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Knowledge of the Why, What, When and How enhances the enjoyment of whisky – to that end, this book is essential to any enthusiast.



Pär Caldenby is a lawyer and an inquisitive malt whisky enthusiast since 15 years. He wishes to share his passion for malt whisky with the like minded, searching for the perfect dram. *Enjoying Malt Whisky – the Enthusiast's Course* is the result.

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The Enthusiast's Course On **ENJOYING MALT WHISKY** by Pär Caldenby

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION	7
WHISKY HISTORY – IN BRIEF	11
VARIOUS WHISKY TYPES	16
Malt whisky	16
Grain whisky	16
Blended whisky – and vatted malts too!	17
THE MAKING OF THE SPIRIT	20
The barley	21
The kiln – heat and peat (?)	23
Mill and mash – getting the sugars out	25
Yeast and fermentation	27
The wash still – from wash to low wines	29
The intermediate still – if there is one	35
The spirit still – or low wines to new make	36
SPIRIT TO WHISKY – ON MATURATION AND OAK	40
First oak tree – the oak in itself	40
Second oak tree – the cask and its history	43
Third oak tree – the three different kinds of maturation	45
Fourth oak tree – the warehouses and their location	47
Fifth oak tree – discussion: the merits of age and the Angels' share	50
Sixth oak tree – finishes and other peculiarities	54
FROM OAK TO BOTTLE	56
Strength	56
Chill filtration	56
Colourful whiskies?	57
Dilution and bottles	57
Labelling the whisky	58
NOSING PRACTICES – THE ENJOYMENT OF WHISKY	60
First glass – aromas and tastes in whisky	60
Second glass – the equipment	63
Third glass – the art of nosing	66

Fourth glass – the art of tasting	67
Fifth glass – the systematic art of appreciation	68
Sixth glass – a few suggestions on ways to organised enjoyment	73
Seventh glass – storing whisky	75
Eight glass – collecting	76
<b>HINTS ON RETAILERS, CLUBS AND BITS AND PIECES</b>	79
Retailers	80
Societies	83
Miscellaneous other facts	85
<b>LITTERATURE</b>	89
Books on whisky	89
Magazines on whisky	91
<b>THE WHISKY REGIONS</b>	93
Campbeltown	95
Islay	100
Lowlands	116
Northern Highlands	123
Southern Highlands	134
Islands	144
Speyside	150
Malt whiskies of the world	192
Ireland	192
Rest of Europe	194
Japan	197
Rest of the World	199
Table of origin of Scottish malt whisky distilleries	200
<b>TO VISIT DISTILLERIES – A FEW SUGGESTIONS</b>	202
Distilleries on the Internet	202
Some suggestions on whisky travel	203
<b>INDEX – DISTILLERIES</b>	208



*Barley – the base ingredient*

## THE MAKING OF THE SPIRIT

In the (malt) distillery, the clear and raw spirit that will become whisky is made, from malted barley, yeast, water and heat. Simple, right? Well, yes, but not quite as easy as that.

It is a good opportunity to make poetic use of the four elements to describe what goes into a whisky – water is used in several ways throughout the process, fire is needed to heat the water and the stills alike, earth is used in the form of barley, peat and oak, air gives its contribution in both processing the barley and in maturation, where oxidization is an important feature. Water,

fire, earth and air. Often not only used but misused in the marketing of malt whisky. A bit of waffle from the marketeers?

To briefly be a bit technical, the following stages take place. Take your barley, convert it into malt, dry the malt, grind the malt into grist, steep the grist in hot water to extract sugars and starch, cool and ferment the worts into wash, distill the wash first in the wash still, making low wines, then distill the low wines in the low wines or spirit still, take the heart of the run from the spirit still, collect it in the spirit receiver and re-distill the rest of the spirit run with

the next batch of low wines, mature the contents from the spirit receiver in oak casks for at least three years, vat together a couple of casks of your choice, put in bottle, cork and sell. Simple.

This chapter will deal with the steps from barley to the spirit receiver, more or less in sequence. The following chapters will discuss maturation and bottling.

## THE BARLEY

For malt whisky, you must start with using only barley as the raw material. There are various strains of barley and new ones show up just about every year, to increase the possible yield of alcohol and avoid various problems that may lead to failed crops. Not all barley may be used for making whisky, only the best qualities will do. Well, everyone wants the best, right?

