

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2013-05 ***By Louis Perlman, USA***

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.



Peat on the Cheap

When Lagavulin simply costs too much

Lagavulin 16 was the dram that launched Malt Madness over fifteen years ago, being Editor Emeritus Johannes' 'amazing discovery'. It took me an extra year to purchase my first bottle. At the time, it cost \$37.99, a full six dollars more than the Highland Park and Macallan 12 year olds that were my amazing discovery malts. But once I picked up on the mighty Lagavulin, it went straight to the top of my preferred dram list, and I was going through a bottle every six months. But apparently Johannes and myself weren't the only ones, and the price started going up. Initially the price increased to around \$45 and then to \$75, as demand was seriously outrunning supply. So for a few years, I got my peat fix elsewhere, until the price went back down to a more reasonable \$50.

Well nothing lasts forever, and once the global recessions eased a bit, Diageo started to raise the price again, first to \$55, and then to \$60 (in New York City), and now to \$67. This now is the best price, and in fact it's higher in many stores. It seems like a lot of people outside of single malt scotch lover circles were getting into Lagavulin, so why not. Even Jim Cramer of TheStreet.com publicly proclaimed his affection for this peaty malt. But \$67 is WAY too much for a 'daily dram' in my budget. And while I was able to get the Talisker 10 year old at a more reasonable price than Lagavulin in the mid-2000's, Diageo has jacked up the price of Talisker lock step with Lagavulin. Meanwhile, I began to notice quite a few attractively priced peated malts sitting on the shelf at local liquor stores, so I figured that it was time to give them a chance.

There was an additional motivation, as my oldest son got married last summer, and has developed a taste for Lagavulin. If I'm not going to be drinking Lagavulin myself all that often, I sure as heck am not going to have him come by and raid my stock. So I figured I would round up a bunch of these budget peat monsters, and let my son take some of them with him when he moved out. So without any further ado, here are the candidates, listed in the order that I sampled them.

Dun Bhegan 'Island' 8 year old (43%) \$35

A bit of internet research revealed that the Island was actually Talisker, so that seemed like a good proposition. The two fewer years of aging compared to the standard 10 year old should've resulted in bit of extra intensity to make up for the slightly lower ABV, and all this for just over half the price.

This bottle had one of the most extreme cases of break-in that I have ever experienced. The Island initially tasted like Talisker Lite, a watered down version of your regular Talisker.

Despite the label proclaiming that no chill filtering was used, the body was rather watery. I would have guessed 40% ABV, rather than 43%. Worse yet, my bottle of Talisker 10 was half empty, untouched since it was opened five and a half years ago, a new bottle would have probably widened the gap even further.

However, when I re-sampled the Island 8 a few weeks later, it was good enough for casual dramming. A few months later, the Island 8 had improved even more, getting close to the 10. Now a new bottle of the 10 may have widened the gap, but the Island 8 is definitely a good value at just over half the price of the 10. The only fly in the ointment is that the 8 is still a mild-intensity dram, which I subsequently found documented in Jim Murray's 2010 Whisky Bible.

Black Bottle NAS (40%) \$18.99

A cult item not often seen on the shelves in the New York City area, I figured that this was the perfect time to try this potential bargain sleeper. Once again, a long break-in period was required. Eventually, the Black Bottle lived up to the label, which states: 'fully honeyed, delightfully smokey flavours'. But that has to be put in the context of an NAS blend, and never seems to rise above that, which as you'll see below, isn't enough in this company.



After I submitted this epistle, Oliver informed me that Black Bottle is being reformulated, with more emphasis on the Speyside components, and less on the Islay. My comments apply to the older version only.



Bowmore Legend NAS (40%, OB) \$27

The Bowmore 12 was my very first single malt scotch purchased after discovering that there was life beyond Glenlivet and Glenfiddich, and as such, I will always have a soft spot for it. The Legend has always been the ignored younger sibling, and perhaps for that reason, is about two thirds the price of the 12. Well, we have a winner here. The 12 does have a bit more complexity, but the Legend actually has a bit more kick. Just the ticket for a peat lover, and a real bargain relative to the 12. If you'd like to save even more money, try the Mcllellans Islay, a still younger Bowmore, as it is bottled by Morrison-Bowmore. I would just mention that Bowmore is generally a medium intensity Islay, so the Legend will not really be a direct replacement for Lagavulin.

Finlaggan NAS (40%) \$25

Years ago, Finlaggan was an NAS Lagavulin, although they switched to Caol Ila when supplies of the former became tight. There was some internet scuttlebutt from a few years ago that they used whatever Islay malts they could get their hands on, but the bottler maintains that it is sourced from one distillery only. And similar to the Legend, we have another winner here. Younger Islays can taste under-developed, but not Finlaggan. There is good balance, and the body is surprisingly good for 40% ABV. I began to think that it would be really great if it was bottled at 46% ABC with no chill filtering, but of course the price would then be a lot more than \$25.

Islay Mist 8 year old (40%) \$18

No mystery here, Laphroaig is mentioned right on the label as the Islay component. I liked this much better than the Black Bottle for about the same money. Perhaps the full 8 years did the trick. I also read somewhere that there is a higher malt content than most blends at this price level. Body again good for 40% ABV. The Laphroaig influence is rather obvious, although it was obvious that this is blend. Still, this is an excellent value and highly recommended.

And better yet were the results when I compared the Islay Mist to a couple of real Laphroaig's, the Cairdeas and the Three Wood. No huge let down, the Islay Mist was very competitive. The 40% ABV didn't give up much on the body front to the 51% and 48% of the other two. So, for a mere \$18, Islay Mist is the overachiever of the bunch.

