old “Old Particular” K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Cask Strength Grain Whisky (\$69.99) Our mission to bring fine Scottish grain whisky to the world continues as we offer you another 25-plus-year-old gem for well under \$100. This 28-year-old cask-strength edition of North British, Scotland’s pre-eminent source of all things grain, is like a decadent dose of everything sweet from cotton candy to maple syrup, and has a finish that runs the gamut from sugary cereal milk to a mocha latte finale. On the nose it almost comes across like a lighter, yet more concentrated bourbon, with the oak dominating the senses, but the elegance at 51.3% ABV is unmatched by any American whiskey currently available. This is a silky and rich whisky from start to finish, made even more attractive by its ridiculous price-point-to-age ratio.



2001 Bowmore 15 Year Old “Old Particular” K&L Exclusive Single Bourbon Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Whisky (\$89.99) Oh, the allure of pure bourbon barrel-aged Bowmore! It’s

been quite a while since we’ve found a pure American oak expression of the legendary Islay malt, but we’re back with a vengeance with the arrival of this 15-year-old cask-strength edition from Old Particular. Fans of the whisky stalwart will go absolutely bonkers for this one as it’s hands-down one of the best Bowmore casks we’ve ever bottled. The nose is a warm wave of sweet oak and gentle phenols, the smoke swirling just faintly behind all that vanilla. The palate is oily, then concentrated with more vanilla, then salty, then smoky, before finally releasing the peat and campfire elements that make Bowmore one of the most distinct whiskeys in the world. It’s the sweetness from the bourbon cask on the finish that won’t quit, however. While you may be imagining a heavy dose of Islay grit, this is one of the rounder and more oak-driven Bowmore editions we’ve ever tasted. At 58.5% you might expect a grizzly island beast, but what you actually get is a polished and stunningly rich expression of Bowmore that simply dazzles from the moment it hits your lips.



New Whisky Glass a Wise Choice, Indeed

By David Driscoll

There was a point in time when whisky drinkers would come to me in search of the proper whisky glassware and, judging by their levels of anxiety regarding the issue, you would have thought their very existence was hanging on their ultimate decision—à la the legendary “choose your glass wisely” scene in the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, in which the unwise choice is unpalatable, indeed. Truth be told, I’ve never advocated any particular whisky glass because I’ve never felt that there was one glass that stood out from the pack. Over the years I’ve used Glencairn, Riedel and various other options that are generally ubiquitous in the homes of most whisky fans and behind the bar at fine establishments. But when posed with the question, “which glass should I use?” I’ve generally answered by saying, “I don’t really have a favorite.”

That was the case for most of my whisky-drinking career until this past February when I visited Melbourne for the first time and discovered the **Denver & Liely Whisky Glass (\$39.99)**, the first whisky vessel I’ve found that performs equally as well with ice as without it (and actually gives you the room for both options). I drank with the Denver & Liely glass for the entire Melbourne visit, then brought one back with me where I tried it at home with various spirits. The result was the same each time: I loved it.

Not long after I posted my Melbourne blog, Denver Cramer (half of Denver & Liely) reached out to express his thanks and ask if I might be interested in carrying his glassware at K&L. Naturally, I said yes. That being said, I’ve never sold much glassware, nor do I have

any idea how many whisky drinkers are looking for the perfect \$40 whisky glass. For that reason, I was cautious and conservative with my initial order, so there are only 24 glasses available in this first go-around. If you’re like the pre-Denver & Liely version of me, and you believe there is no one great whisky glass available, this might be the one to settle that issue for you. It certainly did for me. It’s been the only glass I’ve used at home for whisky since I returned home from my trip.

Choose wisely!



