

# SCOTCH

## *Requiem or Instauration*

*Elements for the*

### PSYCHONALYSIS of a source of wealth

*Scottish professionals as well as connoisseurs of great vintages are much mistaken concerning the reasons for its huge success. An undercurrent of misunderstandings carries a tangle of spoken and unspoken comments in a joyous haze of naïve as well as mercenary enthusiasm.*

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Recension of 10<sup>th</sup> October 2007

## THE SUBJECT

### Analysis

Scotch Whisky is a distillation of cereals – the best being malted barley – and

*it does not reflect any geographical agricultural origin.*

The only limit: all "Scotch whisky" must be distilled<sup>1</sup> in Scotland and have remained at least three years in an oak barrel of a maximum capacity of 700 litres. Failing this, it is not a "Scotch whisky" but a simple "cereal alcohol": the taste is more or less typical according to the grain, lingers little or not at all and is, in the most suitable cases for making an excellent whisky, acrid to the point of nausea reminiscent of the concentration of the wine-must used as a base by makers of scent: **the goal is in fact far from being achieved.**

In order to arrive at Scotch or any other whisky, at the earliest three years later, the aim of the distiller is to achieve an alcohol not intended to be drunk as such – although it is not without charm – but aged in an oak cask, which is traditionally impregnated with a taste of vegetable origin (wine, maple syrup... or whisky). Aging in oak cask gives the distillation 85 to 95% of its character and during the period preceding its consecration as "whisky" it is called "Clerach"... or "New Spirit":

necessary as it is, *a still does not produce whisky.*

### The blessings of a thankless sky

In sub-polar latitudes, through lack of fruit sufficiently rich in sugar for the production of alcohol, the latter could only be obtained from barley – the corn of Scandinavian hoar-frost and formerly queen of cereals in Scotland –. But this poor-man's corn is still preferred to others graminaceae for impregnating a special taste: it is **the primary benefit of an ungrateful nature** and the basis of the best whiskies.

Abundant in fruit but absent from cereals, water is plentiful in Scotland, usually soft and free from metals. It allows the seeds to germinate by moistening them and, used almost boiling, it infuses their grist in order to extract fermentable sugars.

<sup>1</sup> Generously described by all publications dealing with "Scotch", two methods of distillation are in use: the "charentaise" (used for Cognac), costly, very demanding, and the one known as the continuous still with an intensive industrial yield.

NB Although the use of the "kiln" is now prohibited <sup>[2]</sup>, we should mention **fossilised heathers of various kinds known as peat**, used to stop the germination of barley by draining it abruptly. The fuel of the poor, painfully extracted from water-sodden ground in latitudes without forests and with traditionally low wages, the peat brought with its bitterness an elegant liveliness to the finished product if used sparingly. Formerly **with the addition of fresh heathers - if possibly in flower** - this elegance was even more in evidence.

Subsequently, for the best whiskies known as "malt" - malt being the name of germinated barley - a double, even triple, Charentaise distillation of "MALT" makes it possible to isolate the most favourable elements of the spirit with a view to future impregnations.

To this must be added parameters not yet scientifically taken into account at the time of distillation, as for example the care in reproducing even accidental distortions in the old stills when they are replaced – hence the painful experiences of certain famous distilleries which neglected them –.<sup>[3]</sup>

### Fiscal aid

The exceptionally severe taxes of the English authorities added to "Scotch"

*a singular value unique in the whole world*

because the age of the contents of each barrel is guaranteed certain and substitutions are impossible.

By prohibiting the "stillman" any access other than visual to the distillate in the process of evaporation/condensation <sup>[4]</sup>, this constraint heavily limited his initiative but largely compensated for this deficiency by **unparalleled calculated security**. Routines nevertheless were established by innumerable tests and, as well-kept secrets, led to the specific character of each distillery.

This in turn allowed an integration of "Scotch" with modern techniques of production based on the unquestioned repetition of a programme, and no one questioned it because the so

<sup>2</sup> The prohibition of the use of peat on an open fire on the grounds of the presence of cancerous agents (nitrosamine) was a pleasant economy for the whisky industry. A few rare distilleries have nonetheless continued to use peat at the cost of an expensive modification of their . kiln . to which had to be added a coke burner whose sulphurous smoke destroyed the cancerous power of the first fire without removing the organoleptic qualities.

<sup>3</sup> Cf a propos of this the centrifugal movement of aromas and flavours of wines in casks: their intensity increases uniformly when approaching equidistant sides.

