

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-11 **By Louis Perlman, USA**

This article is brought to you by 'Malt Maniacs'; an international collective of more than two dozen fiercely independent malt whisky aficionados. Since 1997 we have been enjoying and discussing the pleasures of single malt whisky with like-minded whisky lovers from all over the world. In 2010 our community had members from 15 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Taiwan, Australia and South Africa. You can find more details on: www.maltmaniacs.org.



Scotch vs Bourbon **It's all in the Yeast**

This is one of those things that happens when, as my wife like to say, I have too much free time on my hands. One of my favorite single malt scotches is the Springbank 10 year old, 100 proof. And one of my favorite bourbons is the Four Roses Single Barrel, which is also bottled at 100 proof. So the obvious thing to do was a scotch vs bourbon showdown.

Well, things didn't work out as planned. The Single Barrel is a much 'bigger' expression than the Springbank, and it pretty much obliterated the Springer on my taste buds. This has nothing to do with scotch vs. bourbon, the same thing would have happened with something like a Macallan Cask strength. So I put the idea aside, waiting for a better matched pair.

Now one thing about the Four Roses distillery. By using two different mash bills, one 60% corn, the other 75%, and five different yeasts, they have the ability to make ten different bourbons. The Single Barrel releases at the time I purchased my bottle, used the OBSK yeast, which is the spicy yeast, which in bourbon-talk emphasizes the rye influence. The OBSK is closest to the flavor profile that most people identify as 'bourbon'.



But the distillery has a program where individual retailers can come down to the distillery and pick out individual barrels from all of the combinations, giving bourbon lovers a chance to do some serious comparisons. These are bottled at barrel strength, whatever that may come out to. When a bunch of these barrels hit the shelves at the end of last year for \$54.95, I picked up an OBSO and OBSV, rich fruity and delicate fruity yeasts, respectively. And wouldn't you know it, when I compared the two, the OBSO overwhelmed the OBSV, just like the Single Barrel did to the Springbank 10/100.

Moving on, my 'house bottle' of Glenfiddich 15 Solera Reserve was just about finished, and had to be replaced. So just what is the house bottle?, you may ask. Well, I have been largely successful in banishing 40-43% ABV, chill filtered official bottlings from my liquor cabinet. So it's pretty much only distilleries such as Ardbeg, Springbank, Bruichladdich, etc., and plenty of independent bottlings. The only problem is that guests tend to be very wary when I offer them a dram. I get lots of comments like 'Gordon & MacPhail is the bottler and Linkwood is the distillery, or is it the

opposite?'. So I decided to keep one bottle of something that everybody would recognize, and at normal proof to allow for driving home later on. The Solera Reserve was under \$40, and it ably fulfilled its duties. I was all set to replace it, when Glenfiddich announced the Distillery Edition. Also 15 years old, but bottled at 102 proof with no chill filtering. It was initially priced at around \$50, so that's what I went with. The heck with the higher proof, they can always add water.



And you can figure out what happens next, back to the scotch vs bourbon comparison, this time with the Distillery Edition and OBSV. This time around, it was much closer. The OBSV was slightly 'bigger', this barrel came out at 106 proof, and I would describe the Distillery Edition as more floral than fruity. Wait, that's the OBSQ, the floral yeast.

Well, I don't need a third barrel strength bottle of Four Roses, so this is where it's going to end. But that brings something else to mind. We know that scotch distilleries play around with different types of barley and peating at the front end, and different casks at the back end. Maybe distilleries will start experimenting with different yeasts as well, in the never ending search for new avenues of creativity.

2010 Holiday Buyers Guide

For a long time, I was way behind on actually opening and drinking new acquisitions. Once my stock of open bottles reached a critical mass, there was hardly any room in my cabinet left for any more, and there weren't any major gaps of any particular style of single malt scotch. So I instituted a new bottle management program. The first step was to finish off as many open bottles as possible, since the contents can deteriorate, or at least change somewhat, once the level drops below a third or so. And now, my goal is to finish newly opened bottles within a year or two, rather than having them sit around forever. It ended up that the planets were properly aligned, and I have opened some new, or fairly new, bottles over the last few months. So I'd like to present a holiday shopping guide of sorts. These are not tasting notes or ratings, you can easily find those elsewhere, but rather, information on why you would or wouldn't want to pick up these drams. And since the economy isn't particularly good in many parts of the world, I am going to take a good look at the price tag. Just because something is now marketed as a 'luxury product' doesn't mean that you have to end up with one bottle instead of two for the same amount of your hard earned cash.

Oban Distillers Edition (43%, OB d1994, b2008)

This is the second release of the Oban DE. While it isn't exactly brand new, the current price is. I have seen the DE for \$50 on the shelves in New York City, a whole lot less than the \$90-100 it originally went for. Some disclosure before I go any further, I have never really 'locked in' to the standard Oban 14, so I'm coming to the DE from the other direction.

