

The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow Scholarship

Last year, with a blend of luck and hard work, I did well enough in my WSET exams to win the Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow scholarship. The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow is an ancient body that originally represented the interests of the coopers of Glasgow. Their motto is the evocative: *wood binds wood round and round*. Nowadays its main function is charitable work.

The scholarship was a two day trip around Scotland to learn more about the Scottish whisky industry. My host was Richard Paterson, master blender at Whyte and Mackay. Richard met myself and last year's winner, Tara, from Glasgow airport and we went straight to the Whyte and Mackay offices. There we were given a brief introduction to the art of blending.

In the Sample room, Richard – who in the trade is known as ‘The Nose’ – showed us how he smells and tastes samples for blending. First, to ensure the glass is free of any contaminate, it is swilled with a small amount of the sample that is then thrown away. I was surprised to see Richard empty the glass onto the floor, but this is acceptable because apparently the whisky neither stains the carpet nor does its smell linger. Another wee dram was poured, and to nose properly you have to put your nose fully into the glass and move it from side to side so that each nostril gets a good waft. To taste, you have to hold the whisky in the middle of the tongue, then underneath the tongue, and finally back to the top of the tongue. The age of the whisky indicates how long it should be held in the mouth: for example, a twenty-two year old whisky needs to be tasted for twenty-two seconds.

One of the whiskies we tasted was the Jura Superstition single malt. This had a delicious spicy aroma with a long honey aftertaste. Richard pressed his hand against the Ankh cross depicted on the front of the bottle and then firmly shook my hand.

‘Superstition has it that you will now be lucky,’ he said.

I laughed and said I didn’t believe in those sort of things.

From the Whyte and Mackay offices, we headed up in Richard’s car to the Speyside Cooperage. As we crossed the Cairngorms we saw buzzards hovering, and descending to Speyside the roadsides became lined with the pink flowers of rosebay willowherb. In the cooperage the men were charring casks. We watched with fascination as casks were rolled across the floor, and one was positioned onto a nozzle that reminded me of a school bunsen burner. The gas was turned up and the whole inside of the cask caught fire. The flames crackled and leapt high into the air. Men sprung about with beads of sweat rolling down their faces. The flames were extinguished and the next cask was heaved into place. I was reminded of a scene from a film where devils danced through the fires of hell.

After the drama of the cooperage, we drove along peaceful roads surrounded by rolling fields of barley until we came to the BenRiach distillery. This is the oldest Highland distillery to create a peaty style of whisky and it boasts the oldest original bonded warehouse. After a tour around the distilling floor we hurried to the warehouse. As he stepped over the threshold, Richard sniffed vigorously.

‘I like to smell every warehouse I enter,’ he said. ‘Notice that damp smell before the whisky aroma – a good maturing warehouse will always have that smell.’

We tasted straight from the casks. The 1976 blend exemplified the BenRiach style. The whisky was very soft, with tropical notes on the nose and a slight chocolatey aftertaste from the peat used in the kiln. We stood outside to savour our

drinks. Dusk was falling and the only sound that could be heard was the calling of red deer from which the distillery gets its name, (BenRiach means hill of red deer). It was the perfect drink for the end of the day.

We started the second and final day of our trip by visiting the huge grain distillery of Invergordon. This distillery makes 32,000 million litres of whisky per annum and uses a continuous still that is 30 metres high. On site are dozens of warehouses, where casks are stacked ten high. The outsides of these buildings are covered with a black fungus. Over time alcohol slowly evaporates through the casks – known as the angels' share – and this is what sustains the fungus.

The final point of call on our trip was the Dalmore single malt distillery. Every bottle of Dalmore is adorned with the emblem of a stag. This is because previous owners of the distillery – the Mackenzie family – had an ancestor who in 1263 saved King Alexander III from being gored by a stag. Out of gratitude, the king granted Mackenzie the right to bear a stag on his coat of arms.

The distillery is in an idyllic setting and looks across the Cromarty Firth. Water for the whisky flows down a burn from Loch Morie. In the burn live two otters, and when the weather is very cold, they creep into the distillery and warm themselves under the stills.

After a tour we tasted from bottles of Dalmore. The 12 Year Old was bursting with flavours of orange marmalade and marzipan; whereas the Gran Reserva was richer, with flavours of liquorice and chocolate and a sweet vanilla finish. It is the ideal scotch for cigar smoking. The King Alexander III was full of spice aromas, bramble fruit flavours and had an elegant floral finish. Before we tried the final scotch, Richard told us to make sure we tasted it properly, holding it in the mouth for at least a minute. I did as instructed, and the intensity and concentration of flavour

astonished me. Layers of flavour slowly revealed themselves: tangerine, dried apricot, orange chocolate, honey, cinnamon and Christmas cake.

‘That’s the most expensive thing you’ll ever taste,’ Richard said. ‘It’s from a bottle of the Dalmore 62 Year Old. Only twelve bottles were made and in 2005 one was sold for £32,000, and promptly drunk. The bottles that remain are thought to be the most expensive scotch in the world.’

I smacked my lips and savoured the aftertaste. The Christmas cake flavour had now turned to heather, and a few minutes later it had changed again to truffle. Richard said I would be able to taste changes in the aftertaste for hours.

On the flight back to England, I reflected on my trip. I had gained fascinating insights into the scotch whisky industry and tasted some delicious single malts. I remembered Richard with the bottle of Jura Superstition and his ‘lucky’ handshake – perhaps after all there was some truth to that ancient Jura superstition.