<sup>4</sup> The safe is a sort of glass cabinet sealed by HM Customs and Excise where the stillman, thanks to a set of control-taps commanded from outside, can at any moment produce in test-tubes samples of the distillate in course of fabrication : a thermometer and a densimeter showing the alcoholic strength and limpidity are visible, but it is impossible to taste or inhale.

complex and expensive use of cereals for the production of alcohol has by this means opened up the **prospects of an unlimited volume**, helped by the reduced effect of annual climatic variations on cereals:

***Scotch Whisky adds infinity to the fascination with figures.***

### Secrecy

Stocking in wooden casks starts the lengthy ennoblement of the cereal alcohol produced for this sole purpose: it can bring us to the highest rank in the chivalry of taste - "Scotch Whisky" -, and the whole education of the acolyte must lead to this end.

**Another hazard of nature** deprived Scotland of the forests necessary for the emergence of coopers. The financial luxury of importing new wood being excluded, it was necessary to make do with casks which had bought over wine from the Continent. But if oak miraculously refines and improves Cognac, Armagnac, Calvados – which already enjoy all the power of their exceptional territorial origin – on the other hand it alone is not sufficient to help an alcohol which is short in fragrance. By itself it would do more harm than good.

**This lack of forests led to the exclusive use of casks which had been used to import foreign wine with a strong degree of alcohol, chief of which were the oak casks of Port, Sherry, Malaga, Madeira** with a prodigious intensity of fragrances. Furthermore, rich from years of soaking-up wine without being moved on account of their size (the system known as *solera*) – the importation of other wines being excluded because they would not have stood that long sea voyage without turning into vinegar –, the long vinous impregnation of the oak cask brought the extra fragrance and flavour which a cereal could not offer.

***The shortage of new wood determined the extraordinary quality of Scotch whisky and***

the harshness of the Northern climate thus generated the most refined and complex spirit on earth, while the aggressive fiscal control initially imposed by the English was paradoxically leading to unlimited worldwide commercial success.

Henceforth free from constraints concerning the origin of its various components (as opposed to French appellations d'origine contrôlée) and with access to the limitless range of the best wine casks, whisky can thus aim beyond specific flavours to

## *the absolute perfection of taste.*

This refinement is totally distinct from what it would be if the aim were to obtain a finished product from the still, but **it is a question of adding to a mediocre distillate an improvement of the organoleptic flavour from impregnated oak, then to adapt this addition to the ideal degree of concentration blending the most harmoniously possible with the alcohol.**

The harmony of this blend is only obtained after considerable delay - the average unit of organoleptic modification is six months - and for the best Scotches it leads to changing the casks (the “racking”). A brutal influx of wine, flavours or concentrated taste would cancel out the operation and the necessary length of time is obtained thanks to the wood’s fibres only releasing their refined and complex contents very parcimoniously under the effect of the distillate, which is itself already carrying a more or less powerful taste of cereal.

**This “more or less” remains the secret of whisky:** nobody has been able to establish the parameters for, as with wines, a simple list of components does not provide any useful information since a permanent interaction modifies their relationship. Above all the rhythm of modifications varies according to different internal factors and ephemeral external ones (humidity of the air, atmospheric pressure et cetera - the myth of the sea air – and nobody can deny the role of radiations which a human being cannot perceive).

A technical evolution was nonetheless going to question the above as from the nineteen seventies.

### **The test**

From the end of the nineteen seventies, when wooden casks were replaced by containers of steel or synthetic-materials, and the traditional cask known as “winefresh” disappeared, the profession threw itself on oak casks which had contained American whiskies where maple and charcoal replace vinous impregnation. US legislation assures that they are free by forbidding their re-use locally (all wooden casks, once emptied of their alcohol, retain a non negligible quantity in their fibres and increase accordingly the strength of the alcohol which will be subsequently placed there, thus making illusory further testing of alcoholic strength). They are imported in pieces and ingeniously put together again by the numerous coopers in the Highlands, thus leading to a renewal of artisans working in the heart of an industry which is totally automated elsewhere <sup>5</sup>.

Various initiatives have tried to make good the lack of sherry casks by creating cooperages in the Andalusian vineyards. They lend their new casks to the local winegrowers for two years of impregnation in an attempt to recall the decades of impregnation in the

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<sup>5</sup> This pervading presence of wood casks has played an important role in the mythology surrounding Scotch whisky.

former “botas” of Andalusian “soleras”.