The quality lies in a high starch content, low levels of protein and nitrogen, the ability to germinate and generally having as little by-products as possible, such as dirt, a high percentage of husks or too much moisture. The moisture level is important, as moist barley would go mouldy. Besides, it would be less efficient to handle, as it will be heavier.

Barley from Scotland and the rest of the UK, Scandinavia and as far off as Australia may be used. Obviously, costs of transport may have an impact, but the economy in production would dictate that the price over quality ratio used will be the one decisive factor, unless there are specific demands for an all-Islay malt to be used – which is something in part practiced by Bruichladdich today.

The strains are said to have little impor-



*Floor malting*

tance on the final product, but for instance Macallan insist upon using mainly Golden Promise, which is an older strain. They claim that it imparts a certain oily texture to the spirit. Well, don't know about that, but it would appear likely that it could have a marginal effect. A greater effect could probably be had from using only ecologically farmed barley, where no pesticides have been used and there can be only natural and often more concentrated flavours. This is certainly true when baking bread, so why not when making whisky?

Strains of barley include Optic, Chariot and Decanter, with names such as Archer, Pioneer, Maris Otter and Halcyon having passed by in earlier times. Wonder who makes up the names?

The barley, once harvested, must rest for some time, to simulate a winter dormancy.

Otherwise, it will not be able to germinate. Following this dormancy period, the barley is usually transformed into malted barley by commercial maltsters and, to a minute degree nowadays, by a few distillers themselves. Springbank malts all of its own barley and distilleries such as Balvenie, Bowmore, Highland Park, Laphroaig and Tamdhu malt at least proportions of it.

The traditional way of malting was and is to use large malting floors, where the barley has to be turned every four hours or so, until the rootlets have come to the desired length and the barley has been turned into “green malt”. If the barley was not turned, it would generate too much heat during germination and it would become a tangled mess. What basically happens during malting is that a hormone within the barley, gibberellic acid, induces reactions in the barley, starting an enzymic hydrolysis



Enjoying the taste of a whisky will also rely heavily on the sensations that come through on the finish, as the whisky peters out. So let the whisky have its way and adapt to its character. Rushing it by taking the next sip – or slug – too quickly will be equivalent to limiting the experience considerably.

## FIFTH GLASS – THE SYSTEMATIC ART OF APPRECIATION

Reading this far, at least in this particular chapter, it appears a fair assumption that the reader is rather interested in whisky and in learning more about it. An important part of the learning process is to structure the knowledge into a system one can use. This will, it is submitted, include taking some sort of notes on the whiskies that pass by the nose and/or palate. Notes may be mental only, but as the experience grows, it will be easier to take them down into writing.

Now, writing tasting notes is rather useless if there is no structure to them and the way they are extracted from the nosing glass. It may well be a very personal kind of structure, but there should nevertheless be one. This section gives the author's opinion on a good structure of a nosing session and of taking notes thereof. If it doesn't suit the reader's needs, alter it as seems best, or ignore it altogether.

The fundamentals of nosing and tasting have been described in the previous two sections. Now comes the time to apply them.

Having your nosing glass with around 3 cl of whisky in it, the first stop is not to down it in one, but rather to take a look at the contents. Swirl them around the sides

of the glass, take in the colour and check the tendency to bead. The colour, if natural and not caramel-induced, may tell you the probable type of wood used for maturation; but this is truly a difficult task to get right, especially as most casks are refilled and most bottlings of whisky are vatted from a large number of casks and are likely to be a mix of both types of oak and of differing previous uses. Beading in a whisky may be equally deceptive, but is probably easier to pick up on. When the beads run fast and thin, the whisky is generally light in character, while the slower and thicker they run and the more evident the crown of the wetted part of the glass becomes, the heavier and oilier the whisky is likely to be. These are general indications only, but they will allow you to make use of the strongest of man's senses – eyesight. It should also be said that older and sherry wood matured whiskies have a tendency to form slower and thicker beads, sometimes without corresponding all that much with heaviness.

Take notes of what you see and experience from looking at the whisky. The notes may describe the colour as “light golden” or “amber”, while the beading or viscosity may be described as “fast and thin” or “ultra-slow and thick”. No way of noting what you see will necessarily be incorrect, as it will be for your own reference, at least primarily. The viscosity will or may be confirmed by the mouth-feel later on.

