

The Last King of Scotland

Master of Whiskey Spike McClure is not a bastard. And, he may have scotch to thank.

IT'S A FURIOUSLY HOT, LATE JULY AFTERNOON and I'm sitting at a table in an empty bar yet to open, talking scotch with Master of Whiskey Spike McClure—been doing so for over an hour, in fact. And while he's due back in Manhattan shortly, one assumes McClure could keep at this well into the evening without thinking twice about it. He loves this spirit the way some love Picasso's Blue Period, the films of Ingmar Bergman...or their firstborn. And the story he's in the middle of telling—one that involves a 4 a.m. conversation with a distiller over a bottle of some fine single malt—may elucidate why.

"I said, 'You've been in this business for a long time and you tried many other trades before that. Why devote your life to this?' And he said, 'You know Spike,'" and here McClure seamlessly slips into a pitch-perfect Scottish



brogue, “there are bastards in every business, but there are fewer of them in whiskey than any business I’ve ever seen.” And that’s the truth.”

McClure, who is employed by world-renowned beverage distributor Diageo, pauses to emphasize this conviction and grips the bottle of 14-year Oban that’s sat between us the entire time. Then, with a sincerity so early-20th Century, so devoid of irony, I expect the scene to turn black and white right then and there, he says, “A bunch of bastards can’t make this. This tastes like love. This tastes like respect. This tastes like somebody cared an *awful* lot. This is not something that’s made cynically.” Right on.

To begin to understand why anyone would be inclined to engage in such romantic revelry over a single spirit, it helps to know where the word whiskey comes from. It’s actually an Anglicisation of the 17th century Irish “Uisce Beatha,” or “water of life.” And while the first written record of whiskey comes from 1405 in Ireland, where it was distilled by monks, it is thought whiskey had already been around for hundreds of years prior. In other words, it’s impossible to separate whiskey (and in this case, scotch whiskey) from the wisdom and mythology of time and its slow, meditative march.

McClure, the son of a Scottish pastor, came to whiskey in his early twenties, and has not looked back since. “Until you taste whiskey, until it pushes that button, you don’t even know that you have been looking for it,” he says. “Until I discovered whiskey, I never appreciated it or understood it. Drinks, for me, were just refreshments.”

Which is not to suggest scotch isn’t refreshing. It is—just not in the way a cold beer or chilled glass of white wine is. The sublimity of scotch is an inverted, perhaps spiritual, satisfaction, one that begs for introspection and meditation. But let’s not get too heady. It is, after all, just a spirit. Or is it?

Here are the facts: First of all, to be called scotch, it must come from Scotland. It must also be primarily made from barley (as opposed to American whiskey, for example, which uses corn as its primary ingredient). Distillers soak the barley until it

begins to sprout, releasing an enzyme that converts starch to sugar. Once that happens, the grain is dried very quickly, either with peat (lending a heavy, smoky character to the final product) or forced air (which often yields a sweeter, unsmoky grain). Once the barley is dried, it is milled into a flower, which then goes into a mash tun (picture an enormous tea ball) that holds about 10,000 liters of boiling water. The barley steeps until a plug is pulled from the bottom and the sweet liquid is removed. This is done three times and is called malting.

That malted liquid is then poured into a large wooden container, to which the distillers add brewers yeast, thus converting the sugar into alcohol. This new liquid—at about 8 or 9 percent alcohol by volume—is then put into a still and distilled twice, once to get it to about 20 percent and again to about 70 percent, or 140 proof. Finally, that 70 percent ABV (or casks strength) is knocked down to about 43 percent with purified water. Pour that into an oak barrel, let it mature for many years, and you have a single malt scotch. If, however, you take that original cask and marry, or blend, it with another cask from another distillery, that’s a blended, or vatted, scotch.

According to McClure, it is a fallacy to attribute severe qualitative differences to single malts and blends. “Some of your finest, rarest whiskeys are blended whiskeys,” he says. “Ninety percent of malt production goes into blends, like Johnny Walker, J & B, Dewar’s. They really keep the industry going.” The single malt phenomenon, he says, is a new thing. It’s only been the dominating trend for the last 30 years or so. “There are bad single malts and there are great blends,” he adds. “There are bad blends and great single malts. It all has to do with how gifted the people making it were and how hard they tried and where they set the bar to begin with.”

But what about the drinking? According to McClure, scotch has been bearing the unfair burden of cultural bias and inferred snobbery for too long. Like your scotch neat? That’s great. Want to crack it with a drop of water? Fantastic. That brings its own flurry of pleasures and sub-

The Glenlivet, 12 Year:

Perhaps the most well-known of the bunch, this single malt has a light golden color very similar to the Talisker. Its nose surprises me with obvious floral tones. Springtime. The first warm afternoon of the season, just after a quick rain. I’m letting this one sit for a little while as I think it may have some blooming to do. (*Twenty minutes later...*) Oh yeah, I was right. This is pure spring in a glass. The palate doesn’t disappoint such a lofty lead-up either, and fruit flavors dance with every sip. Make that berries and cream. I think I taste some vanilla.



leties. Want to pour it into a glass of coke, like the Spanish? Go right ahead. “It is,” McClure continually reiterates, “your bottle.”