And a few that got away. I had intended to include the Isle of Skye and Black Grouse blends in the survey. But I needed to spread the acquisitions over a couple of credit card statements, and they were sold out by the time I went back to pick them up. At least the Black Grouse gave me something to put in the Mixology section (see below). Also, the Dun Bheagan Islay eventually showed up on the shelves, but long after I had finished the survey.

And now it's time for the bonus round, as they say on several of the [P90X](#) programs. You can stay with us, or fast forward to the end. These are two drams that sort of fit in with the group above, but for reasons that I'll go into, didn't quite make the final cut.

Tomintoul With a Peaty Twang (WaPT) NAS (40%) \$35

This distillery's expressions are widely distributed around these parts, so I have gotten quite familiar with them, up through the 16 year old. While the 10 year old proclaims itself to be 'The Gentle Dram' on the label, WaPT is a different animal. Rather than either having a real kick like the Finlaggan or lacking maturity, it has a brooding quality that is really unlike any other peated malt that I have sampled. Definitely interesting, but not quite a replacement for a real Islay. Another matter is the price, which I have seen anywhere in the \$34-45 range. For \$35, I can sort of see it, but there are three superior choices for less money. For \$45, you can get the Bowmore 12 for a few dollars less, and Laphroaig 10 for just a few dollars more, so no dice at the higher price point.

Johnnie Walker Double Black NAS (40%) \$42

Before I got into single malt scotch, Johnnie Walker Black Label was my dram of choice. The Double Black has some extra peated malt in the blend, although it gives up the 12 year old age statement. Initially, I was disappointed. A friend of mine has a bottle of duty free (he has no recollection of when or where it was picked up) 86 proof Black Label with more of a peat kick. But one day, I was reaching for the Lagavulin, and the Double Black was right in front of it in my cabinet. What the heck I figured, lets give the Double Black another chance. And it was in a HTH with Lagavulin that the Double Black's virtues became apparent. Whereas Lagavulin throws everything including the kitchen sink at you all at once, the Double Black's smoke dovetailed nicely with orangey undertones. Two very different approaches, and both enjoyable in their own right. I do think that the Double Black is worth two thirds the price of Lagavulin, but it is not a direct replacement. It's worth having a bottle if it piques your interest, but I wouldn't call it a must-have.



Conclusion

Even if none of these budget peat monsters can replace Lagavulin, they can fill in admirably for a lot of your casual dramming. For a fraction the price, you can save your hard earned dollars (or Euros or whatever) and dollar cost average out your high end bottles. One thing all of these are good for is to kick back with a bunch of friends, when you aren't in purist snob mode. And if half, or even the entire bottle gets polished off, your wallet won't complain. As for my son, I sent him off with the Legend, Finlaggan, and the Island 8, keeping the Black Bottle, Islay Mist, and Double Black for myself.

Mixology

Cocktails aren't talked about much in the Malt Maniacs universe. Nonetheless, they can be fun to play around with every now and then, especially in the company of people who aren't quite hardcore whisky enthusiasts. There are just a couple of things to keep in mind. First, when you are drinking out, you expect the bartender to faithfully adhere to the recipe. At home, you may not have all of the ingredients on hand, so by all means compensate. Just figure out what the missing items was supposed to add, and find something equivalent. Second, since you are coming in from the whisky side, stick to cocktails with only a few ingredients. Save the cocktails with arm long recipes for Las Vegas or trendy nightspots. And finally, you don't need to use the expensive stuff, 10-12 year old malts are just fine, as well as the decent NAS drams. Cocktails were originally invented to cover up the taste of low quality spirits of years gone by (i.e. think bathtub gin), today's mainstream malts are hardly need that kind of help. Along those lines, there are very few cocktails that use scotch whisky. This is because scotch already had a high degree of quality control even in the late 1800's, so there wasn't much need to disguise lower grade spirit. So here are a couple of scotch based cocktails that I have enjoyed recently:

Prohibition Repeal Day is December 8th, at 5:31 PM should you wish to celebrate the exact moment. The industry has [an informative, if somewhat self serving website](#), and here is a nice [blog post](#). Last year, I decided to go with the basic Whisky Cocktail using the Double Black, which had just arrived a few days before. This is a very simple cocktail, just add some simple syrup and a few drops of Angostura bitters, and serve over cracked ice. Simple syrup is just equal parts sugar and water, boil until the sugar is completely dissolved. Make as much or as little as you need, and it lasts forever. Cracked ice is perfect when you want to wash down food, it works far better than on the rocks.

And now for the second. At Whiskyfest 2011, one of the Edrington Group tables was manned by a bartender. He was serving a very interesting cocktail made up of Glenrothes, Black Grouse, ginger liqueur, and fresh squeezed lemon juice and a twist. I didn't think to ask for the exact recipe, so I started off with the 2-1-1 proportions from a Margarita or Sidecar (I actually prefer a third part of tequila in a margarita, but that's another story). Not having either Glenrothes or Black Grouse on hand, I used Glengoyne 10 and the Double Black. As I didn't have any ginger liqueur either, I brewed up some ginger syrup, adding some diced of ginger to the sugar and water (during the cooking process, not after). I also added a bit more of both scotch elements, to get the proof closer to what it would have been with liqueur instead of syrup. This worked quite well, and resulted in a very pleasant cocktail. Just for fun, I made up a smokier version, using the Islay Mist instead of the Double Black. The smoke was obviously noticeable, I would file it under 'different, but not necessarily better. One thing I can tell you though, is that if you like a particular flavor, it pays to invest in a bottle of liqueur for quality control purposes.



Louis Perlman was born in 1959. He got hooked on single malt scotch whisky in the late nineties. After stumbling around various web pages, he came across the announcement introducing the original Malt Madness page, and started exchanging emails with Johannes. Suddenly one day, the Malt Maniacs were introduced, with Louis being one of the original three.