The DE is finished in a fino sherry cask, which adds a drier touch to the Oban profile. It works well IMHO, using the more common oloroso could easily result in yet another sherry monster. Instead, the dryness rather nicely complements the underlying Oban character. In fact, I would say that Diageo has done a fine job with all of the Distillers Editions, avoiding the common pitfalls of finishing. This is a real winner at the new price.

Laphroaig 18 (48%, OB)

The 18 replaced the 15 in Laphroaig's lineup. With any heavily peated malt, there is always the question of how much it has mellowed with the extra aging. Laphroaig deals with this issue by bottling the 18 at the unusual 48% ABV, the same as with the Quarter Cask. And it works quite well. The 18 is definitely a mellow Laphroaig, but the higher proof makes up for it. And the 18 is dangerously drinkable as well, better have a dram of Quarter Cask or Cask strength as a warm up, or your bottle may go quickly.

The main controversy with the 18 has been the price tag. The initial price in the \$135-150 range did not go over well, to be honest about it. But [Binny's](#) now has in for \$100, and I paid even less locally. At the lower price, I'd say go for it if you are interested in mellower, older peat monster, but there are better alternatives at the high end of the price range.

Balvenie 14yo (43%, OB Rum Cask Finish) Balvenie 17yo (43%, OB Peated Cask Finish)

I tried both of the new Balvenie's at a tasting at [Astor Liquors](#) in NYC. The 14 is a very pleasant dram. The rum finishing is well integrated, with just a bit of sweetness added to the standard Balvenie profile. Just like with the Glenfiddich 21, so the Rum Cask Finishing department at William Grant is obviously on the ball. The 14 would be a very nice before-dinner or summer dram, and will probably be appreciated by non-scotch drinkers as well. With the street price in the \$52-60 range, this is definitely a must buy in today's market.

The 17 is the latest in the series, and is finished in a cask that previously held Balvenie peated malt, as opposed to the 17 Islay cask of some years ago. There is no word about where the peated Balvenie went, or if it will ever be released as a single malt. The effect is very subtle, this is not a peat monster. And that is part of the problem. The 17 just doesn't bring enough to the table to justify the \$130 price tag. There isn't a whole lot of extra depth and/or complexity from the extra three years of aging, and real peat monsters can be found elsewhere. And then there is one more issue.....

Amrut Fusion NAS (50%, OB)

All the way from India, the initial releases included versions made with unpeated Indian malt, peated malt from Scotland, and the Fusion, which combines both. There is no age statement, as maturation is rather fast due to the warm climate. As I haven't had a chance to sample the other expressions, it seems like the Fusion is about 20% peated. The smoke dovetails nicely with some light fruit and other sweeter notes, and worked well even while the weather was still nice. This is a really impressive effort for a newcomer. And Balvenie take note, the price is a very user friendly \$60.

Lagavulin 12yo Cask Strength Limited Edition 2010 (57.5%, OB b2009) Lagavulin Distillers Edition (43%, OB d1993, b2009)

The second release has finally made it over to the US. The first release was not terribly popular at \$150, and the price is now around \$90 (Warehouse Liquors at Broadway and Astor place in NYC has it now for a mere \$50). While the regular Lagavulin 16 is hardly a shrinking violet type of dram, the 12 gives up the four years of aging for a more direct attack. This one pulls no punches, and takes no prisoners. Some water is mandatory, but

hardly detracts from the party. There are some sweet notes mixed in with the peat, but there is no doubt about what dominates.

So is it worth the money? The best comparison is with the Ardbeg Corryvreckan, which costs about the same. Now both the Ardbeg 10 and Lagavulin 16 are aged in refill bourbon casks, to reduce the impact of the wood. But the cask strength versions go in different directions. Ardbeg uses French oak, which provides additional elements to the final product, while Lagavulin goes for even less cask contribution. Both approaches are equally valid, and accomplish what they set out to do. So yes, if you like the standard Lagavulin 16, the 12 is a nice contrast.

And I also must put in a few good words about the Lagavulin Distillers Edition. It is a very elegant dram, just the thing to end a meal with. Even my wife liked it, and she won't go anywhere near regular peated malts. I found it for \$70, which is worth the splurge, but at \$100, I'd probably pass.

Wishing you all many happy drams.



Louis Perlman was born in 1959. He got hooked on single malt Scotch whisky in the mid nineties - and his life has not been the same since. After stumbling around various web pages in those pre-historic days of the internet, he came across the announcement introducing the original Malt Madness page.

Louis works in IT and lives in New York, USA. As one of the three original malt maniacs, Louis started exchanging emails with Johannes van den Heuvel from Holland and Craig Daniels from Australia in 1997. Those e-mail exchanges gradually evolved into the Malt Maniacs site. While some senior maniacs are content to rest on their laurels, Louis tries to keep submitting fresh E-pistles regularly.