

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2013-02

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 Spirits of Kingston

The Little Festival That Could

Sylvain Bouffard is not the first person to propose a spirits festival for Kingston, Ontario, but he is the one who actually made it happen. On February 23rd, 2013, his dream, and that of many others, finally became a reality. Of course, this was not without skepticism on the part of several aficionados.

"I can certainly tell you some war stories," he says over a hot cup of decaf at the local Starbucks. And who better to tell those stories than a retired Colonel in the Canadian Armed Forces, who currently does contract work for the military? "When I first pitched this idea to a lot of people, they said 'Kingston is just too small a market', but they don't know my town the way I do."

While only 1/30th the size of Canada's largest city, with a population of 130 000 people, they may have had a point. However, if you go to the local Liquor Control Board of Ontario store, the local scotch expert will tell you that Kingston has one of the highest sales of scotch per capita in Ontario. This, of course should come as no surprise since it also housed a major distillery, built under the aegis of one of Canada's most prestigious families, The Molsons. According to Davin De Kergommeaux's *Canadian Whisky: The Portable Expert*, by 1832 Thomas Molson had built the largest still in Upper Canada. The distillery was subsequently leased to James Morton, who produced a whisky of some repute, Morton's Proof, until it was leased out again to cover his massive debts after the depression of 1857.



Circa 1880-1890

Also known as the Limestone City, and Canada's First Capital, it's also home to Queen's University, one of Canada's most prestigious universities. The University exudes a Scottish atmosphere, owing primarily to the fact that it is the sister school of the University of Edinburgh. If you were to take a stroll through the campus during Frosh Week, it would not be uncommon to see students taking part in a Ceilidh, or see the Queen's Bands, complete with bagpipes, kilts, and sporrans marching through the streets singing *Oilthigh*, while cheering for their football team, The Golden Gaels.

"Though small, by population, Kingston shows a love for Scottish heritage and single malts that rivals much bigger centres," says Roberto Di Fazio, president of one of two large single malt scotch tasting clubs, "and our members have some of the best palates in the country!" he proudly submits. "We are currently celebrating our 15th year as Kingston's

second, and larger, scotch tasting society. While during the earlier days of the society, the membership was predominantly male, it is now refreshing to see an increasing number of female members joining. Our membership hails from a range of occupations. Some are retired, others are students, a few are cardiac surgeons, and everything in between. We are proud of the increasingly diverse nature of our membership. A real slice of life in this town."

A town clearly with an appetite for fine spirits, and fertile ground for a festival.



Sporting a mockup of the festival flyer, Sylvain is eager to share his story. "When I first pitched this to Marc Laverdière, brand ambassador for Edrington Group, at the Victoria Whisky Festival, he was largely kind and supportive, but he gave me three conditions: 1) make a business plan, 2) speak with Johanna Ngoh and Charles Anderson, the producers of the Spirit of Toronto, and 3) visit Frank Scott, Chair of the New Brunswick Whisky Festival. So that's what I did!"

What more would you expect from a soldier of 30 years? And behind every good soldier is a great wife, and this holds true of Sylvain's wife, who accompanied him all the way to New Brunswick to meet Frank Scott for three hours at his Pub, the Lunar Rogue, and return home immediately. Upon his return, Marc could not help but be impressed with his perseverance and pledged his full support to the newly minted Spirits of Kingston Whisky Festival.

"My next step was to select a venue, and I wanted something different. So I decided on The Military Communications and Electronics Museum", a natural choice for the former Commandant of both the Canadian Forces School of Electronics and Communications, as well as the museum. "The museum is something that is really close to my heart. It is a place that is visited by many Kingstonians, where they can learn about how our military has evolved with technology to support our troops on the front lines, whether they be peace-keepers or combat troops."

Established in 1963, the museum's mission was to educate the public about the significant role that the signal corps plays in supporting military operations around the globe. It was expanded in 1995, and visitor traffic has increased to the point where another expansion to the museum is slated to take place in 2014.

"I really felt that this was the right venue. Many members of the whisky societies in town are current and former members of the Canadian Forces, and they have a natural affinity for the museum." Of course it also helps that it is on Dept. of National Defense property, which means that no other provincial agency has jurisdiction with respect to functions that take place there!



Getting vendors onboard was another big task that proved much easier once Marc Laverdière was involved. He spared no effort to rally the whisky industry around Kingston's new festival. Within weeks, many of the big players in the industry had signed on, and

nothing brings in sponsorships like success. So it wasn't long before many of Kingston's most prominent firms were lining up for exposure in exchange for a donation to the museum. Even with this much momentum, ticket sales would be the true litmus test for the event.

"You know, I thought, if I could sell 150-200 tickets, it would be a success," Sylvain says with a big smile. "But when we hit 300 tickets and the fire marshal was breathing down my neck, I knew we had a real winner," you could see a hint of well earned vindication coming through. "If I could have sold another 150, I would have!" Not bad for a city that is only 1/30th the size of Toronto, where they sell around 800 tickets at the Spirit of Toronto!