After watching the whisky closely, the time has come to nose it, as described already. Now, if your nosing includes more than one whisky, it is advisable to cover them with a watch glass or a piece of cardboard, for two reasons – it stops the aromas from escaping too quickly and it will limit the uncontrolled mingling of aromas from more than

one whisky, something which is vital if the whiskies are very different in character.

When nosing, notes should be taken first of the whisky's primary aromas, the strongest and most apparent ones. It is likely that these will be experienced at a certain distance from the brim of the glass and that they can be best described in more general terms like “fruity” or “smoky”, being the primary or secondary groupings of aromas, rather than the detailed examples of those groups. Sometimes, though, the aroma will be spot on a very detailed note like “struck matches” or “chilly, green apples”. Whatever is the first thing or two to come to mind should be noted as the likely primary aroma (-s).

A whisky will typically include several discernible aromas and to some extent, the more the merrier, at least when they come in layers that unfold in sequence. Notes should be taken of the aromas that show up as the whisky is assessed. The tendency is to get more and more into detailed aromas, which is fine.

Tasting the whisky at that particular strength comes next. Again, the primary tastes should be indicated immediately, followed by the more detailed notes and the secondary tastes. It is also a good idea to separate the notes of the palate, with the immediate impressions, from those of the finish, with the ensuing impressions as the whisky develops and peters out. The reason for this is not just to give more room for notes, but the finish will often give other impressions than the palate, not to mention sometimes far more complex sensations. Palate and finish in a whisky should therefore be given separate notes.



*Characterful sign at Bladnoch*

Mouthfeel in a whisky can also differ radically, as can its intensity. Therefore, it is a good idea to make a note thereof. “Clean” and “light” or “oily” and “massive”, or anything in between? Non chill-filtered whiskies tend to have a bigger and broader body than standard bottlings at 40 or 43 percent alcohol.

Following the nosing and tasting you are advised to think about the general impression the whisky has made on you and especially how balanced you think it is. It is conceivable that a whisky can be very nice

but then just split the remaining part of the Highlands in Northern and Southern, with Oban and Ben Nevis in the west forming part of the former and Campbeltown certainly remaining a region in its own right.

Therefore, we will end up with the old classical regions, being Campbeltown, Islay and the Lowlands, but with the Highlands region itself being split up into Northern and Southern Highlands, Islands and Speyside. Effectively seven, rather than four.

The sections that follow will discuss each region more or less briefly and then present the malt whisky distilleries found therein, with some examples of whiskies from each distillery, scored using the suggested scale of four times 25 points for each of nose, palate, finish and balance, as an aggregate out of 100 points. The scores may appear a bit inflated, as the average would be closer to 85 than the middle-of-the-road-score of



76, but this simply comes down to, firstly, that you usually tend to buy something you think is better than just an average malt and, secondly, that most bottlings on the market today actually are pretty decent.

All bottlings are by the distiller itself, unless otherwise expressly specified. When a number of notes are available for one distillery, a selection has been made to showcase the distillery characters, rather than streamline the line-up. The strength is given in alcohol by volume, or “abv”. The notes tend to be shortened to give only the overall main characters, unless the whisky for whatever reason would merit a different treatment.

For those unfamiliar with the geographical location of their favourite Scotch malts, a list of distillery names and origin will appear at the end of the chapter, after a brief presentation of some malt whiskies from other parts of the world.

## CAMPBELTOWN

Down by the end of the long and strikingly beautiful Kintyre peninsula, just as one has navigated the winding road across a hill, Campbeltown spreads out before you. Not a very large town, but one which has a definite place in whisky related history. Founded in 1609 by a Campbell, Earl of Argyll, it today has a couple of thousand inhabitants. Historically, the town had the whisky necessities of peat and barley supplies close by and was very well placed when the highways of the world ran on water.

Exports of whisky came early from this region and it literally exploded after the 1823 Excise Act, when scores of new dis-

tilleries shot up – or took out a license and went legal. In 1887, the well known Alfred Barnard listed 21 distilleries in operation in the town, allegedly producing some ten million litres of whisky a year. Probably quite a stress on the local environment and Campbeltown Loch was said to be a repugnant slosh of distillery waste.

Characterwise, the Campbeltown malts were typically fairly heavy and flavour-some. As the trend swung towards lighter and more fragrant whiskies, Campbeltown came under pressure. From being the town in the UK with the highest average income per citizen, it fell.

