

## ***Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2013-03*** ***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](http://www.maltmaniacs.org).



# **Knocked Out at Knockando**

## **Commemorating the Maniacs' visit to the distillery in 2012**

The first thing that strikes you about the Knockando is its magnificent setting. Set in the remote parish of scattered hamlets and small farms in the Speyside Highlands, caressing the misty clouds, it is actually difficult to find unless you are accompanied by a local. Fortunately, for a bunch of Malt Maniacs, there was no such problem, as they were escorted by some able locals.

Near the meandering river Spey and a railway line passing between Craigellachie and Dufftown, John Tytler Thompson had a vision to build a distillery at this site in late 1890s. Consumption of blends was on the ascending cusp and already there were two successful running distilleries - Tamdhu and Cardhu - in the vicinity and John Thomson had no reason why his venture would fail. Knockando (meaning "little black hill" in Gaelic) survived but Thompson himself was not so fortunate.



John Tytler Thompson (b1865) was very ambitious at a young age. He worked as a railway clerk, became an accountant, and landed himself into Miltonduff distillery as a clerk near Elgin in 1880s. This was the golden period of whisky industry and people were making money in all areas related to whisky distillation, its distribution and exports to the New Continent. This period evolved after the Englishman was compelled to change his drinking habits from wine



and brandy to whisky. When the phylloxera plague wiped out wine yards in France in 1870s, it opened its doors to the Scotch Whisky industry; strange are the ways of nature and its compensatory effects! For a start, John opened a shop in Elgin calling himself "The Spirit Broker and Scotch Whisky Merchant". After making some decent money initially he later raised money and bought six acres of land having one of the boundaries with a railway line and Cardnach farm. This is not far away from the present site which is still being used as reservoir for collecting water from the Cardnach spring. Ambitious as

he was, Thompson wanted to have a state-of-the-art distillery and was not stingy on expenses, hiring the most modern technocrats of the period to build his dream distillery. By 1899 when the distillery was completed, it was considered as the most modern of its class in the region producing a robust spirit of body and class with delicate peaty flavours. Then bad luck struck Thompson (and never deserted him till his death). The distilleries in Scotland were over producing, demand was slackening, and the whisky boom turned to bust. Knockando finally went up for sale in 1900. Soon after, Thompson migrated to Australia, where he had a swing of fortunes and misfortunes in various land deals and ultimately he died penniless in 1943. He was buried somewhere in Western Australia. In December 1903, Knockando was bought by W&A Gilbey Ltd.

For Walter and Alfred Gilbey, Knockando purchase (for GBP 3,500) was proved to be the biggest bargain in Scotch-whisky history. Unlike Thompson, the Gilbeys were prudent. Already established as successful businessmen with Gilbey's Gin as flagship brand, they used the stocks of whisky in the bust period very wisely by exporting to their established contacts in USA and mainland Europe. The distillery saw a checkered period during the two Wars and somehow survived until the arrival of Justerini and Brooks, of J&B fame. J&B, currently a massive blend with firm roots in USA, took Knockando to the international arena as a single malt. During the 1990s it was one of the top ten Single Malt brands of the world. Margaret Thatcher even visited Knockando to present them with an award as top UK exporter.



On the day of Malt Maniacs visit, Duncan Tait was the distillery manager. Duncan, who came into the whisky industry in 1990, was originally a manufacturer of bricks and carbon fibre. He worked initially at Teaninich and Glenn Elgin distilleries before starting his stint at Knockando in 2008. Duncan took over as tour guide and began the tour with the enthusiasm that usually bubbles out of any proud distillery manager. "Everyone working here is a descendant of someone who worked when the operations began in 1898, and life is much the same as it was more than a century years ago. Thankfully, the water still flows down from the Cardnach Spring – all year round and the air is pure and crisp- devoid of any pollution, in these parts of the world," says Duncan. The barley procured is 100% local, so one can say that the Knockando spirit is 100% *sui generis*.

### **How Knockando is made**

Knockando has eight Oregon pine wash backs, each having a capacity of 20,000 liters. The malt is made in to coarse powder and water from the Cardnach Spring is added after raising its temperature to about 65 degrees Celsius. The sweet wort is now ready for fermentation. Yeast is added to begin the process, which is violent and exothermic. After about 50 hours, the fermentation is complete resulting in beer having strength of about 8% to 10% and is now ready for the mystical process of distillation.

Knockando has four copper still: two ball shaped and two lamp shaped. One wash still is manufactured by Forsythes and the rest are produced by Grant at Dufftown. The beer is first

sent into the wash stills for initial distillation and then into the spirit stills for final distillation to increase the alcohol strength. All the stills are internally heated for the magic to happen. Due to the typical shape of the body and graceful swan like neck of the stills, the resultant



spirit cut at 75% a.b.v acquires a distinct flavour profile, unique to Knockando, which is nutty just like the Diageo malts Auchroisk and Glen Spey.

By law, the Knockando spirit is matured for at least for three full years (usually more than 10 years) in second hand oak casks having a capacity of not more than 700 liters. A few casks are aged at the old warehouses at the distillery and a majority of spirit is sent in steel tankers to Diageo's central bonded warehouses at Blackgrange, very near to Edinburgh. In fact, most of the Knockando goes into blending of various scotch whiskies, the most notable being J&B.

In the wet and dark dungeons of Knockando, the spirit rests quietly for well over a decade while the harsh and edgy character is smoothened into a round and mellowed spirit. The spirit turns into whisky and depending upon the character it has developed, the distillery manager selects casks for bottling as single malts.

### **Tasting a 12 year old 1996/2009, 58.5% Natural Cask Strength Knockando**

A small measure of Knockando is poured into the tasting glass and I hold the glass in reverence. In reverence to its founders, to the master distiller and all those who are responsible for creating this piece of art. The initial nose is malty and nutty, it has rich fruitiness and since it was matured in first fill sherry casks, it has acquired a dark rich colour. After some time, you get oak wood notes followed by spices. On palate, it is a concoction of fruits- mainly dried prunes, raisins and rich spicy notes returning. It has a big, satisfying honeyed mouth-feel and you almost feel like chewing. The finish is everlasting and hugely satisfying. This is a knock out Malt! 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.