## THE SOURCE OF WEALTH

This lengthy process of ennoblement, which defies industrial modernisation, has led to the most incredible fascination amongst its most servile adepts. Through being unable to determine any precise rules, this secret process has benefited from the contemporary need for mystery, especially in the natural setting of the Highlands, and is aided by the forbidden access to the maturing sheds imposed by the tax authorities.

Nonetheless, all the numerous and essential parameters have not been codified by the need to respect “loyal and current practices” as with the *Appellations Contrôlées* law in France, without which the *Grands Crus* would be no more than a distant memory. But in fact these customs were much more strictly observed in the United Kingdom, where legislation avoids generalities. Does this unwritten-rule arise from self-restraint imposed in dealing with essential topics ? – the British in fact often hide an excessive sentimentality under the meticulous dryness of their texts and their stiff outward behaviour –.

To this has been added the worldwide sentimentality towards all things Scottish.

### **Attraction of all things Scottish**

Are the Scots a natural source of myths, converted into dogmas in spite of being easily verifiable ? Could foreigners feel a secret need for a society which is as accomplished as theirs, but in the diametrically opposed sense to industrialisation ? Without analysing in order to understand, they enhance the mystery of this people.

Scotch is to a certain extent the epitome of the foreign imagination applicable to Scotland as well as to its whisky. Outside Scotland the omission of the word WHISKY reveals this strange osmosis between alcohol and the nation : Scotch suffices.

Furthermore the wild grandeur of the Highlands and their historical background have contributed to this favourable state of affairs. The AULD ALLIANCE between France and Scotland is not dead<sup>6</sup>.

But another more recent factor has prodigiously stimulated this romantic situation.

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<sup>6</sup> In the Cher (*département*), eight centuries later, Aubigny sur Nère, the first fiefdom given by the French king to a Stuart in gratitude for the Scottish aid during the Hundred Years War still celebrates joyously the Auld Alliance.

## The Crofts (sheep-folds)

The caprice of the French queen Marie-Antoinette, playing the shepherdess on the eve of the Revolution in 1789, has been revived since the middle of the twentieth century in all the richest industrial nations: the fashion there is back-to-nature, called ecology by intellectuals and mixed-up puritans.

From north of the Rio Grande to west of the former Iron Curtain, and in Japan, the new "*marie-antoinettisme*" has taken root with 500 millions of overfed new-style aristocrats (tomorrow China, India ?). Hence back to the French Queen and her sheep-folds.

The professionals of Scotch were completely incredulous and understood the phenomenon only very slowly (or rather adjusted themselves for intellectual analysis is not a British strongpoint: their businessmen act rather than think). "*How can one satisfy the new connoisseurs who dream of craftsmanship, tradition and nature against a background of ultra-modern factories ?*" It is indeed a long time now since the promotion of great wines and alcohol only depended on the prosperity of their customers. At the time nobody except the professionals cared about the why or wherefore of the product: for the clients the fashion was sufficient and for the businessmen the profit. Nowadays people want to know everything and get a glimpse behind the scenes.

The distilleries, which were formerly blank-walled and permanently out of bounds, have gradually opened up a lucrative tourist trade where crowds of guided-visitors are titillated by the ultimate forbidden access to the casks where the whisky is aging.

## The four pillars of imagination

Apart from the parameters mentioned above – ignorance, secrecy, taxation, attraction of all things Scottish – the foreign image of Scotland rests at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on four specific bases:

- the desolate Highlands: a sub-polar territory enjoying the fascination with Nordic mythology – the ethereal light of endless sunrises and sunsets (nobody visits Scotland from the end of November until the beginning of March on account of the eternal arctic night),
- the very scattered population – nobody visits industrial Scotland –,
- the omnipresent ocean,
- the omnipresence of History: almost without modern tribulations as shown by the numerous intact baronial castles and the disconcerting variety of striking dress, particularly welcome at a time when even diversity means uniformity.

## The two unspoken assets

- The imperviousness of place names as unpronounceable for an Englishman as for a foreigner,
- The cover of mystery imposed by the prisonlike legislation for warehousing Scotch

whisky, a reminder of the mistrustful victor of Culloden <sup>7</sup> – smuggling was for a long time a symbol of resistance.

### **Where ignorance is bliss**

The simple evocation of the bases of dreaming which are the abundance of very pure water – the rarest liquid in the world of the third millenium – and over abundance of oak casks fascinate to the point of making one forget to ask questions.

