

Islay Whisky Project

Introduction

Islay, a small island off the west coast of Scotland with a population of under five thousand, is home to seven famous and distinctive whisky distilleries. The walls of the tiny whisky bar at the Lochside Hotel, Bowmore heave with banknotes left by whisky lovers from every corner of the globe. In this report I will look at what gives the island this unique diversity, and why these distilleries are so successful today.

When did distilling reach Islay?

Most of the people I spoke to believe that whisky arrived on Islay from Ireland. Originally distillation was used to produce medicine; early whisky was probably more medicinal than recreational, often flavoured with herbs and spices. Whatever the origin, whisky drinking soon spread with many locals setting up small stills, leading to some 17th century commentators claiming it the scourge of the isles, as more barley was distilled than consumed as food.

With the coming of taxation most of the small illicit stills closed, those with the skill or the financial means started many of the distilleries whose names exist today.

Factors affecting quality- what makes Islay whiskies unique?

Water

Most of the water used by the islands distilleries is rain water rather than spring, collected in lochs and filtered through peat, rock and man-made channels on the way to the distillery. Some on Islay say water is all important, others, possibly more pragmatic, say the peat content makes no difference at all, that only the softness and availability of the water matters. “Does your cup of tea taste of peat after the water’s been boiled?” as I was asked at Lagavulin. A distillery working at capacity may use hundreds of thousands of litres of water a week, so a ready supply is essential. Even here in a dry year, water management can be critical.

Malt / Barley

Virtually none of the barley used is grown on Islay. Most distillers use wheat grown in mainland Scotland, where space allows production on a more economical scale.

Varieties are chosen for their eventual yield and potential sugar content than for any recognisable flavour characteristic.

Yeast

Two main varieties of yeast are used by all the distilleries, Mauri and Optic. There seems to be little interest in experimenting with variety, wild or indigenous yeasts. “So much of the flavour comes from the processes after fermentation, distillation and maturation, that any differences between yeasts are lost” said Jackie Thompson at Ardbeg.

Peat

The majority of Islay's malt comes from Port Ellen, originally a distillery, closed in 1983, and now a malt house alone. The malting is where the peat flavours and aromas so associated with Islay's whisky come from. The Island has large peat banks, created over thousands of years, and traditionally the most readily available fuel for drying the malted barley. Today it is used for flavours sake.

Although a key component of many of Islay's most famous expressions, some are very lightly peated. The peat content, measured in parts per million (ppm), is specified by each distillery, from an average 54ppm at Ardbeg to less than 2ppm at Bunnahabhain. The level of peat in the eventual spirit is always lower than in the malt, and is reduced further by ageing in cask. There is no standard peat recipe on Islay, and many distilleries are experimenting with different levels of peating for different bottlings.

Malting

Only two distilleries still do their own maltings, Bowmore and Laphroaig, and they only malt a proportion of what they use. My feeling on this is that they do not necessarily gain superior malt, but rather the maltings are continued to keep traditions alive and enthuse the many whisky tourists who bring so much to the islands economy.

Fermentation and Distillation

It is at these stages in the process where I believe the majority of an individual malts character comes from. The length of the fermentation, when yeasts convert the sugar washed from the milled malt into alcohol to produce a kind of high strength beer, has an effect on the final product. Faster fermentations lead to a cloudier lower strength beer and a more pungent spirit. Longer fermentations tend to create a beer which is clearer, higher in strength and will be distilled into a lighter, more elegant spirit. Neither is superior, each distillery makes the decision according to the spirit they wish to produce. Many distilleries experiment little, following the recipe they have used for decades.

After fermentation comes distillation, the secret art centuries old. For Islay's distilleries this is a two stage process using pot stills. The beer is first loaded into a low wines still, where the first distillation takes place, resulting in a low strength spirit. This is then transported to a spirit still where the final distillation will take place; the new make spirit flowing from it.

Although the process is similar in a broad sense between the distilleries, there are numerous decisions to be made that will have a profound effect on the spirit produced. The temperature the stills run at will affect the length of the distillation, where the cuts are made, from foreshots to spirit to feints, the level the stills are filled and perhaps most important of all, the shape of the stills.

All of the stills are made from copper, a substance which holds a 'conversation' with the vapours flowing over it, trapping impurities on its surface. The slower the vapours pass over the copper, the more impurities will be removed and the lighter and purer the spirit. The height and size of the still affects this; a small still with a horizontal arm will produce a heavier spirit, and a tall still with a steeply angled arm will slow the vapours progress and result in a spirit of lighter character.

While the story of new stills being fashioned to include every dent and patch of the old is largely a myth, every distillery takes great care not to alter the shape of its still in anyway.

Maturation

To be called Scotch, a whisky must mature in Scotland for a minimum of three years. However, to be called an Islay there is not necessarily a need for it to mature on the island, although in practice much is matured in Islay's many bonded warehouses. The people I spoke to gave a range of importance to maturation on the island. Some people said the unique qualities of the island air, with its salt-character from the sea, is responsible for many of the flavours and complexity their whisky gained with age. Indeed, some maintain that there are distinct differences between whisky's matured in different warehouses, even in different areas of the same warehouse. Other distilleries, notably Caol Isla and Lagavulin, mature little of what they make on the island.

Conclusion

No other Scottish island has the number or diversity of whiskies as Islay. Jackie Thompson feels that the character of the islanders has played its part, an independence of spirit and a need, as she said, to 'make your own fun' in this beautiful but often harsh environment. The long history of whisky production, from illicit spirit to global premium brand, has led to refined products of high quality and distinct character. When blended whisky ruled the market and single malts were curiosities, peated malts were loved by blenders, as a little could be used to impart much flavour to a blend. For this reason the distilleries individual characters were in great demand, keeping them working through times which saw many less distinct distilleries close across Scotland and a great deal of consolidation within the industry.

As single malts gained popularity so distilleries shrugged off the anonymity of blends. Islay's whiskies presented strong flavours to a public excited by authenticity. Marketing companies found a place steeped in tradition and whisky lore, allowing them to build an image of timeless quality. The romantic notions of this distant isle captured the imagination of whisky drinkers worldwide, many thousands visiting the island every year.

While the natural components of whisky may not be unique to Islay, nor even produced there, the island has a beauty and a heritage very much its own.

Two of my favourite whisky's from the trip

Ardbeig Renaissance 1998 Distilled 54% Alc

Lovely bright amber colour. Smokey / peaty notes underpin floral top note. Heather flowers and lime skins. On the palate, spicy and hints of sweetness, dried fruit and nuts, cloves. Pungent and exotic, yet a clean and fresh finish.

Laphroaig 15yo

Darker Amber with golden honeyed highlights and flashes. Floral, cream, toffee and spice notes meet the nose. The smokiness is the bass note here, over-laid by the more delicate fruit and flowers. The texture on the palate is rich, creamy and luxurious, cut and freshened by a citric

edge. The finish is long and fresh and reminds me of melted butter. The balance here is fantastic. Slightly salty tang.

Bibliography

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I would like to thank all at the WSET, the SWA and everybody on the Island for the organisation, planning and extremely kind hospitality I received.

I recommend the soup and a toastie at the Ardbeg Cafe as the perfect foil to a mornings tasting.