

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2013-04 ***By Nabil Mailloux***

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The Bite of the Lochindaal

How the Heach won our hearts

What had started as an idle email almost a decade ago, was now culminating in a gathering of spirits who had been scattered to the winds since their university days. On this fine July day, we were on the cusp of finally visiting the cask we laid down 9 years ago. After a harrowing journey from Stirling to the port of Kennecraig, one fraught with the constant fear of either having our Triumph TR6 squashed by a lorry, or run over by a Ford Focus, we waited sheepishly as they re-opened the ferry for us.



Now for those of you who have never travelled to Islay, it is important to note that you need to book your ferry ticket ahead of time. There are only a limited number of spaces, all allocated. In the event that we were to miss the ferry, we mused that we could simply wait in the village of Kennecraig, whilst the next ferry returned to pick us up. Put that silly notion aside, there is no village of Kennecraig, it is a lone, solitary pier, which we drove right by with only eight minutes to spare. Miss the ferry, and it's back to Lochgilpead for a pint. After a quick turnaround, we made it into the reception area.

"Mailloux?" I nodded to the ferryman. "You'd better go inside."



After entering the office of Caledonian-McBrayne, a stern looking lady in her fifties didn't miss a beat and asked: "Dooon't you answer your mobile phooooone?!" I offer my apologies, and plead with her to understand that we were driving on the wrong side of the road, without power brakes, or power steering, and that this had slowed us down a little. It wasn't long before we were finally pulling our little classic car rental up behind the last of the transport trucks, and sighing in relief as the gate closed behind us, and the departure horn sounded.

We were lucky to be on the ferry at all, and now all we had to do was get some lunch. I decided on some traditional Scottish fare, Butter Chicken on saffron rice and Naan bread. A beer washed down the last of our lunch, and we were free to take in the scenery on the forward deck of the ferry. We were almost at the end of our great quest, a place that has dwelt in our imaginations, Islay, specifically Bruichladdich. In another 24 hours, we would be breathing in the air from the Bruichladdich dunnage warehouse where our private cask lay hidden for almost a decade.

The voyage across the strait to Port Askaig took us straight down the gullet that lies between Jura and Islay, and with the spectacular weather that we had brought with us from Ontario, you could clearly make out the Paps of Jura. Along the shorelines, you could see small cottage farms, one with a small fire burning. You might let your imagination wander and contemplate an illicit still operated by a sly farmer. As we got closer to Port Askaig, we could see straight into several glens that lie between some moderately sized hills.

Off the ferry, we set upon the road towards Port Charlotte and Bruichladdich. Our sense of scale was re-adjusting. In magazines, online, or on whisky packaging, Islay takes on the scale of the Scottish highlands, but on the road, you realize that this island is not as big in person as it is on camera. Paradoxically, we were about to learn that the same cannot be said of the people who live there, the Ileach. As we cruised the countryside on the north shore of Lochindaal, roof down on the convertible, the air smelled of the Atlantic salt, highland cattle, with a dash of sheeps' wool for good measure.

The topography and geology on Islay is quite varied, ranging from elevated rocky hills to sand dunes and pebbled beaches. Around Lochindaal, a strong agricultural presence takes the form of sheep and cattle farms, with almost all of the land used as pasture for grazing. As a Canadian, I noticed the absence of large numbers of trees, and after almost five days in sunny Scotland (I'm saying this with a straight face), we were ready for a little shade. With half the day under our belt, most of which was spent in a convertible, we were a little sun burnt (again, with a straight face). So naturally, when we happened upon the Bruichladdich Distillery, I thought, this should be our first stop...you know, to "verify" our appointment for the next day.

We had seen this all the way from Glasgow to Kennecraig, a few sly snickers as two well dressed lads in their convertible sports car pull up. Well I'm sure the girls who were working at Bruichladdich were thinking the same thing and giggled a little as we got out in the parking lot. We entered the gift shop, and before we could ask about our appointment, we had two Botanist gins and tonic in our hands. It was verily just the libation that was required to sooth our souls after our harrowing journey in our four-wheeled antique. The Botanist Gin is a lovely spirit, with a clean herbal bitterness, and another one was in order. I looked at Jocko and simply said: "You realize, the launch sequence has been started..."



We confirmed our cask visit, and thanked the staff, then made our way back to the car to continue on up the road...1 km up the road...to Port Charlotte. As we approached the bridge to enter Port Charlotte, we had to practise an essential Islay skill, road courtesy. You see, while the roads in the UK are naturally narrow by North American standards, they are even more narrow on Islay. If you deviate from the main thoroughfares, you may even find

yourself on a single lane road, with little pull-offs every three hundred meters. At the bridge, we found ourselves head to head with a little aquamarine lorry painted up in Bruichladdich logos, and the driver was courteous enough to wave through these two rookies in a Triumph. Of course, as we passed him and gave him a reciprocal wave, I mention to Jocko: "You realize who we backed up onto the bridge? Jim McEwan, master distiller at Bruichladdich!"