A remarkable sign of the resulting spell cast on visitors to distilleries is their fascination at the sight of the famous “safe” (qv note 4) which is at the same time a shameless negation of the craftman’s approach.

## **TRAPS**

### **Loosening fiscal control**

Considered from a financial point of view such an accumulation of trump-cards constitutes in itself a formidable commercial advantage whose sole drawback is the need to abide by certain draconian fiscal rules, which are painfully binding although necessary to survival: suppressed, they would leave the way open to a proliferation of illusions which would be soon be discovered and then become entirely meaningless.

The survival of Scotch is at the price of this implacable and costly administrative straight-jacket: it establishes limits beyond which the financial juggling of the investors (the absolute certainty of the age of Scotch permanently generates investments) as well as the gluttony of the tasters would crumble apart.

The weakening of the body and the length of taste of Scotch, linked to the scarceness of casks formerly impregnated during decades by the most sensual and the most elegant wines in existence, is already a deception. Now no product can survive indefinitely on the sole basis of former ecstasies of taste: its traces fade way before disappearing completely.<sup>8</sup>

### **Lowering standards of tasting**

#### **Tasting wines and spirits is an introspection of prosperity.**

Involving an intellectual development in a material overabundance, it emerged during the second part of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century in France, the first earthly paradise for the spirit and the senses, then spread as people worked less.

<sup>7</sup> On the 17th April 1746 Scottish clans were defeated by the English whose cruelty is still remembered today.

<sup>8</sup> Cf the progressive loss of competition of French *Appellations d’Origine* victims of a laxist evolution.



The prodigious growth of comfort does away with human hierarchies, while personal success is concealed by uniformity of appearance: there only remains for their self-satisfaction the difficult proof of intellectual superiority. Famous universities, academic titles, political success, aristocratic bearing tend to provoke jealousy, and so tasting remains the only uncontroversial way of emphasizing one's superiority.

***Tasting thus remains the most solid social cement.***

Following the weakening of hierarchies and ethics, except when deliberately giving offence – and since an intense intellectual exercise necessarily excludes drunken fraternity – tasting instantaneously confirms that the participants share an elitism, and its hermetic vocabulary prevents any verification.

Up to the Second World War the tasting of wines and spirits related to the psychic reactions of the acolytes<sup>9</sup> and only coincidentally identified with the senses – mainly flowers and fruit –.

But the explosion of prosperity following the Second World War in Western Europe and the United States (recently emerged from the nightmare of Prohibition – 29th January 1919/5th December 1933) generated a mass of candidates for this new social consecration without the necessary intellectual capacity, and led people to giving ridiculous references priority: today there can be no description of wines or spirits without evoking the fragrance of some flower, the flavour of some fruit, of another drink, or even solid food.<sup>10</sup>

It was thus natural that commercial publicity dwelt on the least intellectually demanding references and led wines and spirits into **identification stalemate where the object of comparison and the product tasted are mixed together.**

***A huge perspective, this step opened up a market on a scale with the exponential development of contemporary prosperity.***

<sup>9</sup> **Nouns** : Length (the most specifically human criterion because it implies the awareness of an evanescence and the study of its progressive disappearance), body, fatness, liveliness, straight forwardness, fruitiness, complexity (for being at a loss) ; **epithets** : wide, round, powerful, tender, violent, discreet, feminine, refined, voluptuous, brutal, velvet-like, easy, male, strange, closed, disconcerting, fanciful, funny, surprising, penetrating, washed-out, short, deep, superficial, luminous, discreet, hidden, secret, suave, elegant, evanescent, promising, aggressive, puerile, magic, tortuous, enticing, blown up, massive, gross, common, vulgar, immense, et cetera: **the vocabulary of the connoisseur of great wines & spirits is that of a music fanatic.**

<sup>10</sup> An unexpected effect – and a perverse one – of this industrial simplification is the refusal of the contemporary homogeneity of the sensations of smell, taste, sight, hearing and touch, going against this by vaunting their complexity and variety adds an elitist flavour, as in the fashion for bio and the cult of craftsmanship. **Just as equating musical sounds to noise.**

The “*flavour wheel*”<sup>[1]</sup>, pragmatic, chemically lists Scotch Whisky flavours whereas American whisky brands already boast of the organoleptic artificial additives.

As good as admit **the end of the role of classification in tasting** : if this expansionist approach afflicted Scotch Whisky, its prestigious image would disappear and a waste-land of taste would replace this fantastic intellectual wealth.