The local Drumlemble colliery closed, taking away the cheap source of fuel. Popular taste swung towards fruity and light whiskies, which were not made in Campbeltown. The railways reached into Speyside and sea travel ceased to be the principal mode of transportation. Prohibition and depression in the 1920’s didn’t help much and during that decade, scores of Campbeltown distilleries had to close down; names like Hazelburn, Dalintober, Lochruan, Kinloch and Glengyle were closed and fell into oblivion.

It has been alleged that the main reason for Campbeltown’s distillery deaths was that many of the distilleries started taking shortcuts on quality, in order to remain competitive with their product. The idea was that the remoteness was countered by allowing inferior quality to go along with an increased production per pound invested in the business. David Stirk, in his new book, “The Distilleries of Campbeltown”, thinks otherwise – he cites a couple of references to the high quality of the Campbeltown whiskies and has found no contemporary

mention of the opposite. Instead, he offers an alternative explanation, that the ownership of the distilleries had to change, as the third generation down from the founders came into play. And Campbeltown was remote by rail and road, so it suffered as a consequence.

By the early 1930’s, only three distilleries remained, being Springbank, Glen Scotia and Riechlachan. The latter closed only a few years later, leaving only the two left. Thus it has been since, until when, in 2004, the Glengyle distillery was once again producing spirit, after the distillery buildings had been acquired and refitted by the proprietors of Springbank, J & A Mitchell & Co Ltd. Thus, there are today three distilleries in operation in Campbeltown. Perhaps rather well done by such a small town, even if a lot less than in the heyday of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### Glen Scotia distillery

Glen Scotia has had an up-and-down career and is rather neglected when it comes to maintenance and the likes. It has even been run by the help of some staff from Springbank in the 1990’s and it has experienced periods of silence. Founded in 1835 by Stewart Galbraith & Co, the distillery has had a number of different owners, one of which is said to haunt the place after having drowned himself in Campbeltown Loch. Today, Glen Scotia is owned by the Loch Lomond Distillery Company, who also owns the distillery of that name.

Six corten steel washbacks each holding some 17,000 litres of wash, are allowed to hold the fermenting wash for anything from two to several days before distillation. The wash still has a volume of 11,800 litres, while the spirit still holds 8,600 litres. Both are of the traditional onion design, have horizontal lyne arms and are indirectly heated. Worm tubs are used.

When it comes to the traditional Campbeltown character, it would appear as if Glen Scotia could be closer to this than Springbank is – not counting the Longrow make. Largely, the Glen Scotia whisky is regarded as “the other one” from the region, referring to its much better known neighbour Springbank – an opinion which may not have as much merit as many would have it. The house style is oily, briny and aromatic, with a robust body. Typical scoring would be in the mid 80’s.

Glen Scotia 13 yo, SMWS 93.13 @ 61,1 percent abv – expressive, briny and a powerful nuclear plant of a dram, mainly on musty apples, aromatic clove, oily peat and ale; score 87.

Glen Scotia 14 yo @ 40 percent abv – powerful and intense character despite being at standard strength, it concentrates on aromatics like clove, sherried notes and brine; score 87.

### Glengyle distillery

After the original Glengyle distillery was closed in the 1920’s, its buildings has served a number of purposes, from the local shooting range to a farmer’s shop. The site came up for sale around

the year 2000 and Hedley Wright, the owner of J & A Mitchell & Co that own Springbank, decided to get it and to re-build the distillery again. The design of the distillery is very neat, laid out by Frank McHardy, manager at Springbank.

When it re-opened in March 2004, none of the original equipment remained and the distillery was essentially new, although some second hand equipment was installed, such as the mill which had come from a Speyside distillery. The stills were also purchased second hand and had previously been used at the long gone Ben Wyvis distillery, which was part of the Invergordon grain distillery plant. At Glengyle, however, the two stills have been slightly re-modelled from a bolted to a welded connection of the neck to the kettle of the stills, creating traditionally onion shaped stills. The sizes are 18,000 and 15,000 litres for the wash and spirit stills, respectively, but they are only charged to slightly more than half their volumes. Shell and tube condensers are used and the lyne arms are horizontal.

