

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2012-06 ***By Krishna Nukala***

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.



Visit to Dalwhinnie

An Armchair Travelogue

After a hearty meal and a classy Blair Athol (55.8%, distillery limited edition) from the Blair Athol Distillery, we, the two dozen or so malt maniacs, moved quietly in our bus towards Dalwhinnie, our next destination. We were eager to reach the famous distillery quickly and maximize the time we could spend there. For some reason I was under the impression that Dalwhinnie was the highest distillery in British Isles until a voice from the rear corrected me saying it was actually the second highest distillery situated at 1073 ft. I am still not really sure who is correct but suffice to say that for the world, Dalwhinnie is high up there.

Our bus, sticking to route A9 so far, took a gentle left turn and we were soon on route A889, otherwise called General Wade's Military Road, an old military road built by General George Wade, an Anglo Irish man, in the early 18th Century. Though this road was built to help the King's forces to curb the Jacobite movement, it ironically helped the Jacobites more than the Government forces. Anyway, we moved onwards into the mountains, not as high and rugged as Himalayas, or the Nilgiris in India, but certainly high hills with gentle slopes and



sliding snows at a few crevasses. Having arrived at Dalwhinnie, we were greeted by a black haired Scot with a constant smile, the distillery manager, Ewan Mackintosh (more of him later).

At Dalwhinnie one does not rush into the distillery immediately on arrival. One has to stop and look around to understand where the spirit that we would be offered at the end of the tour comes from. The

distillery is seated in the lap of the surrounding mountains- Monadhlaith to one side, the forests of Athol in the rear, the Cairngorms and the Grampians in the east. With lush green hills, blanketed by grass or heather and coniferous forests in patches like the one in Athol in the rear, the place is a nature paradise. A slender burn meanders across the road below the distillery. The air is crisp and nippy, with an edge and a more scenic spectacle you could not find.

The name 'Dalwhinnie' means 'a meeting place' and has been so named because the place was really a rendezvous of travelers and cattle traders from the North, South and East about 115 years ago when it came into being. It is so lonely and far away from hustle and bustle of the modern world, that according to Ewan Mackintosh, it beats Islay in desolateness. Even as he spoke the weather turned bleak with intermittent rain and it was not difficult to understand what Ewan was saying about desolateness. I don't have too many Dalwhinnies in my malt mileage but from my memory I knew it to be gentle highland spirit and now I know why it is gentle.



Ewan Mackintosh, with the rugged appearance of a Spaniard and the chivalry of a Scot, assumed the role of our tour guide. He is multifaceted; a Civil Engineer by education, a professional musician who played bagpipes in Paris and the world over, one who studied Judo in Japan for over a year and who ended up in Oban as distiller, a Brand Manager at Caol Ila and Lagavulin and finally Distillery Manager at Dalwhinnie in 2010.

"The original people who built the distillery chose this place very wisely" says Ewan. "They chose the site between the road and the railway and built their own siding for receiving barley and coal and dispatching whisky. What's more, the altitude and remote wilderness of the district meant that there was constant supply of pure, soft water issuing from the snow-melt that is so crucial for making fine spirit."



"7.2 tons of mash contains 7 tons of unpeated malt and rest is peated", says Ewan. "That's why you observe the faint peaty tones in Dalwhinnie". The barley is a new strain called Concerto, which is mainly a spring variety and has characteristics of Optic barley variety. Pure pre-heated spring water is added in a batch of 64,000 liters to the barley grist in a steel mash tun to make the wort. All the sugars in the barley are allowed to dissolve in the mash tun. The wort is then cooled and transferred to six Oregon wood fermentation tanks each having a capacity of 34,000 liters. Here distiller's cream yeast is added to begin the fermentation. Fermentation takes anything between 48 to 72 hours. The resulting beer is about 8% strength.



Dalwhinnie has only two stills made by Abercrombie & Co. One wash still has a capacity of 17,000 liters and spirit still has a capacity of 16,000 liters. The stills, not as large or as small as Lagavulin's stills, are heated by steel coils inside (the art of direct heating of stills is long extinct in Scotland). The stills with a large bulbous base gradually taper off without any curves to a lyne arm. Due to this typical shape of the stills, the spirit has scant contact with copper and the outcome is a heavily set oily spirit. "More importantly it is sulfury- the distillery character the master blender is

looking for," says Ewan. The resulting vapours from the stills are cooled in two wooden tubs that contain the cooling coils standing at the front of the distillery.

The wooden tubs were dismantled long time ago but were rebuilt in the 90's bringing back the traditional character of the distillery. According to Ewan, it is in these cooling coils that the magic happens to Dalwhinnie spirit. The resulting spirit is sent for ageing in casks. But in the warehouse here at the distillery rest only few casks of Dalwhinnie, only symbolic. Most of the spirit is sent to the massive warehouse operations at Blackgrange, few kilometers north of Edinburgh and some of it is sent to Auchroisk to end up later in several of Diageo's famous blends.



(Photo by Keith Wood)

Tasting directly from a 1991 cask, about 60% abv

In the dark dunnage of Dalwhinnie, Ewan selects a 1991 cask and pipettes out the spirit directly from it. We, the Malt Maniacs, held the spirit in reverence and with heartfelt gratitude tasted the gentle giant. In spite of Dalwhinnie's harsh surroundings, the malt is famously soft. The 20 odd year old has imbibed all the characteristics of its rugged surroundings- the heather and flowers, honey, and grass with faint hints of peat. Its palate is smooth, sweet and honeyed with hints of malt and citrus fruits and the subdued hints of peat revisiting towards the finish.



(Photo by Martine Nouet)

A masterpiece!

No wonder its 15 y.o cousin finds its place in Diageo's Classic Malts.

Slainte!



Krishna Nukala (b 1955) lives in Hyderabad, India. After tasting a Lagavulin in Surrey, UK in 1998, he cancelled his return ticket to India to go in search of the distillery. He met Mike Nicolson at the distillery and his life has not been the same since then. Having worked 25 years in banking, he took voluntary retirement in 2005; presently Krishna is working in a multi-national company as Credit Controller. But his passion is whisky and his chief mission is to spread the message of malt in India and he frequently contributes articles in Indian Magazines about Whisky. Krishna is one of the earliest Malt Maniacs having been invited by Johannes, the founder member in 2000.