The Big Night was finally upon Sylvain and his army of...well, army volunteers. Milling about the festival, dressed in uniforms dating back to WWI, these soldiers were serving us yet again as ushers, ticket receivers, waiters, and bussers. The first order of business was to exchange your ticket for a Glencairn glass...with a twist, it came secured by a special lanyard that keeps the glass stable when suspended around your neck like a whistle. Another invention by yours truly, Col. Bouffard!



Upon entering the museum, a kind, WWI private directed me to the first Master Class, presented by Beam Global's Matt Jones, a professional mixologist. As he performed his feats of cocktail alchemy, boxes of Thai noodles, cheese and fruit platters, and various hors-d'oeuvres were being ferried out to the tables. A full house was in attendance, to be enlightened by Matt on the histories of classic cocktails such as The Old Fashioned, Mint Julip, and The Manhattan. A humble man working with humble tools – his tool case was from Canadian Tire – Matt's passion for whisky infused the room with interest and enthusiasm. Even some of the most seasoned single malt drinkers were giving the nod in appreciation to bourbons and Canadian whiskies.

Undeniably, the signature moment for this event was Marc Laverdière's early-bird Master Class featuring the new Macallan lineup. Without extra space in the museum for Master Classes, the industrious officers, and enlisted men and women, did what they do best, they put up tents, complete with forced air heat from mobile heaters. Juxtaposing suits, kilts, and sporrans with the blacktop of the parking lot underfoot and the canvas of military field tents was odd at first, but then you remember where you are, and you feel how whisky fits into the very fabric of this historic military city.



"Hear ye, Hear ye!"

How else would you open a festival in Kingston, but with your very own town cryer?! (Chris Whyman is the reigning World Champion Cryer) The Spirits of Kingston was about to be put to the test. Lineups were never too onerous, but you were forced to explore every nook and cranny of the museum to discover all the drams available. This made for a learning experience on many fronts. Even with heavy hitting drams like Highland Park Thor or the new Balvenie 17 yo Doublewood, patrons were never long waiting for

their samples.

For newbies and aficionados alike, a solid lineup of whiskies is the key to a successful event. Kingston's first festival delivered a respectable lineup for its debut. Glenfiddich had their lineup, as well as specialty drams like the Cask of Dreams; Johnny Walker was showcasing the Platinum 18 yo, next to its traditional lineup; and the Macallan was rolling out the new NAS line to compare with the traditional lineup.



At Highland Park's table, one of the whisky world's most colourful ambassadors was manning the table and pouring everything from a 12-18 year old, and of course, Thor. "They think that they hired me!" says Laverdière as he rolls up his shirt sleeve to show off his brand, literally. Now there was a man who is branded for life!

There was no need to rush through this event to get to the food. It was plentiful and varied. Sixteen-hour smoked ribs, roast beef, antipasto, and cheeses were just the beginning. Thai noodles and fruit platters were never empty. A full belly and plenty of water is a requisite for running an event where people are imbibing strong spirits. As you milled about the main hall where Matt Jones presented, you could hear patrons commenting on "what a great venue this is," or how "I'm totally marking this down for next year". There was buzz in the air, and all of it very positive. Col. Bouffard certainly made his beachhead here in Kingston, and the troops were right behind him.

Other drams included Glendronach, Bowmore, Jura, Old Pulteney, Laphroaig, Forty Creek whiskies, and Gordon & MacPhail's bottlings. You were even given the opportunity to "nose" a fresh oak cask, never having been used. For those who wonder where so many of those sweet caramel, and vanilla aromas originate, this was a sensory treat. The notion that a good part of the character of a whisky originates in the wood becomes undeniable fact after you have the chance to sniff one of these barrels. Later on, Pete Bradford, from the Carriage House Cooperage, in Bloomfield Ontario - one of only two coopers in Canada - closed the event with a live charring of casks in the parking lot, outside the museum. Talk about going out in a blaze of glory.

Saying that The Spirits of Kingston was a resounding success, would not do justice to the work Sylvain, Marc, and the troops in Kingston put into this event. A new star has been born in the universe of Canadian whisky fans, and it burns very brightly. With the help of the 5000\$ raised from the festival proceeds, a new expansion is in the works for the museum in 2015. In two short years, The Spirits of Kingston will find even more breathing room for the legions of aficionados and rookies in the Limestone City, and beyond, to discover the constellation of malts, bourbons, and Canadians available to them. Nothing breeds success, like success, and it's clear that Eastern Ontario already counting down the days to The Spirits of Kingston 2014.



One might be given to think that Col. Bouffard would take a break after this monumental effort but the affable officer has this to say: "I will turn my brain power to the 2nd Annual Spirits of Kingston Whisky Festival in a few days. My consulting job has me going

flat out this week and next week we are hitting the road for March Break in Florida. I will come back refreshed and relaxed ready to start all over again!" Keep on keepin' on Sylvain!

Full disclosure: I was allowed to enter the event free of charge as a "member of the press".



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...