



It is many years since my last visit to Scotland but I still have vivid memories of the trip. One such memory involves walking into a bottleshop called The Whisky Castle in the small highland town of Tomintoul and seeing a wall of shelves lined with bottles of malt whisky, each bottle different to the last. And then I realised that all of the shelves in the shop were stacked with whiskies! That simple experience revealed to me that whisky, particularly malt whisky, is as diverse in its expression and variety as wine. And, like wine, there are pleasures to be had in exploring that diversity and variety.

Malt whisky is a complex drink. It starts with barley which is encouraged to sprout by soaking in water – this releases the fermentable sugars in the grain. The germinating grain is then dried by heating, often over a fire fuelled by peat (the compacted, layered vegetative matter forming the soils of the highland wetlands) – this germination and drying process is what is known as malting. The malt is milled and mixed with water drawn, in many cases, from the local stream or river. The resultant sugar-laden liquid drained off this mix is called the ‘wort’, which is then fermented via the addition of yeast. The alcoholic beverage created is essentially a type of beer, which is then boiled in a traditional distillation vessel called a pot-still, a large copper kettle or pot with a flue-like spout. Because alcohol boils quicker than water the spirit vapour is separated from the water and, as it travels along the flue or chimney, can be collected as it condenses back to a liquid. The spirit is then stored in oak casks and, with time, a malt whisky is born.

The term “Single Malt Scotch” defines both where and the way in which the spirit is made; it is, in wine terms, an appellation. Carrying the name “Single Malt” indicates that all of the whisky in the bottle has been made in the one distillery and that the whisky is made only from malted barley and no other grain spirit is included in its making. This differentiates a malt whisky from the many proprietary blends on the market, such as Johnnie Walker Red or Teachers, which contain a proportion of malt whisky leavened with a lighter spirit made from unmalted grains such as wheat or maize. The term Scotch, obviously, indicates that the whisky has been distilled and aged for at least three years in Scotland and that the ageing has occurred in casks of no greater than 700lt capacity. Of course, malt whiskies can also be made elsewhere, most notably, Ireland and the U.S. (where it is known as whiskey, with an ‘e’) and Japan.

Also like wine, single malt whisky has regional characters, a terroir if you will. In general terms, the regions of whisky production in Scotland can be defined as –

**The Lowlands:** from the region around Edinburgh and Glasgow and to the south. Malt whiskies of the Lowlands tend to be softer, lighter styles with the malt being to the fore; they are fine aperitif styles and often provide a gentle introduction to single malt scotch.



**The Highlands:** this really covers a vast area of central and northern Scotland and can be subdivided into the Eastern and Central Highlands (with a number of smaller or no longer operating distilleries), the scattered distilleries of the Western Highlands (the best known of which is Oban with its rich, sherry characters) and the Northern Highlands (home to the outstanding whiskies of Glenmorangie). However, the heart of the Highlands is the area known as Speyside, where at least half of the distilleries of

Scotland congregate along the banks of the river systems (the most important of which is the Spey) springing from the granitic rocks of the central highlands and flowing to the northern coast. The Speyside style of whisky is broad, yet many have a full, honeyed, heathery character which can only be attributed to the water of the rivers.

**The Islands:** from the Orkneys in the far north to Skye, Mull and Jura and then the daddy of them all, Islay. Each island shows its own character – try Highland Park from the Orkneys or Talisker from Skye - but it is the malt whiskies of Islay that confront, challenge and engross with their powerful, seaweed, iodine and smoky peat characters.

This is merely an introduction to single malt scotch. There will be more next month as I investigate the importance of the water, the type of oak barrels, and length of ageing in the shaping of a fine malt whisky as well as the curious phenomenon of proprietary bottlings.

For further information visit [www.singlemalt.com.au](http://www.singlemalt.com.au). Cremorne Cellars will be conducting a Malt Whisky Masterclass on Wednesday, August 5, featuring the malt whiskies of Glenmorangie and Ardbeg. Bookings can be made on 9953 1331 (places are strictly limited).



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#### ***Glenmorangie 10 Year Old 40% alc (Northern Highland)***

Glenmorangie is undoubtedly one of the greatest and most revered distilleries in Scotland, as well as being one of the most innovative. The 10Y.O. is, as the distillery itself describes it, the “original”, aged for 10 years solely in bourbon casks. It is a beguiling malt with beautiful fruity, floral aromas of mandarin and apricot, beeswax and honey with spice and mint in the background. The flavours are rich and satisfying whilst retaining elegance and delicacy, a whisky of balance and poise. If you are new to single malts this is a perfect starting point.

#### ***Aberlour 10 Year Old 40% alc (Speyside)***

There are better known Speyside malts (Glenfiddich and The Glenlivet for example), but few offer the quintessential Speyside experience and exceptional value that Aberlour does. This whisky has malty, heathery and spicy aromas with even a touch of mint tickling the senses. This leads to a soft, smooth palate with honeyed malt and restrained fruitiness perfectly balanced; you can even sense a sherry-like flavour from the oak maturation. This is the ideal single malt for those people just starting their journey of discovery in whisky. Even better, it is also one of the best value-for-money malts around.

#### ***Ardbeg 10 Year Old Non-chill filtered 46% alc (Islay)***

Winner of Jim Murray’s (the Robert Parker of the whisky world) 2008 World Whisky and Single Malt of the Year. Ardbeg is the most traditional of the island malts and arguably the peatiest, smokiest and the most powerful of all single malt scotches. The pale colour belies the deep aromas of woodfire, seaweed, brine and fruitiness with high end citrus notes. In the mouth the flavours build and build, fruity at first followed by a charry peaty, iodine meatiness with a hint of sweetness to finish. One for aficionados to be enjoyed as a bedtime tittle (and with a good lie-down afterwards!).