

Against the grain

Tash McGill takes an in-depth look at the (new) world of whisky.

Whisky is a necessarily long game where trends are determined by the imagination and of distillers in conjunction with the courage of the consumer. And as the perception of who whisky consumers are becomes more diverse, there is plenty of room to explore new ideas. That's good news for consumers and distillers – the adventurers, explorers and experimenters. The ones who are chasing the grain, looking for new and interesting expressions of the malt. There has never been a better time to be a whisky adventurer or to start paying attention to current whisky trends, especially in new world whisky.

What's that, you ask? Good question. Broadly, whisky has been categorised into Scotch, Irish, American, Japanese and a 'world whiskies' bucket. That 'world whiskies' bucket is what I'm picking as the big new trend, as well as some redefinition of how we think about the grain spirit full-stop.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM WHISKY IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS?

1. INCREASED DEMAND (AND SUPPLY) OF AMERICAN AND IRISH WHISKIES

The number of current Distilled Spirits Permits – the permit required to lawfully operate a distillery in the United States – has grown from 560 in 2010, to 1,825 in 2016. In the last 18 months, permits have been approved at a rate of more than one per day. More than 1000 of these distilleries fall into the 'craft' category. Ireland's whisky industry has grown from five to 12 working distilleries in the last five years with another 32 in operational planning. Rumours suggest another 80-160 licenses are in process at the moment. This increase in supply from non-Scotch distilleries will impact global pricing and the approachability of whisky from other regions. This is vital for the industry to continue to grow in both domestic and international markets while Scottish and Japanese stocks recover from a 20-year boom period.

2. EXPANDING WHISKY FLAVOUR PROFILES

With the increased acceptance and interest in other whiskies, the traditional flavour profile of whisky will expand, thanks to the grain spirit's unique relationship with the local malt, water and production method. In Seattle, WA, the Westland Distillery is producing single malt whisky from American grain harvested locally – Master Distiller Matt



Westland Master Distiller Matt Hoffman

Hoffman takes a similar approach to terroir and small batch production as some of the finest Scottish distilleries. This is sensible expansion – for a time, American single malt was too experimental, either too sweet or spicy and often young in flavour profile. Westland Distillery is taking traditional techniques but with local ingredients is creating a unique new whisky. Award-winning, at that. Down the road in Oregon, Rogue Brewing Company is both embracing and challenging the palate with whiskies that are younger and bursting with citrus, oak and honey made from the same malt recipes as their beers. It's still whisky but it's decidedly different and full of curiosity for the adventurous drinker. Local malt will increase in provenance, especially with those American distillers leaping on board the 'transparent' movement – disclosing the unique source of the grain, sometimes down to latitude and longitude of growing conditions. That certainly rings true for local New Zealand production also, where New Zealand distillers Matt and Rachael Thomson of Thomson Whisky have already explored unique New Zealand wine barrel finishing and Manuka smoke. Local ingredients will continue to develop local flavour profiles and the whisky flavour spectrum will expand.

3. IT'S GOING TO BE MORE ABOUT THE PALATE THAN THE PRODUCT

Consumer behaviours are changing and expanding at the same rate distilleries are. Drinkers are becoming bolder and more experimental, less likely to ask for the same old trusted brands and more likely to try something new. This also translates to increased demand for whisky cocktails and aperitif-style servings, which means the role of the bartender as whisky sommelier of sorts, will continue to matter. Auckland bar, The Jefferson, specialises in whisky and stocks more than 600 expressions on the shelves. Owner Ofir Yudilevich says his customers are increasingly coming into the bar to explore new flavours. "People are realising whisky has as many complexities as wine and is much more than two dimensional Jack'n'Coke," he says. "We see an increased desire to learn about the unique qualities of the drink through participation in our group and private tastings. And of course, the demand from women for good whisky, which in turns seems to have an effect on male consumption and desire to keep up with the opposite sex!"

The flow-on effect here? Conversations are going to be more about flavour than age or alcohol volume, giving customers the confidence to order what they enjoy without a sense of 'whisky-wankery' (technical term), which can't happen soon enough in this opinion.

AND WHAT ABOUT THOSE OTHER TRENDS WE'VE BEEN FOLLOWING?

NAS (non-age statement) whiskies are here to stay. There are valid and exciting flavour frontiers that can be explored without the restraint of age statements that are finding traction with both old and new whisky distillers and drinkers.

Supply and demand will still play a role in the high-end of the whisky auction market. Expect age-statement Japanese whiskies and Pappy Van Winkle to still create demand in the market and so if you enjoy them, enjoy them while you can. ■

Tash McGill is a writer and whisky hound. You can find her writing, talking and hosting whisky tastings on a regular basis and online at www.whiskygirl.co.nz



Whisky sampling at Westland Distillery

THE SHOUT'S WHISKY PICKS!

WAITUI MANUKA HONEY WHISKEY 40% ABV

Eighteen years ago, distiller Terry Knight had a quest to create an iconic New Zealand whiskey. Influenced by early healers' and alchemists' elixirs distilled for the elite of ancient times, using the simple ingredients of New Zealand malted barley and Te Waikoropupu spring waters, the result is Waitui Whiskey. Produced in batches of only 3000 litres per year, Waitui Whiskey is aged in Manuka honey mead barrels for a minimum of six years before careful selection, hand-labelling and bottling. Taste the smooth flavours of this unique Kiwi-style whiskey, with just hint of the ancient Waters of Life.

RRP: \$139.00

Distributor: Kiwi Spirit Distillery
www.kiwispirits.co.nz



TALISKER SINGLE MALT SCOTCH WHISKY 45.8% ABV

Talisker is the only Single Malt Scotch Whisky made by the sea, on the shores of the Isle of Skye - one of the most remote, rugged, yet beautiful landscapes in Scotland. Few whiskies tell the story of their origin better than Talisker. Its smell and taste instantly connect the drinker with the rugged environment – like a warm welcome from a wild sea. It's a powerhouse; challenging but adored; once discovered, rarely left. Talisker has notes of Iodine, sea weed, smoke and minerals. Bitumen, roadworks, blue cheese and smoky bacon. A long, intense, peppery finish, with the tail of the whisky cracking a whip down the back of the throat.

RRP: \$109.99

Distributor: Lion Beer, Spirits & Wine New Zealand
Phone: 0800 835 554



JOHNNIE WALKER PLATINUM 40% ABV

Johnnie Walker Platinum Label is drawn from a limited number of casks, carefully chosen and retained throughout their maturation because of their exceptional character. It is an intense, smooth and subtly smoky blend, crafted from Single Malt and Grain Whiskies, each matured to perfection for a minimum of 18 years. Johnnie Walker Platinum has a fragrant aroma with hints of almonds and subtle smoke. Flavour of stewed fruit, malty cereal, smooth creamy vanilla, fragrant, almonds and tangerine give a waxy and fruity sweet taste, mixed with slight drying astringency with subtle smokiness.

RRP: \$149.99

Distributor: Lion Beer, Spirits & Wine New Zealand
Phone: 0800 835 554



The Jefferson in Auckland stocks more than 600 whiskies