### Always more and more

In turn, modern financial constraints insidiously undermine the patient punctiliousness of the old distillers and “*chief blenders*” by shortening or even suppressing certain practices which have become too costly at the time of computers and robotisation : such as the drying over peat of germinated grain, after the use of fresh peat likewise disappeared a long time ago.

Semi finished products – already moistened, germinated, dried and ground in the numerous maltings in the United Kingdom – supply almost the entire Scotch industry<sup>[2]</sup>, reducing proportionately personal initiative which was already very slight. Ancient strains of barley are replaced by various strains with a higher alcoholic yield but with less flavour.<sup>[3]</sup>

These same constraints are mistrustful of the – potential – organoleptic effect such as the natural diversity<sup>[4]</sup> of the ground sown, to take into account only the pure alcoholic yield : considering such parameters would subject these financial projects to impossible norms (qv the endless financial feud against French *appellations contr.l es* laws) The same calculations of profit obviously go with a dogmatic celebration of Scottish water and sea breezes, the latter being decreed unique although unverifiable and above all affected by industrialisation, **faint praise in the eyes of critical reflection and of the dramatic disappearance of oak casks ennobled by the world’s greatest wines whose essential role was for a long time hidden**

A rush forward in the current direction, emphasising only the mediatic aura emanating from an environment as propitious as Scotland’s would be fatal. Scotch whisky would have no truck with this sumptuous natural theatrical production if it did not frame an alcohol which is perfect by its own standard.

By trying to maintain dream-like conditions immune from all introspection, as so many Scotch financiers and objective aficionados try so hard to do, the risk is being run of sooner or later facing the lot of other images resting on a too obscure secret base before being

<sup>11</sup> Flavour Wheel by **THE SCOTCH WHISKY INSTITUTE**, The Robertson Trust Building, Research Park North, Riccarton, EDINBURGH Ph 1314.49.89.00 - E-mail frances.Jack@swri.co.uk.

<sup>12</sup> Only a quarter of distilleries have kept – but until when ? – the capacity to produce the whole of the “loyal and constant” process.

<sup>13</sup> The maximum degree of alcohol permitted during distillation was recently increased to 94.8% for using in the continuous-still, which purges the distillate of the rare flavours brought by the cereal : the greater the degree of alcohol, the less the taste of the distillate. A good “new spirit” draws considerably less than 70%.

<sup>14</sup> Not to be confused with porosity to which those obsessed with maximum yield attach the greatest importance : fertile ground does not absorb nitrogen fertilisers and a high level of nitrogen lowers their sugar yield. On the other hand porous ground is greatly appreciated but only to this end (such as the sandy Black Isle North of Inverness) : sand equals less residual nitrogen → more sugar → more alcohol. Good-bye to the flavours!...

abandoned. The baby would then be thrown out with the bath water.

## SOLUTIONS

The enormous perspectives opened up by this intellectual creation with its nationalist evocation poses a particular problem at a time of worldwide porosity of frontiers and instantaneous communications for

this national specific feature is not linked to any scientifically elucidated base, except for **an uncontestable – and uncontested – copyright**.

Differently from *appellations d'origine de vins et spiritueux*, Scotland's frontiers are historical factors which ignore the only parameters of Scotch whisky allegedly linked to this land: viz air and water.

The concept of origin as taken up by all the legal systems referring to it up to the present time not being sustainable – except to demand the exclusive use of cereals harvested in Scotland –, a relevant legal structure is excluded and **the remedy** seems to be

- either the international registration of a commercial brand whose holder would be the Scottish nation via a State corporation
- or the suppression of this evanescence of origin by forbidding all handling outside Scotland subsequent to a precise stage of fabrication, such as for example the grinding of the cereal.

“Scotch” would remain the god of great alcohols: secret, distant, mysterious, and inevitably very expensive as implied by the costly methods of production of “Malt Scotch Whisky”. It would reveal without complex its essential very high-quality vinous origin which alone will assure its perennality and would impose the obligation to carry out in Scotland for the very least **all** handlings subsequent to the grinding of the cereal, including aging and bottling with sealing by the Scottish Excise and **prohibition of any additive other than the natural impregnation of the cask**.

Michel M A Couvreur, 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1997 (recension of October 10<sup>th</sup> 2007)  
*Translated from French by Anthony J.A. Johnson in close collaboration with the author.*

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