“There’s a school of thought—I’d rather call it a gang of thought—that says scotch whiskeys are special and dignified and you must treat them with respect and you can’t drink them with your left hand and you must drink with one eye closed and on pain of death do put water in it. And then you go to Scotland and you sit down with a distiller and he takes out a big thing of water and pours it, 50–50. Or, as my dad says, ‘I don’t water down my whiskey. I whiskey up my water,’” says McClure, again with the perfect accent.

“I guarantee you; over in Scotland the one thing they’re not thinking about is how you drink your whiskey. They don’t care. Nobody cares. And with all due

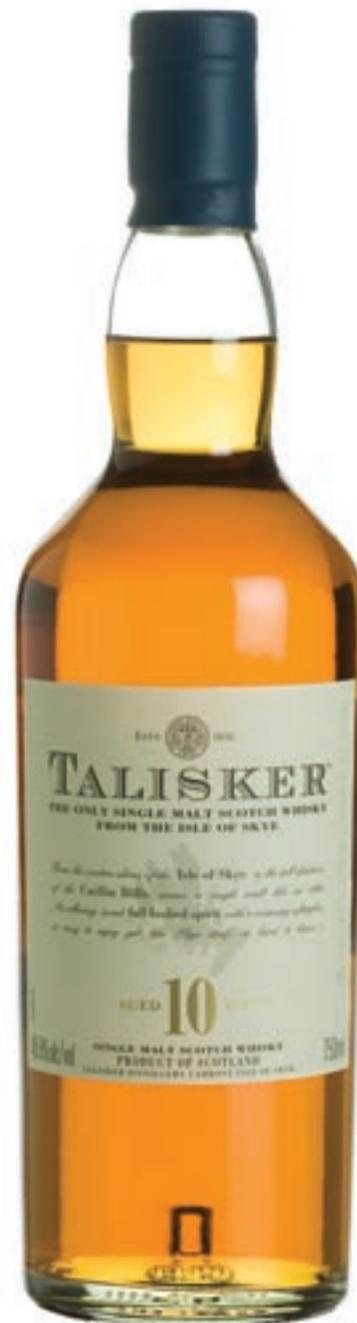
respect, anybody who cares about how you drink your whiskey—does he really care? Does he care about what kind of underwear you’re wearing? What side of the bed you sleep on? It should be the way you like it. Never, never drink a whiskey in a way you don’t like because that’s how you’re ‘supposed’ to drink it.”

Which goes back to the bastard quotient. During our conversation, McClure strikes me as one of the most content, enlivened, at-peace individuals I’ve met in some time. Maybe this has to do with his love for this spirit. Maybe he has actually found a libation that speaks not only to his taste but his soul as well.

“The whiskey life is, I think, about freedom, about choosing, about having idiosyncratic, peculiar taste,” he says. “Ultimately, you don’t drink scotch to fit in. You drink it because it’s delicious.” ■

DURING OUR INTERVIEW,

SPIKE SCHOOLED ME ON THE ART OF SCOTCH TASTING. It’s a four-step process that’s easy enough to execute, but quite difficult to evaluate. That part takes time and experience. But go on. Try this at home. Don’t be scared. First, look at the color. Sunlight is the best source for this. Then, swirl the glass for legs (the streaming of the scotch down the inside of the glass) in order to check the viscosity. Nose it (making sure to breathe through both your nose and mouth), and then sip. Repeat as necessary (or desired). -N.D.



Talisker, 10 Year:

This one is of an even lighter gold. It seems crude in the context, but apple juice comes to mind. The nose is much sharper—or perhaps more mature, less forgiving—like an expensive leather coat or the pages of a dusty, basement-kept book. My first thought in the aftertaste is chocolate. Then, upon a second sip, I detect a pleasant back-of-the-mouth hint of licorice and...is it apples? Again, with the apples. This strikes me as peculiar, that I should taste apples, since nothing else about this scotch strikes me as fruity. So it goes, I suppose. Scotch is a labyrinth of flavor.

The Singleton, 12 Year:

The color of this newly unveiled scotch from Diageo is a light gold; darker than wheat but breezier than amber. An inviting hum of mellow, if you will. I'm expecting potency but the nose of The Singleton is actually quite mellow. I sense fruit tones, although I can't decipher the specifics. And the flavor follows suit, coating the tongue instead of running hard and sharp down the middle. It has a calm, fruity zest that finishes with a slight, grassy bitterness on the edges of the tongue. Upon the last sip I smell and taste caramel. A lot of caramel. They should give this stuff out to trick-or-treaters on Halloween!



Lagavulin, 16 Year:

Amber, straight up. No doubt about it. This is the darkest and richest of the lot thus far. It's beautiful. The nose is crisp and aggressive, but not uninviting. An autumn afternoon or the lingering scent of burning leaves in the distance. Rain about to fall. The smokiness of the nose is echoed by a similar taste, a calming warmth that brings to mind fireplaces and Christmas. There is something nutty there as well, or a vanilla that one expects from a decadent bed and breakfast brunch. Like the color, the Lagavulin's flavor is the darkest and richest of the lot. Ooh, there's even some honey in here. I think I may actually be in love with a beverage.