

The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow Scholarship

Recipient of 2010 Scholarship Award: Joanna Cugley

Host: Richard Paterson, Master Blender at Whyte & Mackay

The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow's motto is "wood binds wood round and round" and they were kind enough to sponsor my WSET Advanced Exam scholarship award of a two-day trip to Scotland for a fascinating in-depth insight into the Scottish whisky industry. The trip was to take in Speyside Cooperage, Glenfiddich & Balvenie Distillery, Invergordon Distillery and also the distillery at Dalmore.

My host, Master Blender at Whyte & MacKay, Richard Paterson met me at Glasgow airport and we headed straight to Dalmore House (Whyte & Mackay's head office). Richard's passion for whisky is evident from the moment you meet him, a third generation Master Blender he has been responsible for the quality of Whyte & Mackay whiskies for just over 40 years. Known in the trade as "the nose", it is one of Richard's main tasks as a blender to nose a huge number of samples each day to ensure that the blend is evolving in the required way.

In the Whyte & Mackay boardroom Richard talked to me about history, heritage, regional characteristics, the importance of nature, the role of wood in the maturation process and the art of blending amongst many other things; within an hour my knowledge had increased tenfold and this was only the beginning!

Richard then showed me how to nose samples for blending. Initially, to ensure the glass isn't contaminated in any way; he swirled a little in a copita glass which I was then shocked to see him fling out of the glass onto the floor! Richard laughed explaining that it didn't stain. He then explained to me that in order to nose the whisky properly you have to approach it in the correct way, assessing it in the same way as you would when meeting a person for the first time. First, Richard said, you need to say "hello"; bringing the glass up to your nose with your eyes closed; then, "how are you" opening up your eyes whilst swirling the glass, moving it first to your left nostril, then to your right (the "tell me about yourself") ensuring the whisky opens up. The top, middle and base notes will begin to emerge but "it needs time" said Richard; "after all, you wouldn't expect to get to know someone completely in under 5 minutes".

Richard also said to me "if I ever see you holding a glass with your hand wrapped round it and sniffing it far too far away from your nose I'll kill you!" Richard explained the tasting process thus, first hold the whisky in your mouth so it's in the middle of your tongue; then take it underneath and to end, back to the top of the tongue. Richard explained that the age of the whisky told you how long it needed to be tasted for, that's to say; a 12 year-old should be held in the mouth for 12 seconds.

From there Richard led me to the Whyte & Mackay sample room, it was a fascinating room, full of bottles of all different ages, shapes and sizes with a vast array of logos and labels. A particular bottle Richard showed me was Jura Superstition single malt which carries the mark of the Ankh

cross. The term “whisky” comes from the Gaelic “usage beatha”, or “usquebaugh”, meaning water of life¹. Just as the peat from Jura sustained Island life, the Ankh cross sustains eternal life. Richard took the bottle in his hand, cross facing inward and then shook me firmly by the hand telling me that I would now have good luck.

From Dalmore House, Richard then drove me to the Speyside Cooperage, opened in 1947 by the Taylor family. Once there I sat down to watch a film about the history of the coopers industry; I had never before appreciated the amount of work that goes into making a single barrel. The video showed that the art of coopering dates back at least 5,000 years and that although there are over 50 species of oak worldwide, only a few are suitable for coopering. It can take up to 150 years before the oak is harvested which is then specially selected for the Speyside casks, these casks can last up to 50 years.

Watching the coopers at their craft from the viewing window was fascinating, I was informed that it takes a 4 year apprenticeship to qualify as a cooper and that these men (Richard told me he didn't think there was a single female cooper) construct and repair around 100,000 casks (barrels, hogsheads, butts and puncheons) a year. Casks that are to be reused arrive at Speyside where they are de-charred and re-charred, if needed staves are replaced and new metal hoops are hammered tightly around the outside.

We then headed up to Dufftown to the Glenfiddich Distillery which is a Speyside single malt owned by William Grant and Sons. This whisky is the only one to be distilled, matured and bottled at a single distillery and uses a natural source of water from the Robbie Dhu springs. Glenfiddich means “Valley of the Deer” in Gaelic hence the appearance of a deer on Glenfiddich bottles. I was given a captivating tour by Gordon who showed me how the entire process in whisky production came together – having only read about it in my WSET Advanced book, seeing it in real life was a real treat! When I was taken up to the maturing warehouse I saw my first blackened warehouse roof; the infamous “Angels’ Share” and inhaling deeply, I identified the damp smell and whisky scent Richard had mentioned to me earlier that day. We ended the visit enjoying a 15 year-old and I was delighted to receive a gift of a 3 ages tasting set.