Under-the-Radar Elixirs

By David Othenin-Girard

You may have noticed that the spirits category is absolutely on fire. The reason our spirits department is so turned up is not only because we're committed to selecting the very finest and most exciting spirits, respecting our customers' tastes and needs, while doing so in an unpretentious and inviting manner—it's also because we've been able to connect with people in a personal way through our online marketing platform. This incredible tool has been extremely advantageous for our customers who are really in tune with what's going on in the wide world of wine and spirits, but also allows less-devoted aficionados to engage in a new and meaningful way. However, our ever-expanding base of highly knowledgeable and discerning customers has one glaring drawback, when trying to sell limited-production and hard-to-get items: demand significantly outpaces supply. What's even scarier is that the pool of interested individuals continues to grow exponentially. For example, we've been in the Southern California market for over 10 years now—it's a competitive and growing market and K&L is easily the highest quality, most reasonable fine wine and spirits store in the area. Yet I'm constantly meeting people who are very much interested in quality libations who have never heard of us. There are more than 40 million people in California who can order via our website at extremely competitive shipping rates and acquire the world's rarest products at the touch of a button, and if only a fraction of .1% of those people actually do that, we'd be out of every specialty item we stock in mere moments. So sometimes instead of standing up and shouting about some new incredible find, we like to let it simmer, to let our best customers, who spend a bit more time examining the website or chewing the fat with us in the store, stumble upon something of great quality without overt direction. Luckily, you actually read what we write here—you've made it to this special page of 2017's only Spirits newsletter. So indulge in these exceptional stealthy stimulants, but with lips pursed, please. These under-the-radar elixirs are only for you, the few:

1995 Thierry Darrimajou "Domaine du Berdet" 21 Year Old K&L Exclusive Armagnac (\$79.99) **1999 Thierry Darrimajou "Domaine du Berdet" 17 Year Old K&L Exclusive Armagnac (\$69.99)** Everything about Thierry Darrimajou is big. His big, booming voice matches his substantial size and seems to reverberate around the tasting room as he describes his wares. He's got a gregarious laugh, bold sensibility, and a drive that is uncommon among the Landes. He uses exclusively new Gascogne oak and works the brandies hard to create some of the cleanest most elegant Bas-Armagnacs we've ever come across. Easily some of the most approachable and inviting brandies in the store.



1974 L'Encantada 42 Year Old "Le Sablé" Bas-Armagnac (\$139.99) The small bottler Encantada was started by four Armagnac super fans as an endeavor to uncover the most authentic and exceptional estates throughout Gascogne. Encantada identifies those great estates that might not be able to sustain commercial production without their expertise. They typically bottle single casks and never cut or filter the eau-de-vie before bottling. The Sablé estate, which no longer produces Armagnac, was planted to 100% Baco. They only produced brandy in a handful of vintages in the '70s. Their Armagnacs were aged at the estate in new oak barrels before being discovered by Encantada and bottled exclusively for K&L. An incredible rarity and a treat for any lover of old spirits.



2000 El Jolgorio "Vintage" Espadin Mezcal (\$89.99) Distilled by José Cortés Santiago in 2000 from 10-year-old espadin and harvested entirely from the hillside behind the Cortés palenque before being rested for 17 years in glass at full strength. Jose is the family patriarch of one of Matalan's finest and most well-regarded palenques and this was his final distillation before passing the torch. A unique expression of his lifework, unmatched by any product on the market, representing his legacy as well as the spirit of Oaxaca. It should be consumed with reverence for this great man and wonder for the unique place from which it came.

Hochstadter's Family Reserve 16 Year Old Cask Strength Straight Rye Whiskey (\$189.99) This exceptional old rye whiskey is one of the few old aged, stated ryes available and has been widely lauded as being one of the finest new releases in years. While of course it's not at all inexpensive, this whiskey actually represents an incredible amount of value considering where the industry is today. Booker's Rye sold instantly for \$300 at 13 years old. Whistle Pig Boss Hog sells out every time and the new 14-year-old release is going to be close to \$500. This modest little whiskey is sourced from Alberta Distillers, but with significantly more depth and intensity than most Canadian rye. Despite the opaque nature of the origins, there's no question about the quality of this cask-strength offering. While it's relatively available at the moment, it will be very hard to get in the near future as only 7,500 bottles were produced. Expect a big, fruity style, bold and complex with that classic rye spice lingering behind the rich fruit and sweet oak. Long and textured with the distinct feeling of old whiskey that you just can't fake. The finish goes for ages. A legend by any measure and when you include the relatively affordable price point this is a must-buy in our book.