Glengyle is run in pair with Springbank, so when one distillery is silent for maintenance, the other one can run, essentially using the same staff. All malt is produced at Springbank’s floor maltings, but there is some hope of per-

After a couple of owners and refurbishments, Glendronach was bought by Charles Grant, a younger son to Glenfiddich’s founder. Eventually, this branch of the Grant’s family sold Glendronach to Wm Teacher & Sons Ltd in 1960. The distillery was subsequently renovated, but the coal fired stills and floor maltings remained. Allied distillers took over Teacher in the 1970’s. Glendronach was mothballed in 1997 but restarted again in 2003, although without the floor maltings.

An old, traditional cast iron mash tun and nine Oregon pine washbacks charged with worts and a combination of brewer’s and distiller’s yeasts feed the four coal fired, boiling ball design stills. All lyne arms are descending. As Glendronach has, to a considerable enough extent for the bottling as a malt, been matured in ex sherry casks, the house style is also more or less sherried. The bottlings offered have varied and there is no real consistency over the years of how it has been vatted. Bourbon and sherry matured malts have co-existed and been mixed and age statements have been changed. The six year production stop will not help matters either, but the 12 yo expression seems to be the signature one. Scoring has been as variable as the bottlings, but would oscillate round the 80 mark.

Glendronach “Traditional” 12 yo @ 43 percent abv – an older bottling that paired the whisky with the extensive use of ex sherry casks. Mild and soft bodied on the nose but with an intense palate of sherry characters, with caramel, earth and oaky aniseed. The nutshell is “sherry and malt”. Score 81.

### Glendullan

Founded in Dufftown in 1897, by an Aberdeen blending firm. It subsequently changed hands a couple of times and ended up with the Distillers Company Ltd in 1926. It is today one of the successor Diageo’s larger production units for malt whisky. The original still house closed in 1985 but a new and much larger one, with six stills, was built next to it already in 1972. The output is used in a number of blends and the

malt is not common, although there is a 12 yo Flora & Fauna expression from Diageo and the odd independent bottling.

The details on this distillery are hard to come by – in fact even more difficult than finding the malt as such. However, there are three pairs of indirectly heated stills, with the wash stills holding around 24,000 litres and the spirit stills being even larger. Glendullan’s house style is flowery, malty-sweet and milky. Scoring is in the low to medium 70’s. The malt seems perfectly tailored for use in blends, where it will melt into the background.

Glendullan 8 yo @ 40 percent abv – somewhat promising, if mundane, but a bit too young, it offers a soft and milky body with flowery, lightly spicy and sweet characters. The nutshell is “sweet perfume with cloying floweriness”. Score 72.

### Glenfarclas

“Glen of the green grassland” is the meaning of the gaelic name Glenfarclas. This rightly famous distillery stands at the foot of the mighty Benrinnes. As is often the case with older malt distilleries, the surroundings are striking, with the massive mountain standing tall over the distillery.

Glenfarclas distillery was founded in 1836 by a certain Robert Hay, at the Recherlich Farm in Ballindalloch. At his demise, however, the farm and its distillery came into the focus of John Grant, then a cattle breeder with a farm in Glenlivet. In 1865, the farm and the distillery were acquired. The fifth and sixth generations of this Grant family – all named either John or George – still run the distillery, as an unlimited company by the name of J & G Grant. They are not to be confused with other Grants in the malt whisky industry. The distillery is owned by the family company and it has no further proprietary interests in other aspects of the industry.

Glenfarclas has had ties with the blending in-



Glengyle stillhouse





*Glenfarclas distillery*

dustry and one troublesome such tie was with the infamous firm of Pattison's of Leith, which was the trigger to the crisis round the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But the Grants regained full control and were able to keep the distillery intact and in business.

Asked to give the primary factors behind the Glenfarclas' character, Robert Ransom of the company stated that "whilst the ownership of the distillery may not normally be considered a principal factor in determining the character of the distillery's spirit ... the other factors which determine the character of Glenfarclas stem from the family's commitment to quality". And why not – an indirect factor it may be, but it has enabled Glenfarclas to make long-term decisions rather than letting the quarterly return dictate what can and can't be done.

Thus, the three principal material factors in the creation of Glenfarclas' character are all, relatively speaking, more expensive than need be the case. First, the stills are heated with a naked flame and an experiment with indirect and more efficient steam heating was quickly scrapped, as the spirit "lacked guts". So the stills are wastefully heated by fire and this will certainly influence the character of the spirit.

