

Malt Maniacs E-pistle #2015-01

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.



Malt Maniac Awards:

The Travails of being an Indian Judge

Getting the packages

Whenever the Malt Maniacs Awards for the year is announced, a pall of gloom sets upon me and this year has been no different. Getting the MMA samples into India is not as much an expensive affair as clearing it from Mumbai Customs and ultimately bringing them home in Hyderabad. Keith announced that he would be sending the samples by FW of October in the month of August. Apart from paying the costs for the sample bottles and its courier costs (about Euro 400), as an Indian judge, I have to be ready with customs duty costs for release from Indian Customs at Mumbai, travel and lodging costs in Mumbai etc. This also means I also have much less time available to me to taste the samples. This is not the case with rest of the Malt Maniac Judges. They pay only the competition costs of samples which arrive at their door step in no time. All foreign parcels coming by post to India end up in Foreign Post offices either in New Delhi or in Mumbai. Since I live in Hyderabad it comes under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Post office in Mumbai.

And they are off....

Keith informed that this year there were two packages for me, dispatched on October 6th. As Deutsche PO does not accept a parcel to India beyond 20 Kg weight, he had to make two packages. A bigger package containing the maximum number samples and the rest in a small package (he gave me the tracking numbers of each parcel). The next day when I was tracking the dispatch numbers of the two packages on DHL/Deutsche PO website, one package was shown heading towards Paraguay! When I informed Keith, he rushed to DHL/Deutsche PO, they then claimed that everything would be in order in due course. In the meantime I was tracking the parcels' progress and everything appeared to be OK.

On or around October 20, the tracking showed the arrival of two parcels in Mumbai PO. Since the customs formalities would be too complicated, I did not want to entrust the job to any third person and set off to Mumbai.

Real goof up

Monday morning, the 26th October, I presented myself before the customs officer. He typed the reference numbers in his computer and declared triumphantly, "yes, your parcel has arrived". I said "two packages, not one". He typed the reference numbers again and declared, "No, there is only one package, the other package with the reference number you mention



has been delivered in Paraguay on October 14th". I was flabbergasted and asked him to check for the package again. He became impatient and said he cannot do anything for a parcel that is not showing in his records and told me in no uncertain terms not to waste his time. He asked me if I wanted to clear the parcel that has arrived. Hoping that it would be the bigger parcel I said "yes". Further conversation and events took place as follows:

Officer: "What is the content of the parcel?"

Me: "Oh, they are samples for testing purpose"

Officer: "What samples and what testing?"

Me: "They are whisky samples for judging best whiskies of the year.... I am a member of Malt Maniacs, a global conclave of people....(blah... blah...blah...)"

Officer (with keen interest and raising an eye brow): "Oh, there are whisky bottles in the parcel? Do you have an import License or any permit to import the whisky?"

Me: "Sir, they are only 50 ml whisky samples meant for personal use for judging an international competition, which I have been doing since 2003" (Shown proof of custom cleared documents of parcels pertaining to MMA 2012 and 2013 along with few articles written in local magazines at this stage)

Officer: "So you are a specialist whisky drinker. You can clear the parcel, but I have to open it to assess the duty". "Do you know how many bottles are there in the parcel?"

Me: "I don't know, but kindly assess the duty to bare minimum as this is not for any commercial purpose" (The officer got the parcel opened, counted and bewildered seeing only some numbers on each bottle)

After doing some calculation, he said, "Pay Rs. 7,500/- plus Rs. 100 for handling and take your parcel". By this time I was really tired and mentally strained and wanted to get out of the place somehow. I paid the amount and got out of the place. To my ill luck it turned out to be the smaller package.

In Mumbai, I stayed at my friend's place and upon my departure, I asked him to collect the second parcel from Customs, that is, if it arrived at all. I completely lost hope that the bigger parcel would arrive at all. I informed Keith of the situation regarding the Paraguay package and asked him to take up with Deutsche Post/DHL suitably. And how "suitably" he had taken up the matter with them in Munich is another story. All I can say is that Keith was almost sued by DHL/Deutsche Post for the language he used with them!