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Wathen's Private Barrel "K&L Exclusive" Single Barrel Straight Kentucky Bourbon Whiskey (\$39.99) This exceptional single cask from the Medley family is on another level. The Medleys are Kentucky legends and some of the few NDPs (non-distiller producers) who actually get to dictate how their distilling partners produce the whiskey that they contract. That means truly taking over a distillery and producing bourbon to their exact specifications. The result is a portfolio of whiskeys with unique character at exceptional prices. This single cask was selected with Sam Medley and is easily one of the "smoothest" whiskeys in the store. I don't love to use that term because it's generally meaningless, but what I mean here is that there isn't a sharp edge anywhere in this bottle. Round, supple, rich and comforting without being cloying or overtly sweet, this is a real drinker's whiskey. Notable are the aromatics of spiced honey, deep, exotic mahogany, baked vanilla beans and subtle candied citrus. The palate is crème brûlée over pepper and spice. The finish is easy and long without a hint of heat. This one was Sam's favorite of the day and it is without a doubt ours as well.



Ocho Plata Tequila (\$42.99) Ocho Reposado Tequila (\$46.99) Ocho Añejo Tequila (\$54.99) We quietly brought this important and exceptional tequila brand back into the store a few months ago. The brainchild of "Tequila Ambassador" Tomas Estes and master distiller Carlos Camarena, Ocho was the first brand to truly treat agave like the terroir-driven cultivar that it is. Distilled slowly from single-estate agave in the highlands of Jalisco and aged in third-to-fourth-fill barrels to highlight the differences in terroir and avoid masking the complexity of the agave spirit, Ocho reigns supreme as the finest boutique Tequila on the market. For years we couldn't get a good price on this special brand—but we never quit. So please enjoy these single-estate tequilas at this incredible price and ponder that joy that the spirit of Jalisco can bring when treated with the respect that it deserves.



From Apples, to Order: Copper & Kings American Dry Gin

By David Driscoll

Here's a new gin expression that likely none of you have tried and no one has yet sold at retail but us here at K&L. It was custom-made for us by Joe Heron and the team over at Copper & Kings in Louisville following an evening my co-worker Julio and I spent drinking gin and tonics out on the patio at the distillery this past April.

"We only make this for us," Joe explained after we commented on how delicious the drinks tasted. "We like gin, and we can make it here, so we do," he continued. While C&K is indeed making what I think is one of the best American gins on the market, they're doing it in a way that few other producers (if any) are doing. Let's break it down:

Almost all gins are made with grain neutral spirit as the base.

Almost all gin producers purchase that grain neutral spirit on the bulk market (it's a dirty secret). Very few producers distill their own base spirit for gin. Even fewer use apples as the base material.

Yet, because C&K is a brandy distillery, Joe and his team use brandy as the base for their American dry gin, adding a botanical soak and basket to their standard double pot distillation process. The production is no different than distilling a batch of C&K American apple brandy, just with the addition of juniper berries, coriander, angelica, orris and other dry botanicals tossed into the low wine for a long steep before the second distillation begins. Once that first 35% ABV distillate is thoroughly flavored, a basket is hung in the pot still with citrus peels and lavender to further infuse that vapor as it passes through the chamber during the second run. The result is a flavored

apple brandy, or an American dry gin—call it what you like. I call it gin. Delicious gin!

One thing to know about **Copper & Kings American Dry Gin (\$34.99)** is that it's made on the smallest pot still in the facility, which according to Joe only yields about 120 bottles worth of gin per batch—exactly the amount we ordered in our initial 10-case purchase. Smelling my first glass of the newly arrived hooch, I can already sense the differences from the bottle I originally brought back from the distillery this past spring. There's a bit more apple must on the nose and the finish is creamier and tangier in profile. My point in mentioning that is: this is real small-batch gin, and it will taste a little bit different each time we order it. Joe is making it especially for us each time, so while the recipe will remain the same, the subtle nuances of the apple brandy base will vary from batch to batch.