At any rate, who better to show us the Islay way, than the man himself! Only a few hundred meters up the road, we pull up to the Lochindaal Hotel, just up the street from the Port Charlotte Inn. Again a few snickers from the locals seated at the pub through the doorway, though, I think they genuinely liked the car this time. We were greeted by Sarah MacLellan, quick with a big smile and dry wit, who then took us up to our twin ensuite rooms, which are located on the top floors of the hotel above their kitchen and laundry facilities. The rooms were clean and well appointed, with access to a courtyard and clothesline.

To be sure, this was no Royal Auto Club in London, with people referring to me as "sir" or M. Mailloux. There was no Pagani sports car in the lobby, or paintings of members on the walls. But I must tell you that from the moment we set foot in the Lochindaal Hotel, we felt at home, and the MacLellans treated us like family. That evening was spent around the hotel bar enjoying a few drams with Sarah's uncle, Allistair MacLellan, as well as her cousins. These people wasted no time in accosting us and plying us with questions and conversation.

When, Curt, the last member of our company joined us around 9:30 pm, our first evening on Islay was well under way. As it turned out, Curt was a MacLellan on his mother's side, so Allistair proclaimed the evening an unofficial family reunion. Sarah was kind enough to make some suggestions for drams and brews. Before getting into some drams, we decided to sample the Islay Ales, which were wonderfully nutty and refreshing. Later, Sarah suggested a few local favourites such as Lagavulin 12 yo, PC8, and Caol Ila Mock. We tried to get her to open her top shelf stuff (literally on the top shelf), she laughed at us and explained that those were part of the Hotel Collection. She also recounted a sad tale of a distillery worker who had enjoyed a little too much cheer, and in a dram-induced fervor, opened up his Bruichladdich 1970 bottle, and consumed it with his friends in one night. I happily settled for a quick sniff of the bottle of Bowmore 1956, which could be savoured for a modest 225 pounds/dram.

After closing the pub, and finishing off the night with a walk down to the pier, waters in hand, we made our way back to our rooms around 3 am. It wasn't until morning that we noticed that our pants had been soiled by a few slips into the tidal pools that litter the rocky shore adjacent to the pier. Nonetheless, we made our way down to the restaurant for our complimentary full Scottish breakfast, which included eggs, fried tomato, blood pudding, sausage, bacon, toast, and of course freshly brewed coffee. My cardiologist was not happy, but I was. Ian MacLellan, the hotel patriarch, took one look at us and concluded: "Aye, you've felt the bite of the Lochindaal, have ya!?"

Hence a new verb was born that day...we'd been Lochindaalled. But that wasn't going to stop us from making our 11 am appointment with Cask #66. Curt and his father gathered us up in their car and ferried us quickly to their bed and breakfast half way to Bruichladdich, then we happily set off on foot across the fields, making a bee line for the distillery. Quite frankly I was a little concerned we wouldn't make it, and when Curt's 80 year old dad tripped over a fence we were hopping, I thought we were done for. However, no sooner had we recovered from the field hopping than we were pretty much at the gates of the distillery.

The staff quickly took us over to the filling house, where to my amazement, Jim McEwan was waiting for us, sample bottle in hand. I had emailed the distillery, asking for five minutes of his time for a quick chat for this epistle, but I was not prepared for what ensued. My cask-brothers were slack jawed that the Master himself was going to show us to our cask. He quickly ferried us into the belly of the dunnage warehouse where the temperature quickly dropped several degrees.

The aroma in the warehouse was heavenly, a little sherry, port, vanilla, and other woody smells holding out the promise of some penultimate dram somewhere in the warehouse. He suddenly stopped. "Well, this is approximately where your cask is stored. Of course we can't get you to it, but here is your sample." He opened the bottle and stuck his pinkie into it, then put it into his mouth. "That's just wonderful. That's Bruichladdich. Clean. Perfect. It's a real cracker of a whisky."



With great anticipation, I took the bottle from him, nosed it, and took a taste. I believe the picture Curt took says it all. **I was having a malt-gasm.** Perfectly sherried. Nutty, with loads of allspice, cloves, nutmeg, and a hint of cinnamon, some sweet leather coming through. Some sweetness, but leaning towards the dry side. Jim was quick to point out that the first fill Olorosso sherry cask we selected in 2004 was now as rare as hen's teeth.

What had really concerned me was sulphur. This is a compound that is used in the malting process, as well as the production of wines and sherry. So I was understandably worried that our sherry bomb might just turn out to be a sulphured skunk of a whisky. Not cask #66. It was perfectly clean, and relieved, I thanked Jim for great cask selection.

