

SAS Guide to Scotch Whisky

As I sit here drinking a vodka martini, it hit me to write an article on Scotch whisky. Do not ask me why, let's just roll with it. Scotch was not a beverage I enjoyed from the start. It took many years and many role models to finally understand what it was all about. I'm not quite sure when it was that I started to look forward to sticking the liquid equivalent to a peat covered oak log into my mouth, but I'm sure glad it did.

And, out of that sudden unpredictable enjoyment, comes this SAS guide to scotch Whisky. Like a glass of aged single malt, enjoy…

First, what is Scotch? Well, aside from both making you feel funny inside, Scotch whisky and Sean Connery have the same principal ingredient. They are both Scottish.

It is a distillate mash of malted barley that must be aged in oak barrels for no fewer than three years. Blended scotch combines malt and grain whiskies, whereas Single malts come from pot stills. It usually is distilled twice, which allows it to retain its distinct flavor.

Now for the majority of us Scotches in the ten to eighteen year range of are just fine. They contain enough complexity that when you finally start learning what to look for you will not go broke. Leave the thirty-five year old bottles to the rich and experienced for now.

Now how should you drink your Scotch whiskey? With water? With ice? And does choosing either of these mean you are a pansy? No.

When drinking Scotch whiskey some dilution is recommended. Add a splash of cool still water to drop down the Alcohol content from about 40 percent to 35-30. If it still burns the mouth, add a little more. Remember, we are trying to appreciate 18 years of hard crafted labor here. Adding water does not mean you cannot handle the taste, only that you want to enjoy it more.

You can also add ice if it is necessary but only one cube. Making the Scotch too cold will stunt the flavor. Again, not the idea.

When enjoying a glass of Scotch always use the proper glassware. A Scotch glass has a purpose. Its thick glass bottom keeps the warmth of your hands out of the Scotch and lets it rest at room temperature. They are also quite wide, which aids in getting a good sniff of what you are about to enjoy.

Once you have the whisky sufficiently tamed and in the right glass, it is time to enjoy it. A true whisky drinker, one who drinks it for the experience, will chew it, allowing the warmth of his tongue to release the many complex flavors.

And remember. Enjoying a glass of Scotch is not the same as throwing down a shot. If you really wish to enjoy what you have and experience it, a good measure of Scotch (about a quarter cup) will take around forty minutes to finish.

Now then, we have discussed the proper way to drink it, but how about choosing the right one to drink.

Well thankfully, we have many wonderful ways to narrow it down. First by type: Single or Blended. Next by location, and lastly by age.

Blended Scotches are just what they say, blends of many different distilleries. The result is a smooth, drinkable whiskey that is easy on the budget and easy to get into. Blends have complexities all their own and should not be compared to single malts. They are a completely different beast.

Single malts come from one batch, one still. They singularly reflect the artisanship, age-old recipe, location and techniques of their home distillery. And it is this, the most complex of the two varieties, that we will discuss.

Scotland has five main Scotch producing regions. Each one produces its own unique product and no two tastes alike.

Factors such as altitude, humidity, barometric pressure, salt content and unique distilling techniques all contribute to the final product.

The first region is the Scottish Highlands. This consists of the northern mountainous areas. The higher altitude and colder conditions come together to make a Scotch that is fuller-bodied, muscular and bold. Not for the faint of heart, this Scotch whisky like its birthplace is rugged and tough to master for the newbie but fortifying and a pleasure to enjoy once you have made the effort.

The second region is the Scottish Lowlands. The Scotches crafted in the lowlands are lighter-bodied, with elegant hints of floral. But it is not to be mistaken for a ladies Scotch. Just like its kilt-wearing inhabitants, you can't read a book by its cover. Once you try it, you'll understand.

Third, we have the Scotches from the coastal area of Campbeltown. Located between the High and Lowlands, Campbeltown only has three distilleries, which make this rarest of the Scotch whiskies. Whiskies from the region are very complex, containing notes of damp salt and spice. A perfect example of how location plays such a crucial role in the chemical makeup of Scottish Whisky. Coming from the turbulent coast makes this the perfect remedy for bouts of seasickness. Further proof that boating and whisky were a match made in, well, Campbeltown.

In fourth place, but not competitively, we have Speyside. Although geographically a valley located in the Highlands, Speyside produces a product uniquely all its own. Finding itself in the middle, it is not as bold or light as its Highland, Lowland cousins. Speyside Scotches tend to the softer side but still pack quite an experience. One not to be missed.

Lastly, we have Islay. Islay is an Island off the western coast of the Campbeltown region. Possibly, because of its harsh, cold coastal climate the whiskies from Islay are known for their warming, peaty, smoky flavor. In my opinion, the most unique whiskey experience one can have. To close your eyes, take a whiff and then sip this exquisite whiskey is enough to make you trade your pants in for a kilt. The best way to describe it is liquid bacon that can get you drunk.

So now that you have an idea of what Scotch whisky is all about, it is time to work your way up the ranks. Time to set yourself some modest whiskey-drinking goals. Do not just go to your local watering hole and ask for some Dewar's. Instead, find a good Scottish pub in your area and hope they have a liquor license. Or ask around until you find an establishment with a good variety.

And remember, the more expensive it is the better it is. So set yourself aside a day's pay and a weekend. Trust me; you'll be glad you did.