Other than the wildcard of a base material, the C&K American dry gin drinks much like a classic London dry style. Bright juniper notes lifted by the coriander, with a fresh and spicy finish. In a gin and tonic, it's absolute heaven. It's also my new favorite gin in the store. I highly recommend getting one.



North Shore: This Gin Goes to Eleven

By David Driscoll

If there was ever a classic example that demonstrates just how competitive the gin market has become today (and the spirits market in general), North Shore is it. Back in 2009, when I took over the Spirits department at K&L, North Shore was my first real addition to our selection. I had spent some time hanging out with bartenders Erik Ellestad, Jennifer Colliau, Craig Lane, and Erik Adkins over at the now-defunct Heaven's Dog on Mission Street—at one point easily the best bar in San Francisco. We were discussing the exciting new world of “craft” gin (there were maybe three or four new ones back then!) and Ellestad told me the North Shore 11 was his favorite. We sat at the bar tasting small pours of various gins side by side, and there was no doubt: the North Shore was the clear winner. I ordered a few bottles for the store the next day, opened them for the staff, and watched the madness take hold.

From that point on we were all huge North Shore fans at K&L. The staff was amazed, we were selling bottles by the case, and Sonja Kassebaum—the distillery owner—was making regular trips out from Chicago to do events with us. That momentum lasted for about two years until the gin world absolutely exploded and began pickling itself in a veritable sea of saturation. All of a sudden our customers wanted new gins—non stop—every single time they came to visit. The shelf became a revolving door of boozy experiments, wild concoctions, haphazard distillates, and transitory faces. Years later, North Shore's dominance had all but been forgotten.

The pendulum is now swinging back the other way, however. After years of tasting through bizarre recipes and amateurish adventures, I see a lot of customers returning home to the basics. It's no different than being young and wide-eyed. You want to see the world and know what's out there—to date all kinds of people and understand what's possible in life—but eventually you settle down and gravitate back to the basics. That's happened to me recently with gin, which is why I've been drinking gallons of North Shore recently—the gin that originally brought me to the dance. The gin that made me love gin because it tastes like really good gin!

You know who else loves gin? Sonja Kassebaum, which is why she and her husband Derek started the North Shore distillery in the first place back in 2004—not because

they eventually wanted to make whiskey, but because they wanted to make gin. They were pioneers of the American craft gin movement, focusing on the botanical spirit long before it was cool again.

The opportunity to be artistic with the botanicals and creative with the recipes was what drove Sonja and Derek to open their own distillery. Wanting to create something different from what was available on the market, they released the **North Shore Gin No. 6 (\$31.99)** back in 2005, one of the first American gins to use cardamom and lavender—a standard practice today among many small producers. Not only did they want a new gin, they wanted clean gin. Fresh gin. Bright gin. Gin that tasted more vibrant than the standard pour. What they quickly learned, however, was just how picky gin drinkers can be (as I also learned after sending various bottles to my grandmother, the ultimate gin connoisseur). It turns out that gin's focal point—the juniper—was pretty important to a number of classic enthusiasts, who had a hard time coming over to the North Shore No. 6. Thus, the **North Shore Gin No. 11 (\$31.99)** was born, with a heavy juniper recipe (because it goes to eleven—yes, they named it after Spinal Tap).

“As that point, there were few distilleries that were making multiple styles of gin,” Sonja told me recently. “We were the first distillery making different gins to play differently in cocktails.”

People were totally confused. “Why is that bottle white and the other one green?” customers would ask all the time. Two gins? Why two? Today, it's common for a distillery to have more than two gins and to make a navy strength, an Old Tom, and a sloe gin, to boot! But it wasn't always that way. These days there are plenty of new and bright-eyed gin customers who don't even know about North Shore and their early dominance. They think this modern movement began with Bruichladdich's Botanist or Monkey 47 (just like Nirvana fans who had never heard of the Pixies).