"Now, if you've got a couple of minutes, I've got something special to share with you." And off Jim went around the corner. When he returned, it was with an elderly couple and their son and his Canadian-born wife. "These are personal friends of mine, and they have their own cask here, they were just sampling it. Aged in a port pipe." They were quick to share the sample, and it was absolutely fantastic. "Now follow me, I've got another surprise"

Off we went, deeper into the warehouse until we arrived in front of a cask on the ground. Using what appeared to be an oversized cork-screw, he removed the bung and winked at us..."don't tell the tax man ok?" (They don't read epistles, do they?) Using a valinch, he poured a sample and handed it to us. The nose was more on dark fruits, very floral, perfumed, but also with a slightly nutty or oxidized dimension. "This is our latest Black Art, soon to be bottled." Now this was a proper cure for the bite of the Lochindaal!

I was hoping to ask Jim a few questions, but if you've ever met him, you must know that this is a man who spent his life in the whisky business, and learned the art of public relations under a PR master, or so the local lore has it. You don't interview him. You don't ask him questions. You let him run with it, let him tell the stories. Some of the stories were about warehousemen who were impaled, or amputated by casks, for a lack of safety precautions. You let him tell you about Ugly Betty, or enjoy the tour he gives you of the new



warehouses Remy Martin is financing. Each one is supposed to hold 15000 casks, and they plan to build one every year, essentially doubling their production. In fact, their need for new spirit is such that our cask will be among the last to be privately bottled, making us all the more awesome!

Before we left, Jim regaled us with one last story. He is a little like the William Shatner of whisky. It began with an annoying whisky anorak who, during a tasting, demanded the secrets to the Black Art bottling. It is difficult to remember the entire yarn he spun for that poor Austrian, but it ended with him in a hot tub, smoking a Cohiba cigar, drinking a dram of Laddie, whilst watching the British & Irish Lions win the tour (which they did in 2013), and telling a naked Heidi Klum he'll take a rain check. Of course, it was a pure fiction, meant to confuse the hell out of the poor man, but it also garnered a real laugh from all of us. With that he bade us adieu and asked us to finish our samples out of sight of public eyes, which we gladly obliged.

One last trip to the gift shop to purchase a few "souvenirs", a valinch bottling among them. Of course, Jim was back making the rounds of the gift shop, greeting guests, and signing our bottles. "Don't open this. No, really. This is a 1000 GBP bottle. It's to commemorate the British and Irish Lions winning The Tour in Australia. Oh, and the signature will cost you a pound." I laugh nervously, nice joke Jim. "No, seriously, it's for the children's charity. Put it in the jar over there." I happily deposited three pounds to cover the signatures for all the lads in our party. A final handshake with everyone in the gift shop, and Jim is off. This was by far, the highlight of our visit to the island.

As we were leaving the gates of Bruichladdich, we caught another glimpse of Jim making his way back home, just next door to the distillery. We couldn't help but remember him tell us that in two weeks hence, to the day, he would celebrate his fiftieth year working in the scotch whisky industry. And to think this was the guy who also made our whisky.

The walk back to Port Charlotte takes about forty-five minutes, and if you follow the main road, you will undoubtedly run into fellow pedestrians or motorists. They will ALL give you a wave and/or a hello. You must surrender to Islay's charm and return the favour, it is the bare minimum you can offer the Ieach in return. In fact, you will find that nary a driver will NOT give you at least a two finger wave and a smile as they pass you, though you may have to jump up onto the grassy curb to make way. If you look carefully enough, you will also find highland cattle with their shaggy fur and long lateral horns hiding from the hot sun (again with a straight face) amongst the stands or yew.

After a quick shower at the hotel, Jocko and I were off to explore parts unknown to most whisky pilgrims. We decided to take the road back towards Port Askaig, and turn up the road signed for Kilchoman. Now this is one of the roads that will put your driving courtesy to the test. It is a single laner, with pull-offs every 300 m. After some precautionary honking, a lot of pulling over and waving, we finally arrived on the North-Eastern side of Islay,



Ardnave Farms, a nature preserve. This part of the island is a sandy dune type landscape, with a view of the bay as well as the Paps of Jura. If you ignore the driving conventions and the accents, you might swear you were on Prince Edward Island. By the way, if you are ever walking there and you find a set of car keys, please make every effort to return them to Martine Nouet, she tells me she lost them there the week previous to my visit!

We returned home to the hotel and prepare for another evening with the locals, which did not disappoint. After dinner we bellied up to the bar again, only to find ourselves next to yet another Bruichladdich employee, Roddy MacEachern. He explained that he is the label designer. I looked at him and described our label concept, he then looked at us and smiled. "So you're the guys with that cask." He then pulled out his mobile phone to show us the mockups of our label. "Usually, I don't start these until the month before bottling, but I liked your idea so much I started on it right away!" Needless to say we were all blown away, realizing we were going to be even more awesome than previously thought.

