

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2010-01

By Nabil Mailloux

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.



The Smokeheads

M. L'abbe, I detest what you write, but I would give my life so that you may continue to write it.

- Purportedly, and possibly Voltaire.

Back in 2003, while at the Faculty of Education, where most Canadian educators are trained, we gathered for the first time together as a class. Some of us were older, some of us fresh out of our undergraduate degrees. I fell into the former category. We were settling in for our welcome lecture from the Dean of Education, when one last person entered the auditorium. I still remember seeing the same thought cross the eyes every one of the 750 candidates. How is he supposed to teach?

The man who had entered was one of the funniest, kindest, and good-hearted people who ever graced our halls. He was a blind, handicapped man who was also born with dwarfism. How was such a teacher to maintain the security of up to 36 students ranging from kindergarten through to grade 12. These were students who may be mischievous, or in the extreme, psychologically unstable. According to the law, we have parental responsibilities during the school day, so I remember thinking, is it possible that some careers or jobs are simply not meant for some individuals who have physical differences?

I do not claim to have the answer to this complex question, but a few years ago, an article came out which described how tobacco smoke can morphologically affect taste buds. If this were true, then is it within the realm of possibility that smokers may be compromising their ability to sense through their taste buds? If this were true, then is it possible that some of the literature written about food and whisky may be less reliable as a result of the authors' predilection for tobacco products?

For some time now, the scientific community has been debating the effects of tobacco on the human palate. As early as the 1930s and 40s, scientists had been conducting experiments on humans using specific taste markers. Specifically, in 1945, Hall and Blakesly recruited 60 individuals, 32 were smokers, 28 were non-smokers. They used each individual as their own control, by administering a taste agent, measuring the threshold at which they could detect it, then asking them to smoke and repeating the test at regular intervals to see if there was an effect. Sure enough, they found that 73% of people showed a decreased sensitivity, while surprisingly, 16%



showed an increased sensitivity. The subjects' sensitivity returned to normal on average around 45 min. later, but in some cases it took several hours.

Clearly, it is possible that in certain individuals, and it is hard to know in whom, tobacco smoke can significantly affect the palate's sensitivity. These findings were consistent with those of Kathleen Redington at the Department of Neurology, Division of Cognitive Neuroscience, Cornell Medical College in 1983. She also found that after smoking, the ability to rate the pleasantness of sweet, salt, and quinine(bitter), was also depressed. This was true of both smokers and non-smokers. Neil Grunberg (2002) also found that the administration of nicotine and smoking decreased the preference for sweet tasting, high-caloric food, and even suggested that this might explain why smokers have a lower body weight, on average. Now there's some food for thought!

The last study was the most recent, and it was the one that set me on this smoking hot trail. A group of Greek researchers from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, found that habitual smokers had flatter taste buds as compared to non smokers, though the number of taste buds remained the same in both groups. They also found that smoking tobacco decreased the blood flow into those taste buds. Importantly, they also measured significant decreases taste sensitivity in those who smoked tobacco.



Now it is important to note that I did find one article that did claim to have shown no effect at all. Such is the trouble with science, it's hard to know which studies to believe, sort of like climate change. However, I found more studies claiming to have found an effect rather than no effect at all.



But what does all of this have to do with whisky? Well, it's not hard to connect the dots. How many of us have a veritable library of whisky books on our shelves, full of tasting notes, written by industry experts? Well, if they are making their living tasting whisky so that you can make better buying decisions, which of these experts is reliable? Have they compromised their ability to do their job by changing the morphological structure of their palates as a result of tobacco use? Before we proceed any further, we might distinguish between a *habitual* and *non-habitual* smoker. After all, it is one thing to enjoy a nice

Cohiba one night, then rate a malt the next. It is quite another to be constantly using tobacco, engendering semi-permanent changes in the morphology of your palate.

Consequently - now this is where I flush all possibility of becoming an industry whisky writer down the drain - should professional tasters be smokers? Should they not take the same care with their palates as a surgeon might take care of her hands? If smokers have a harder time detecting sweet, salt, and bitterness, then perhaps smokers are not the best candidates to be whisky writers? Remember, my teaching colleague most likely never got hired to teach in a traditional classroom! This is not to say that you shouldn't enjoy a cigar with your malt, but if you make a living rating malts, perhaps you owe it to your readership not to become a habitual smoker?



Having said that, one of the discussions with my "editor" did bring up a good point. What if tasting notes made by a smoker are simply tasting notes that are written *for* smokers? This would mean that the notes that are prepared by a habitual smoker may be useful to the smoking segment of the population. Or more precisely, perhaps there might be two classes of critic, two types of tasting notes? It is entirely possible that tasters could be asked to make a full disclosure of their status as (non)-smoker. The intent would not be to stigmatize, but rather to inform the reader, much the way any reader uses notes to decide if a critic has a palate similar to his/her own. I know this all sounds somewhat Orwellian, and I'm not actually proposing we go forward with such measures, but rather to at least consider the consequences of tobacco use on the validity of tasting notes.