Maybe, now that you're all grown up, you can go back and revisit some of the classics to give yourself a better perspective. Like an old Motörhead song, these gins still kick major ass.



The World's Next Great Balsamic

By David Driscoll

We've been preaching the gospel of Camut for as long as I can remember. As I often tell customers, there are few genres of wine and spirits in which I can unequivocally declare a "world's best," but in the case of Calvados there's Camut and then there's everything else. From the age and condition of the family orchards to the meticulous sorting process to the blending and maturation, there's simply no other distiller in Normandy—or the world, for that matter—who's making fruit spirits with the same complexity, pureness of flavor and utter awesomeness. I've been visiting the Camut brothers, Emmanuel and Jean-Gabriel, at their grandfather's original estate for seven years now, getting to know the two giants (literally and figuratively—they're both quite tall!) of apple brandy quite intimately. It wasn't until my last visit, however (possibly because it was the first time I could speak with the brothers with a more intermediate grasp of the French language), that Emmanuel felt comfortable sharing with me a lingering secret. "I need to show you something, David," he said to me cryptically after dinner, his voice quivering under the weight of strong drink. "It's in the shed behind the barn." I was both intrigued and utterly nervous.

There was nothing but darkness and cold winter air as we walked into the icy Norman night, through the Camut orchards, and toward the old shed Emmanuel had mentioned. As we approached the looming structure, he took out a flashlight, fumbling the key of the padlock, and opened the door into the small room, revealing under the glare of the lamp hundreds of small barrels of various shapes and sizes, stacked in rows according to type. "This is my new obsession," Emmanuel said with a grin. What was in these barrels? Not Calvados and not cider, but rather balsamic. At the beginning of the millennium, Emmanuel was offered a bottle of traditional balsamic vinegar by some Italian friends. He was taken by the word "traditional" on the bottle because, as he would come to find out, it belonged to a protected appellation of vinegars that followed rigorous production guidelines. The vinegar was only sold in 100-milliliter bottles and was both elaborate and expensive, representing only about .01% of all Italian balsamics. The experience was transformative, apparently—he had never known balsamic of this quality. Being the artisan producer that he is, Emmanuel decided to research the process of making traditional balsamic vinegar and applied it to the base material he knew best: apples.

The particularity of the traditional process is the attention given to cooking the must and concentrating the flavor. To recreate that quality, Emmanuel uses two 200-liter copper pots heated gently by a wood fire. Whereas the Italians use a variety of grape that results in roughly 17% sugars, Emmanuel's apple must—composed of interesting Norman varieties—only results in 5%, and thus three times the concentration. Next comes a long decanting



period, done during winter, where about 15-20% of the production is tossed out to keep the must as clear and clean as possible. During spring, the must is transferred into barrels in which a slow fermentation process begins. The vinegar is aged for more than a decade, during which it loses roughly 10% of its volume each year from evaporation. With each year that passes, Emmanuel moves the liquid into smaller and smaller barrels, made of different woods like chestnut and acacia, some so small that you could hold them comfortably with one hand. That's as much as Emmanuel was willing to share with me about the process, and at that time he didn't want me taking any photos of the shed. "This is a secret, David," he mentioned again. "I'm not ready for the world to know about this yet."

