



THE EXPERT: WHISKY

ALWYNNE GWILT AKA 'MISS WHISKY' HAS A SIMPLE GOAL - TO TURN THE 'ARMCHAIR & SLIPPERS' IMAGE OF WHISKY ON ITS HEAD

Words: LORENZA BACINO Portrait: ROSIE BARNETT

Alwynne Gwilt, aka Miss Whisky, believes we should all take a moment to appreciate the finer qualities of the 'water of life'.

The word whisky comes from the Gaelic, 'usquebae', meaning water of life and it's been distilled in Scotland for centuries. Mostly it's marketed as a 'manly' drink or a 'great adventurer's' drink, and as such, is often deemed 'unladylike'. Alwynne Gwilt, or Miss Whisky, as she's known, couldn't disagree more.

Now aged 28, Alwynne cut her teeth in the trade after arriving in England from Canada six years ago. A few months into her first job as a financial journalist in London, her boss asked her to network with clients at a whisky tasting. She reluctantly obliged and went along to an experience that ultimately turned her life around.

"It was at Milroy's in Soho. I was so shocked to taste whiskies that were older than I was," she says. "All my preconceived negative notions were dispelled, and I began a quest to find out more."

Miss Whisky began treating herself to a different bottle of 'the water of life' each birthday and Christmas, and is now determined to show that there's one out there for everyone. We're up for the challenge!

Talk us through the different types of whiskies.

There are two distinct strands - 'blended' and 'single malt'. Blended whisky, such as Jameson Irish Whiskey, Famous Grouse or Teacher's, has both grain and malt components, so it's a mix of whisky made from corn or wheat and whisky made from malted barley - and comprises whiskies from different distilleries. A single malt, such as Glenfiddich or Glenmorangie, is made from malted barley, and comes out of one distillery. You also get a blended whisky called a bourbon, which is made from at least 51% corn, and has a sweeter, richer flavour.

Do single malts vary from region to region?

Yes! I personally like ones from the Speyside region, which tend to have more floral, fruity notes - apricots, peaches, honey and vanillas. Much of the flavour comes from the type of cask it's matured in, because of the chemical reaction between the spirit and the wood, although the whisky will vary slightly from distillery to distillery due to the shape and size of the stills. Over time, that spirit softens out, it relaxes, and eases into its job. It's like a marriage between wood and the spirit. It's one of the most beautiful things about whisky - a bit of magic, I always think - as you're never quite sure how the whisky's going to come out.

Does that mean single malt is a superior whisky?

Grain whisky, which goes into blended whisky, doesn't tend to be aged as long, so it can be seen as less refined. This also means single malts are more expensive, as storage pushes up the price. Blended whiskies cost from around £12 in supermarkets, while a single malt will often be at least £25. I like blended whiskies for different purposes - they work well in cocktails, as long drinks with soda and lime, for instance.

Do you have a personal preference?

That's almost impossible to answer! The taste changes



Before 'nosing' your dram, tilt the glass to allow for more evaporation - and a stronger aroma

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROSIE BARNETT

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significantly depending on how long it's been aged, what it's been aged in and who made it. If you go to a tasting and get exposed to five or more different styles, you'll begin to identify the flavour profiles you prefer - salty or sweet, smoky or floral or grassy. Big names such as Glenfiddich are popular because they were among the first to release single malt whiskies when people were only used to blended whisky, but some smaller ones are incredible too. The Irish triple distil most of their whiskies, which gives them a distinct flavour profile.

What regulations are faced by the whisky industry?

In order to be considered whisky, it must be matured for at least three years (but most will be aged for longer than that), and it has to be matured in oak casks. The majority of casks come from America's bourbon industry, as they're only allowed to use their casks once, so whisky producers in Scotland, Ireland or Japan then buy them to mature their spirit in. These are made from American white oak. Then you get European oak, which has usually already been used to mature sherry in, so they're seasoned with that distinctive flavour. »

You'll find whisky distilleries across the globe, including Japan, South Africa and Wales



The narrowing at the top of the tulip glass concentrates the aromas and allows you to make a good swirl!



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: ROSIE BARNETT

Made in Speyside, The Balvenie whisky offers fruity flavours with citrus and vanilla hints



Where do you recommend we buy our whisky?
Supermarkets like Waitrose, Aldi and Asda now have incredible selections, while specialist whisky shops stock more unusual off-the-wall ones. In London I go to Milroy's in Soho, or the Vintage House on Old Compton Street, and you'll find The Whisky Shop throughout the UK. Online you can go to www.thewhiskyexchange.com and www.masterofmalt.com. Of course, online you can't taste them before you buy, but Master of Malt offers what's called 'drinks by the dram'. You can read about a whisky first and they'll send you 30ml sample from anywhere from £2 to £70.

How should you drink whisky?
Any way you like it! There's been a lot of snobbery in the past against mixing whiskies or adding ice, but now the industry is becoming a lot less prescriptive. I love whisky, ginger and lime, for example. But sometimes drinking it with ice isn't such a good idea because ice shuts down the flavours and freezes your palate.

What food/whisky pairings do you recommend?
Cheese is a fantastic pairing with smokier whiskies, and

a nice sherried malt is heavenly with a dark chocolate truffle. Whisky is also delicious over vanilla ice cream. Once, I tried bread pudding with raisins with an Irish whisky called Redbreast and that was divine too. And duck liver pate with a sherried nutty whisky is another dream combination. Around Christmas time, Christmas pudding and whisky is the perfect pairing, especially when the pudding comes out all aflame.

Whisky is often perceived as an 'old boy's' drink - what's been your experience of this?

I've been very lucky as people within the industry have been welcoming and friendly and eager to share their passion. It's a craft product, which means that even representatives from the massive distilleries are really down to earth, and simply love to talk about whisky. It's lovely to meet up and chat away.


How eco-friendly is the whisky industry?

Whisky is a superbly green craft and everything about the industry is re-usable. At Bowmore Distillery on Islay, there's a public pool which is heated by the waste heat from the whisky-making process. The barley grains used in the process are often compacted into something called draff and fed to cattle, so farmers use it too.

How can burgeoning whisky aficionados develop their taste-buds further?

I'd look for things with an interesting 'finish', when you've got a malt whisky that's been matured for 12 years in a cask that previously held bourbon and then transferred into one that held sherry, madeira or port, for instance. That's called a 'finishing' and it gives the flavour an edge. And check out those really small distilleries such as Benromach, Kilchoman, Glen Garioch or Glengoyne in Scotland.

What tips can you give us about buying whisky for friends in the run-up to Christmas?

All the whisky outlets will be doing tastings, so go along and try some. At the Scotch Malt Whisky Society in London, Edinburgh and Leith you can buy tickets to events where you can sample interesting single cask whisky. Don't assume that just because it's old it's good - it comes down to what you personally enjoy. And when buying for friends, think about what they already drink. If they enjoy red wine, sherry or port, they'll probably prefer a whisky that's had a sherry maturation. If they already drink bourbon, then they might like to try a Scotch whisky which has been finished in a bourbon cask. Just go into a specialist shop and have a chat. There are no 'wrong' questions! 

MISS WHISKY is the 2013 International Whisky Ambassador as awarded by Spirit of Speyside, one of the world's biggest whisky festivals. She runs tastings for companies such as The Balvenie and through www.secretguru.co.uk. Read her blog at www.misswhisky.com.