In light of the emerging science on the relationship between tobacco and taste, some may also question the wisdom of joint marketing of tobacco products and alcohol. I have chosen for personal reasons not to partake of any tobacco products; but knowing that it may dampen my sense of taste is just one more reason not to do so. In an industry that prides itself on the complexity of aroma and flavour, is it wise to suggest that tobacco products be paired with malt whisky? I don't know the answer to this. Nor would I want to tell people not to enjoy a nice Churchill with their Dalmore Cigar Malt. But I think it fair that people at least be informed prior to making that call.



Many of my colleagues in the whisky field do enjoy smoking and I hope they will still call me a friend after reading this. I can only hope that they feel as strongly as I do about Voltaire's possible thoughts on the matter. Whether or not he wrote his sentiments on free speech in his letter to M. L'abbe La Riche, it is an essential pillar in the Malt Maniacs' philosophy, and the reason we maniacs can ask these difficult questions.

And now for some malts with tobacco tendencies:

Kavalan NAS 'Solist' (58.4%, OB, sherry cask#S060703012, 608 Bts.)

Colour: Mahogany. Nose: chocolate, antique store, leather, sherry, pipe tobacco. With water, candied nuts, maple syrup. Palate: Sweet, spicy, sherry, dried fruit, oranges, toffee. Finish: long, spicy, leather and tobacco. **85 points.**

Glen Scotia 17yo 1992/2009 (59.4%, A. D. Rattray, Sherry Butt #1, 670 Bts.)

Colour: Amber. Nose: Shoe polish, toffee, orange peel, faint smoke, raisins, nutmeg, leather. Palate: Sweet, spice at the front, dried fruit, raisins, sherry, citrus, tobacco, faint peat, peppery. Finish: medium long on pepper and tobacco. **82 points.**

Port Ellen 25yo 1982 (58.2%, Douglas of Drumlarig for Kingfisher, Selection 2008, Sherry Butt) Colour: Amber. Nose: peat, mint, leather, allspice, nutmeg. With water, musty cinnamon, vanilla, honey. Palate: semi-dry, peat, spice at the front, cinnamon, dried fruit, sourness. With water, tobacco, raisins, toffee, coffee. Finishes on peat and tobacco. **82 points.**

Connemara 2001/2009 (59.2%, OB for Limburg, Peated, cask#K01/10 1196) Colour: Straw. Nose: Sweet, farmy, cereal, malt, vanilla, compost, overripe melon, wet hay, apple juice, gentle peat. Water brings out tropical fruitiness and some resin. Palate: Sweet, nuts, spice all over, pepper, peat, malt, mint, leather, tobacco. Water highlights grapes, bananas, and some anise. Finish: Long on tobacco and mint. **88 points.**

Smoking Islay 15yo 1993/2009 (57%, Blackadder Raw Cask, Cask ref BA2009/417, 270 Bts.) Colour: gold, peach hues. Nose: Early, wet hay, heather, vanilla, overripe apples, gentle peat, leather, tobacco. Water releases cinnamon and banana. Palate: Spice at the front, peat, iodine, medicinal, saltiness. Water highlights some sweetness, walnuts and ashes. Finish, medium long on ashes and fruit. **82 points.**

Lagavulin 12yo 'Special Release' (56.4%, OB, Bottled +/- 2009) Colour: Straw. Nose: Iodine, peat, vanilla, melon, brown sugar, bread proofing, pepper, mint, sweet. Palate: Peat, sweet vanilla, minty, lemon, pepper, ripe apples, tobacco. Finish: longish on minty ashes. **88 points.**

Glendronach 37yo 1972/2009 (53.3%, OB LMW, Oloroso Sherry Butt, Cask#705, 275 Bts.) Colour: Mahogany. Nose: Sweet leather, tobacco, coffee, peppermint, cloves, sherry, toffee. Palate: Sweet, dried fruit, nutmeg, spicy. Peppermint, chalky, coffee, cough medicine, hint of peat. Finish: long on peppermint and nutmeg. **85 points.**

Distilled in Speyside 39yo 1970/2009 (54.4%, The Perfect Dram, First Fill Oloroso Butt, 240 Bts.) Colour: Dark amber. Nose: cocoa, toffee, coffee, sherry, black pepper, wood resin, menthol. Palate: Eucalyptus, spice at the front, very peppery, dried fruit, tobacco, peppermint, espresso, toffee, nutmeg. Finish: Very long, peppermint and nutmeg. **84 points.**

Teaching in a classroom is but one setting in which educators may work. I'm sure my colleague is using his skills productively as an educator in some capacity, bringing the joy of learning to his students every day!



Nabil Mailloux hails from Kingston, Ontario, Canada, a town that likes to celebrate *almost* becoming our nation's capital. He is originally from southwestern Ontario, a town that is also known as South Detroit (Windsor), the automotive manufacturing capital of Canada. He holds a Master's degree in organic chemistry from Queen's University, Canada. While in the Quiet Pub at Queen's University, he was introduced to the world of single malt whisky by his good friend John Morgan. That very same Morgan also convinced him to buy a hogshead of whisky with him, thus forever changing his life. As a result, he has become obsessed with nosing, tasting and evaluating whisky. He eagerly awaits 2014, the bottling date for his cask. He also wonders what he's going to do with his share of the whisky...