*The noblest of all drinks, it is Scotland in a bottle.*² Scotch whisky has been made for more than 500 years and is a product of its environment. Made from only natural ingredients, (cereals, water and yeast) Scotch whisky is sold in more than 200 countries worldwide. 106 distilleries are licensed to produce Scotch whisky and 1 in 50 Scottish jobs³ depend on the whisky industry.

Style is influenced by many factors, if the whisky is single malt, blended malt, a blended scotch

¹ Page 8: Scotch Whisky Association – Questions and Answers

² Page 1: Paterson, Richard & Smith, Gavin D. Goodness Nose: The Passionate Revelations of a Scotch Whisky Master Blender, Angels’ Share, 2008

³ Page 53: Scotch Whisky Association – Questions and Answers

whisky, a single grain or a blended grain. Grain whisky is often industrially produced in a patent still giving a more neutral spirit whereas malt whisky is distilled in copper pot stills producing a more flavour driven spirit. Variations are also due to the Scottish climate, the terroir, the local water used, the peat used in the kiln and the region it comes from which will be Highland, Lowland, Speyside, Campbeltown or Islay.

The length of fermentation and the barrel in which the whisky is aged also significantly affect the flavour. In fact, in order to be legally called Scotch whisky at all the spirit must mature in French or American oak casks in Scotland for at least 3 years. Richard explained the maturation process to me like a relationship, telling me that it is the Blender's job to choose the appropriate cask, with the correct amount of char, made from good quality wood and of an appropriate size so that the relationship between whisky and barrel can begin. "At first" he said, "the whisky and barrel take their time getting acquainted, then they start having conversations, before eventually settling down and getting married". Traditionally, the casks of choice for maturation were sherry butts,⁴ but now wine and even beer casks are used.

Richard and I started the second day of my trip at the large scale grain distillery of Invergordon where I was shown round by Andrew "Scottie" Scott. Whilst showing me round he explained that the distillery makes over 30,000 million litres of pure alcohol per year, using around 2,000 tonnes of wheat per week, and that there were almost 50 warehouses on the site each with the potential of holding up to 40,000 casks. I was a little surprised to see some coopers performing their craft in the industrial setting there and glad I got to see the de-charring and re-charring process that had been explained to me the previous day at Speyside. Scottie also told me that Invergordon is one of the largest producers of animal feed in Scotland using the residues left over after fermentation and distillation.

Here I also got to see Richard at work in the sample room where he was nosing hundreds of samples to ensure they were all progressing in the required way. I nosed a few too and Richard let me nose a "rejected" sample which had an almost chemical scent to it; it was peculiar!

Having seen the warehouses, Richard explained his unique Whyte & Mackay double marriage blend to me. After blending, the single malts are returned to sherry butts and the married together fully for several months. Then this 'vatted malt' is mixed with up to six different grain whiskies and returned to another set of sherry butts to mature until perfection.⁵ All this accounts for consistency of style, balance, smoothness, taste and finish.

Last of all we headed to The Dalmore single malt distillery which was established in 1839 by Alexander Matheson located on the banks of the breathtakingly beautiful Cromarty Firth. The distillery was purchased by the Mackenzie family in 1886 whose 12 pointed stag crest still adorns

⁴ Page 202, Fielden, Christopher. *Exploring the World of Wines and Spirits*, WSET 2005

⁵ <http://www.whyteandmackay.co.uk/roots/detail.cfm?contentid=82>

every Dalmore bottle of whisky today. The legend behind the emblem is that an ancestor of the Mackenzie family saved King Alexander III from being gored by a stag whilst out hunting. The grateful King granted him the right to bear a stag's head – a 12 pointer or “Royal” on his coat of arms⁶

Richard told me that the approach to producing The Dalmore is thought of as “Alchemistic Artistry” with three fundamentals: Dynamic Distillation, Sublime Maturation and Harmonious Fusion.

After a tour, photograph session and lunch I had a fantastic tasting session from bottles of Dalmore. The 12 Year Old was full of citrus and vanilla; and the 15 Year Old was spicier with undertones of ginger and cinnamon. The final whisky I tried was from a bottle of Dalmore 62 which Richard told me was “the most expensive thing I would ever taste”. In April 2005 a bottle sold for £32,000, containing vintages from 1868, 1878, 1922 and 1939 only 12 bottles were ever produced. Richard told me that current estimates put the price at over £100,000 per bottle. The original flavours were chocolate, honey and liquorice and the aftertaste continued developing and changing which Richard said would continue for a good few hours afterwards. As so many people describe whisky, it truly was “liquid gold”.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who made my trip the fantastic experience that it was, to Richard Paterson for being my personal guide over the two day trip, to The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow for sponsoring my prize and to all those who gave up their time to take me on various enjoyable tours.

Joanna Cugley – September 2010

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⁶ <http://www.thedalmore.com/site.html> “The Death of the Stag”

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