Secondly, the Glenfarclas spirit is to a considerable extent – around two thirds – matured in ex sherry casks that have previously held Fino or Oloroso sherries, with only the one third going into refill ex bourbon casks. Although some ex sherry casks may be made of American oak, most would probably be made from the spicier and more powerful European oak. Factors which are sure to lend a strong influence on the whisky.

Thirdly, the maturation of the distillery's 52,000 casks takes place in traditional dunnage warehouses. There are 30 of those at the distillery premises. Inside them, the casks will be racked no more than three high and they will slumber within a narrow temperature band, differing no more than some 6° C even between summer and winter.

So, direct fired stills, plenty of sherry casks and dunnage warehouses. What else makes the Glenfarclas whisky?

To begin the story, it is to be noted that Glenfarclas likes it big. Their semi-lauter mash tun has a capacity of 16,5 tonnes and may be the biggest in a malt distillery. The first and second waters drawn of as wort from the mash tun

measure around 64,000 and 28,000 litres, respectively. The third water is then recycled as the first in the next mashing. Adding only distillers' yeast, the wash is fermented for 48 hours in one of a dozen stainless steel washbacks, each taking around 45,000 litres. A very respectable tun.

After fermentation, the wash holds around 8 percent abv and goes into one of three wash stills. Again, these are big and said to be the largest on Speyside. The still size remains somewhat blurred, but the charge is 25,000 litres of wash. This is distilled into low wines as usual and the resulting low wines are then mixed with the feints and foreshots of the previous spirit run and a compound charge of 21,000 litres goes into one of the three spirit stills.

The six stills at Glenfarclas are all of the boiling ball design and the wash stills in particular have quite wide necks. With lyne arms slightly declining, the resulting spirit from these stills is likely to be filled to the brim with character. The vapours are condensated and cooled by shell and tube condensers.

New make from these stills, at around 68 percent abv, is fresh and fruity with green apples, pears and a fragrant main theme. Textbook Speyside whisky material. But on the heavy side, given the traditional methods applied.

As already indicated, a vast majority of ex sherry casks are used to mature the spirit into whisky. And thus it has been for a long time, according to the distillery. Its bottlings and the availability of venerable sherry aged whiskies from it seem to confirm this statement.

The Glenfarclas house style is robust at younger ages and silky when older, typically sherried, massively fruity and often with a fudge note from the oak. It is suggested that this whisky is at its best when quite well matured and it can reach grand ages with grace. Typical scoring depends on maturity, but a fair average would be around the 85 mark, with some performances around and above the 90 mark. The current standard range is embracing 10, 12, 15, 17, 21, 25, 30 yo and the non aged "105" which

is a cask strength version at around 8 years. There are also quite a few single cask or special vatting releases to different markets, plus a wide range offered from a few select independent bottlers, such as the Scotch Malt Whisky Society, where Glenfarclas holds the proud position of being the first whisky bottled by the Society, thus with the key "1".

The distillery proclaims that no artificial colouring is added at bottling, which is to be applauded; the high ratio of European oak does add plenty of colour in itself. On the labels, Glenfarclas is further named a "Single Highland Malt Scotch Whisky", although the name Speyside does appear in fine print. Given its robustness, the denomination Highland would seem appropriate.

Glenfarclas 105, no age stated @ 60 percent abv – as good fun as a young cask strength whisky can be, it can also be a bit too much. In this case, the 105 handles the potential problem with some grace, although the young spirit is not quite mature, round and heavy enough to make the most of the full onslaught of the probably very active sherry casks used. Musty cider, vanilla, cinnamon and fudge in a slightly sharpish and robust vatting – ideal for outdoor use. Score 82.

Glenfarclas 10 yo @ 40 percent abv – the sherry influence is obvious, as is the heavy fruitiness on musty apples and strawberries. Additional notes of vanilla fudge and some leather. But although it is a nice whisky, it is still too young to be near its peak and the spirit and ex sherry oak have not yet completely married. Score 82.

Glenfarclas 11 yo, Scotch Malt Whisky Society, No 1.93 @ 59 percent abv – a single sherry cask that has resulted in a whisky full of dried fruit notes, sherry proper, old wood spices and some fresh wine gums. The nutshell is "winey wood and dried fruits". Score 86.

Glenfarclas 12 yo @ 43 percent abv – with a nutshell of "warm sherry and earthy fruits" this is a perfectly typical example of the