On our last full day on Islay, we took Curt's whole family on an excursion to the round church in Bowmore, then Claggain Bay, via the Kildalton Cross and ruins. These are sights on the island not to be missed. For lunch, we stopped at the Old Kiln Cafe at Ardbeg, which was both reasonably priced and delicious, especially with our complimentary dram. If you are visiting Ardbeg, Laphroaig, and Lagavulin, you just carry on further up the same road until you get to these sights. Claggain Bay is a lovely pebbled beach, just watch out for cow and sheep patties. As the children unfurled their kites to fly in the Atlantic winds, I made sure to prospect for some interesting rocks for our family collection. If you have the whole day, you can follow the path straight up Beinn Bheigeir to gain a panoramic vantage point.

We made our best effort to find the hidden Kildalton Castle, and without children, we would have made the hike over rugged private land to find the abandoned keep. Jocko and I finished off our afternoon with a few extra stops at the aforementioned distilleries for a few micro-drams. I would particularly like to thank the Laphroaig crew for a great experience and a free gift dram in addition to the sample we tasted.

At this point, we had worked up an appetite for the seafood platter we ordered the day before at the Lochindaal Hotel. A significant chunk of the seafood served in the EU is caught off the coast of Islay, so the hotel can boast some of the freshest seafood in the world. We were due to meet Curt's family for dinner, but not before visiting one of the most charming and hospitable people on Islay, Martine Nouet. After being dropped off at her home, just up the road from Port Charlotte, we sat down to share a dram of a first edition Laphroaig Cairdeas. You might not expect a Laphroaig to be floral, but this one was a bag of flowery perfume with an undercurrent of peat to complement the sweetness in the dram. From her deck you can take in a panoramic view of Lochindaal and the south shore where the largest town on the island is found, Bowmore.



While we were chatting about potential visits to Canada, in particular Prince Edward Island, which shares a common spirit with Islay, her neighbour Paul Capper, owner of Islay Ales showed up to join us. We chatted about island life, and how different it is from the mainland, and how enjoyable our visit to Islay has been.

Another interesting topic that got us all going was very similar to what Jim McEwan had brought up the day before: when people think about Islay, they think exclusively about whisky. Often, so many people are focused exclusively on processes, hardware, scientific analysis (I'm as guilty as the next anorak), but really, whisky is an experiential journey. Martine recounted a visit to the New Brunswick Whisky Festival where she paired up whisky with chocolate and seafood, whilst her colleague was playing traditional Canadian East Coast

folk music. "Sometimes you find yourself surrounded by just the right people, in just the right places, and wonderful things happen." Indeed.

After our chat, in typical Islay style, Martine, known endearingly to the locals as "the whisky chef", gave me a lift back to the hotel for my seafood meal, which she highly recommended. "You should try the Caol Ila. The sweetness and smokiness of the malt brings out the sweetness in the lobster and langoustine." I made sure to extend my open invitation to Canada, and we parted ways just in front of the Hotel.

What came next can only be described as a true Bucket List Meal. I will NEVER have another seafood meal again, simply because nothing will ever rival this one. Sarah brought us 3 large platters, each one loaded with a 2 lb. lobster (with roe!), two massive scallop shells with four giant scallops, still sporting their gonads, and easily 10 langoustine. All of that was accompanied by a fresh salad and fries. I did not really know what fresh seafood was before this, but I can tell you, there was no need for butter or sauces. The flesh was perfectly seasoned by the Atlantic Ocean. And Martine was correct, Caol Ila was the perfect dance partner for this feast.

Before we retired to our rooms to get some rest, the MacLellans made sure to let us know that we were welcome back any time, and treated us to a dram of PC8. As if letting me use their laundry facilities wasn't enough! I can say now quite certainly, that when I return to Islay with my family, I will stay nowhere but with the MacLellans at the Lochindaal Hotel, my home away from home on Islay.



If you travel to Islay asking the questions, *which distilleries will I visit? Which Islay malt is my favourite?*, you will be asking the wrong questions. Travelling to Islay is visiting a place that will touch you with the warm hospitality that the island folk extend to you. The answer to why you chose this destination will become abundantly clear the longer you stay.

As we set sail the following morning from Port Ellen, none of us could stay inside the ferry. Fortune smiled on us as we managed to catch a glimpse of Kildalton Castle, just east of Ardbeg through Curt's telephoto lens! The shore was quickly pulling away from us, and we were leaving behind a small part of our hearts. The Ileach had opened their arms to us, treated us like one of their own, and humbled us with their generosity. From the cook at the hotel, to the master distiller at Bruichladdich, the Ileach are a special bunch that we will not soon forget, and I look forward to visiting them again in the not too distant future.



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 hoghead 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...