A year and a half later, however, Emmanuel Camut—the world's foremost authority of all things apple—is finally ready to share a bit of his Norman magic with us. He reached out to me this past spring and asked if K&L might like to be the exclusive American outpost for his **Emmanuel Camut Vinaigre Balsamique de Cidre (100ml \$34.99)** Vinaigre Balsamique de Cidre, an elixir that in its appearance is as black and dense as that cold winter's night we spent back in the shed. Oozing like maple syrup out of the bottle, it's astonishingly rich in flavor, with a harmonious balance of both sweet and sour. You only need one drop on a piece of bread, a tomato, or even a slice of finely cooked steak to enhance the flavor of each bite immensely. All of the apples used for the vinegar came from a Norman orchard where no chemicals or herbicides have ever been used and where—per the norm for Calvados orchards—cows graze openly in a symbiotic relationship with the apple trees. Emmanuel's vinegar is so concentrated, flavorful, and rich in character that just a single drop carries with it a symphony of flavor. While the bottles are only 100ml in volume, each has more than 2,000 drops. Our initial order is a mere 120 bottles, most of which will likely be purchased and consumed by K&L staff. It is without a doubt the best vinegar of any kind I've ever tasted, but I'm far from an expert. What I do know, however, is that most of my colleagues feel the exact same way. Basically, if you thought the Camut Calvados was life-changing, wait until you try the balsamic.

The Lore and Lure of Highland Park

By David Driscoll

I've recently been revisiting the whiskies of Highland Park with great relish after a long absence of Orkney blood in my veins. I remember being a young, up-and-coming whisky buyer back in the day and hearing all these veteran drinkers rhapsodize about how good the island distillery was—its inherent complexity, its potential for greatness, and its status as a top-tier single malt in the greater world of Scotch whisky. For me, however, Highland Park was never one of my favorites.

Why? I don't know. Maybe I was looking beyond the obvious. Maybe I was contrarian in nature as a more youthful drinker. Maybe I just didn't get it. What matters is: I'm getting it now.

The evolution of the palate is an interesting thing. In most cases, at least from my experience, drinkers tend to move from bold and obvious flavors to more nuanced and discreet complexity over time. That's how I've evolved as a wine drinker, and my development is decisively similar to that of my colleagues as well. When it comes to whisky these days, rarely am I looking for power. Much like I'm turned off by some blowhard who can't shut up (the irony isn't lost on me there), I'm similarly less enthused by whiskies that are all punch and no prowess. It's for that reason that I found myself utterly charmed this week by a whisky I had previously written off: the Highland Park 12-year. The combination of ripe and supple stone fruits, bolstered by creamy vanilla and just a whisper of peat, is just what I've been looking for of late because it's all so well integrated. As I pondered previously: is the HP 12 really that good, or am I just being bombarded by mediocrity? It's hard to know for sure, but either way I'm happy, so who really cares?

When I saw the new Highland Park "Valkyrie" Isle of Orkney Single Malt Scotch Whisky (\$69.99) show up last month, I was really curious to see how it compared. The packaging marks the beginning of a complete make-over for the entire portfolio. Historically, I've not been intrigued by the distillery's Viking mythology series. I've spent countless hours in the Heathrow duty-free shop looking at the Valhalla bottles, wondering where the Edrington Group was going here, thinking the heritage of a legendary brand was getting caught up in too much legendary heritage. All of this lore regarding the history of Orkney and the Vikings that once dwelled there, but little talk of the whisky itself—and for a premium, no less! I tend to tune out that noise and look elsewhere when limited-edition bottles like that are released. However, when they're priced under \$75, I'm open to discussion.

Highland Park's new Valkyrie edition, much like its previous releases, is long on Viking mythology and short on specifics, but that doesn't mean it doesn't taste good. I did a side-by-side comparison with the

12 and 18-year this week and felt that, as a middle ground between the two, the whisky holds up quite well for the \$70 price. More importantly, it tastes like the best parts of both. While the 12-year is light and fruity, the classic 18-year is remarkably more sherried. With the Valkyrie, you get the malty, lightly peated texture of the 12 with some of the rancio, cakebread and richness of the 18. From what I understand, about half of the barley used in the Valkyrie was peated, which is higher than what's used in the 12 and 18. That extra kick helps to mask any rawness from the whisky's younger components and was clearly a good move. On the finish is a wave of dark chocolate and earth from the sherry, bolstered by more smoke.