Pleasant surprise

On 28th October, my friend in Mumbai gave me a big surprise. He called and said that a Postman came to his residence, notifying arrival of a parcel asking him to collect it by paying Rs 12,100/- as duty. While the good news of the package's arrival cheered me up, the later part of news had put me off. The Malt Maniacs Awards was costing me dearly and by now putting strain on my available finances. My friend, Keshav waited on the phone for some time for my response and asked me if I wanted the parcel or not. In case I did not want it, he would be glad to clear it by himself and enjoy the whiskies for the rest of the year. I said "Keshav, please clear the parcel and I shall reimburse the money".



A Good Samaritan and the second package arrives

Keshav cleared the parcel and kept it at his home. In India, the courier companies do not accept packages containing spirits, a 20 KG package at that, and I didn't want to risk getting it through the normal Indian Post office. Half the bottles did not arrive. I also didn't have time, money and energy to go to Mumbai again to collect it. I was wondering how the package would arrive at my place in Hyderabad and suddenly I remembered an old office junior of mine who used to help me out and had a knack for getting things done. I requested that he help me out and I would bear all his expenses. He carried the package all the way from Mumbai by overnight bus and delivered the package safely to me on 9th November. By now the custom duty, mine and my friend's travel expenses, accommodation etc came to further Euro 400/- and the total expenses of MMA 2015 to Euro 800/- .



Now some forensic work

The bottles arrived intact except one broken bottle and labels rubbed off from about 30 bottles. The packages' travel coincided with Rugby World Cup 2015 timings and when it arrived at my place it was of oblong shape, just like big rugby ball. People must have played Rugby with it and no wonder the labels were rubbed off on several samples! After lining them



up serially and by permutation and combination, correct numbers could be assigned to 22 samples. The numbers on 8 bottles could not be deciphered at all. How to assign correct numbers to these 8 samples? A mail was sent to fill the gaps in my line up of bottles asking for a good picture of these bottles and David from California responded immediately. By matching color combination of the picture received from David and placing my bottles in front of the screen, six bottles' color could be matched accurately and numbers were assigned to them. Sample numbers of two final bottles were identical in color and there was no possibility of assigning

numbers. Permission was sought from the organizers to share the organoleptic characteristics of these two samples and it was granted as a special case. Rich Howard, one of our US judges sent me a mail sharing his nasal notes which was in line with my notes, one a highly phenolic and the other non phenolic. Now with all bottles correctly numbered and resolving the score of the broken bottle to be a blank one, I went ahead with tasting of MMA2015 samples.

Another Good Samaritan from San Francisco

Sundar, a friend of mine who lives in Fremont, SF informed me that he would be visiting his ailing father in Chennai on 20th



November. Was my run of luck getting extended? During my visit to SF last year, my friend met Tim Puett, another of our US judges who lives near SF. I sent a mail to Tim requesting whether he could share a small part of the broken sample and he gladly agreed. He couriered the sample to Sundar and so it arrived at my home SF-Chennai-Hyderabad on 26th November.

The verdict....

I scored the broken sample pretty high- giving it 94 points. It was a brilliant sample and I was congratulating myself for getting it all the way from SF otherwise I would have definitely missed it. Here are my tasting notes: "Showing class of a highly aged whisky. Rich and complex. Lots of dried fruits- Dates, raisins, figs etc. Old leather pouch holding cured leaf tobacco. Beef stock. Very meaty. Fennel and anise seed. You can go on describing this stuff. OH, my god! What is this whisky? All characteristics of nose reappearing on palate. Unbelievably good whisky. Out of this world".



When I submitted the score to Keith, I commented on the possibility of it winning the award for overall MMA 2015 and predicted it to be a Karuizawa/ Yamazaki or a Glendronach. When Keith announced the results, my prediction was not all the way off (although not one of the three predicted). It

won the Thumbs Up award in the Premium category and scored more than 90 from five other judges. It turned out to be- Amrut Spectrum, NAS, 50%, Hand crafted, 5 woods .

Slainte!

Krishna Nukala
Certified Malt Maniac
December 08, 2015.



"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 Nicholson at the distillery and his life has not been the same since then. After working 35 years in banking and a Multinational Company, Krishna is now retired and spends time in pursuit of QAVP (Questio Aqua Vitae Perfectum). Besides whisky being his passion, his chief mission also is to spread the message of malt in India and he frequently contributes articles in Indian Magazines and conducts master classes. Krishna is one of the earliest Malt Maniacs having been invited by Johannes, the founder member in 2000"