

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2012-03 ***By Peter 'Pit' Krause, Germany***

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 16 countries; The United Kingdom, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, The U.S.A., Canada, India, Japan, Taiwan, Australia & South Africa. More information on: www.maltmaniacs.org.



BEER GOES BARLEY

Creating Beer-Finished Single Malts

It all started out as a joke and turned into Bavarian Malt Mania: At the Finest Spirit Festival in 2011 in Munich, spirit expert Werner Obalski and independent bottler Andrea Caminneci (C&S Drams) were discussing the finishing practice in the whisky maturation when they saw a tiny beer cask. For Bavarians, Andrea remarked giggling, the industry should start working on beer finishing/maturation with these kinds of casks. Werner mentioned that such attempts had been done without much notice and that the idea – if it was properly carried out – wouldn't be a bad idea after all. The thought needed some time to be processed, but Andrea said after a while, that such maturation should be tried again. That was birth of one truly maniacal undertaking.

The idea spread around a small circle of insiders among the fair's team and we agreed on the choice of a really sweet and potent beer similar to a sweet wine. But who had such a beer after early spring, when it is traditionally made? One of the festival's partners was the famous Ayinger brewery, which undisputedly produces great beer specialties. They loved the crazy idea once we told them about our plans and promised to brew a dark beer of the kind we needed – and at the time around late September when we needed it, because that was the time we planned for our trip to Scotland with the motto 'Beer goes Barley - Highlanders salute Highlanders – and unite their drinks'.



Kenny MacKay (Head of the Scottish Liqueur Centre and Cairn Mhor, also selling casks to The Whisky Exchange and other bottlers, formerly at Morrison Bowmore) and Stuart Nickerson (Distillery Manager at Glenglassaugh) were also present in Munich and immediately offered to play the whisky part. So the destination of those casks was fixed as well. Festival organizer Frank Böer chipped in finally and decided to present the finished whisky as festival bottling – because it really fitted the occasion.

In that circle we also agreed on rather small casks for quick maturation because the result should be presented to the public at the subsequent festival in February 2012. As there is only one beer cooper left in Munich who is really busy making casks for the Oktoberfest around the scheduled time of year, the project almost failed. But he pulled it

off! Four casks of about 25 liters lay in our hands ready to be filled with the Bavarian nectar just below 10% abv. The beer filling took place just prior to the trip so that the beer stayed fresh.

There we were on our way to Scotland in traditional clothing! Along with the guys mentioned above, we had two prize winners, blogger Kristina Wolf, Andreas J. Langeder and a film crew to document the trip. The video will be part of the bottle presentation for sale along with the beer and two beer-finished whiskies. Let me tell you, this cast really hit it off! And the hospitality we encountered by Kenny and Stuart was immeasurable – and not only because they and their workers could ‘take care of’ of the beer in the casks, as Kenny’s co-worker put it ☺. We contributed our share in fighting the contents of the four casks which remained in pretty good shape despite the long travel (we feared that the beer could have lost its vibrancy and develop sour notes).



At the Scottish Liqueur Centre, where we arrived with our unusual load first, I was to decide first on which whisky we would use. Kenny preselected a Macallan and a Cragganmore Cask, both around 14 years of age. As I knew that the Mac would probably sell better, I gave the Cragganmore a fair chance. Not only did I nose and drink to make the right selection, I also mixed a tiny amount of beer into the whisky to imitate the final result. Both practices confirmed my gut feeling for the Cragganmore. The sweet malty character of the Macallan was too close to the malty beer sweetness and they cancelled each other out while the herbal and complex Cragganmore improved further with the beer’s taste elements. I passed my glasses on and it almost became a unanimous decision – Cragganmore it was!

To be honest with you, just a moment before we made our selection in the warehouse and filled the first two emptied casks with the Cragganmore, everybody expected this experiment to be fun, but not a tasting highlight. But the smells coming from

that glass and cask really changed our mind. The beer was fitting the whisky like a glove! No kidding! The main aromas were, of course a big maltiness and yeasty and toasty champaign notes along with the malt's other characteristics. It was absolutely complex. The key question, however, is how long to mature it. As there is no real experience with small beer cask whisky maturation, Kenny told us to check weekly. We hope to avoid stale beer notes in the dram, or some weird fungi action to develop.



Before we went on to Glenglassaugh Distillery, our Scottish hosts gave us the chance to take a ride in a historic steam train leaving from Aviemore. On our trip we also visited many great things (I won't mention the pubs) like 'Whisky-Disney', or officially called the Scotch Whisky Experience in Edinburgh, where they have a big Whisky Collection (falsely claiming to be the world's biggest one) and great food which both made the visit worthwhile. The cart tour into the world of whisky with a small tasting is more a gimmick, but nice for beginners and kids. We also enjoyed the scenery at lochs and mountains, the visit of a fish ladder and the Atholl Estate's Blair Castle in Pitlochry and the famous Speyside Cooperage, where we met Stuart Nickerson and his wife for a snack. Then the cast was taken to Portsoy for a traditional Scottish evening.



The visit of Glenglassaugh on the following day was an amazing experience and we were able to get a peek into everything we wanted to see. This deserves its own e-pistle some day, their future sure looks bright. After a while and a pint or two of the beer it was

time to get down to business and fill the casks. The maturity of Glenglassaugh's first new spirit – which just turned legal (3 y.o.) in December – surprised everybody. We tried a Bourbon Barrel aged 30 months and everybody would have guessed it to be around ten years. For our experiment, Stuart Nickerson chose a spirit that had rested in Californian Zinfandel wine casks and displayed a slightly pinkish color. Wonderful hints of raspberries and strawberries accompanied the pear-laden young dram. The sweet beer suited this fragile yet expressive spirit even better than the Cragganmore and lifted it into another dimension. Stuart and the rest of the crew stood flabbergasted. The spirit seemed to have aged ten years just by touching our beer. Again, it has to be seen if time will work for or against this maturation, but the first impression was more than promising. These two casks now sit in the Glenglassaugh warehouse until they are ready to be filled, at latest in early February 2012 when they are going to be presented to the public. The set of both distilleries' beer-finished Single Malts will be released with the video footage of our trip.



I kept the samples of both whiskies before the finishing happened. This will make an interesting comparison once I have the result in liquid form in my glass. Nevertheless, I am not a great fan of finishing whisky, but some of these procedures do work and the industry needs to find new ways in this realm. However, the amount of beer needed for such a step on a larger scale doesn't exist, so don't worry. This was just a one-off, a maniacal experiment with an unknown outcome yet.

Prost!



Peter 'Pit' Krause was born in 1974 in the Alps of Bavaria. He always enjoyed whisky in his youth without knowing a lot about them. In his university years abroad he discovered his love for quality whisky and other drinks. Self education took place and the path to Malt Mania began ... Pit started a Whisky-Club in his new hometown Regensburg in 2003 and his homepage featured almost 1000 reviews by 2005. As many people from other areas were visiting the numerous tastings (mostly whisky, about 30 per year), he founded other Whisky-Clubs (e.g. Munich) and united them in the connoisseur's network www.slowdrink.de (replacing the Regensburg page) – an undertaking with now almost 3.000 people on the mailing list, a blog and stands at fairs. Pit also writes articles for other culinary pages/magazines and explores wines and spirits.