The packaging marks the beginning of a complete make-over for the entire portfolio. I'm normally not one to write whisky reviews like this in the classic sense, but given the all-or-nothing reviews I've read thus far online, it seems people either hate this whisky because of its NAS (non age statement) status and consider it pure marketing, or completely love it and think it tastes great. I thought I'd chime in. As someone who in the past has avoided Highland Park for those former criticisms, I have to say I'm with the latter group of drinkers in this case. I think the Valkyrie tastes pretty damn good, and I'm much more inclined to appreciate the gorgeous packaging and the mood of the messaging when I'm satisfied with the whisky itself.

I'm not at all opposed to Highland Park's new direction of Viking-oriented themes and Orkney lore. In fact, I think it's an interesting approach and a smart move in terms of distinguishing the whisky for a younger, Game of Thrones-watching generation. What I appreciate most here is that the Valkyrie delivers its finest work on the nose and the finish, rather than the mid-palate. These are two elements of whisky appreciation I appreciate more as I get older: how it teases my nostrils and how it comes together as a unit on the back end. There's a robust sherry aroma right out of the bottle, and sweet, concentrated hit of Oloroso richness on the finish that dries out a bit with the smoke, but clearly makes itself known. While Highland Park went heavier on Viking heritage this time around, they didn't do so at the expense of the whisky.

I'm finally coming around to Highland Park as a longtime whisky drinker. Perhaps a bit late, but better late than never.





Big Turkey: Wild Turkey Decades

By David Othenin-Girard

It's no secret that I love Wild Turkey. Whether it's their incredible commitment to quality, the wonderful people, the gorgeous new distillery (sentimentality for Old Ripy, the ancient wooden distillery that was demolished recently, aside) every part of Wild Turkey resonates with my bourbon aesthetic. Of course, the real reason we love the Kickin' Chicken is that their whiskey is fabulous.

It's fitting that I sampled Wild Turkey's new Master's Keep Decades release alongside the newest Russell family member to join the WT team, Bruce Russell. The Decades contains some of the oldest whiskey ever released by WT and is a milestone for Jimmy, Eddie and Bruce (should we just start saying Brucey?).

I met up with Bruce recently to discuss the barrel program and examine the new Decades bottling. After only moments together I knew that the Wild Turkey name would be in good hands in this next generation. He's got some mighty big shoes to fill, but he certainly seems up to the task. Tasting with Bruce is a pleasure. I look forward to many years of tasting great whiskey with this man.

While Bruce is down to earth and fun, this whiskey is serious as hell. Apparently, when Eddie located these old stocks in some off-site warehouses, they

had enough old whiskey to create a special release right there. Campari only managed to digitize their whiskey inventory in 2010 and these experimental batches (not different in any way other than their age from the standard WT recipe) are hidden all over Kentucky. The original blend would have been made up entirely of these old casks but for the protests of the one and only Mr. Jimmy Russell. The family patriarch and seven-decade veteran of the whiskey business still has strong opinions about how his whiskey should taste. "If it says Wild Turkey on the bottle, it should taste like Wild Turkey," I can hear him saying. It's an interesting commitment to a style and his consumers, which has served the Russells and the Wild Turkey brand well over the last half century. Indeed, the Wild Turkey brand was always about capturing a certain flavor profile and for decades was not produced in one specific location. They used several distilleries to create their whiskey.

So, they added a bit of 10-year (apparently about as much 10 as 20) to a blend of mostly 14 to 16-year-old whiskeys and the "Decades" was born.

Wild Turkey "Master's Keep - Decades" Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey (\$129.99) The result is something wonderfully complex and full of deep, dense bourbon spice, a tinge of herbaceous mint and nutty roasted vanilla and plenty of power for those who crave it. A big, bold classic Wild Turkey in a way that last year's 17 was distinctly not, but offering a rare example of what this special whiskey does with significantly more age in barrel. Expect tons of texture at 104 proof and a sweet caramel finish balancing out that bold Turkey spice. I'm not at all surprised to love this—and I absolutely do!

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