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American Single-Malt Whiskeys Serve Notice

By Clay Risen

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THE humid streets of Waco, Tex., may not have much in common with the misty glens of Scotland, home to some of the world's best malt whiskeys.

Not much, that is, until last month, when a single-malt whiskey from the Balcones Distillery in Waco bested nine others, including storied Scottish names like the Balvenie and the Macallan, in a blind panel of British spirits experts.

It was the first time an American whiskey won the Best in Glass, a five-year-old competition to find the best whiskey released in a given year.

Balcones, said Neil Ridley, one of the organizers, is everything you'd expect from a young American: brash, robust and full of flavor. "It was like putting a New World wine against an Old World chateau," he said.

This wasn't supposed to happen. American whiskey is all about corn and rye; malted barley, the primary grain in the Scotch variety, traditionally plays a minor role in bourbon recipes. And single malts have long been considered an exclusive province of Scotland.

But suddenly, American malted whiskeys — most of them single malts — are popping up, some to loud acclaim. "There's been a wave this year," said Sean Josephs, a co-owner of Char No. 4, a restaurant in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, that features a bar flush with domestic and imported whiskeys.



A bottle of Balcones, an American malted whiskey. Allison V. Smith for The New York Times

Four years ago, when Mr. Joseph helped open the place, just a few oddball American single malts were available. The past year's arrivals include Pine Barrens, a whiskey made by Long Island Spirits, on the island's North Fork, and Leviathan, produced by the Lost Spirits Distillery outside Salinas, Calif. "They're pushing the convention forward about what American whiskey is."

In a way, the surprising thing about American malt whiskey is not that it exists, but that it took so long to come around. Corn and rye may be the traditional American whiskey grains, but most of today's craft distillers come from a brewing background, in which working with malted barley is the core of the business.

"I've been studying beer since I was 16 years old," said Chip Tate, the master distiller at Balcones (pronounced bal-CONE-ays), who worked as a brewmaster before co-founding the distillery. "I woke up one day and realized I wasn't a beer lover who liked whiskey, but a whiskey lover who liked beer."

The American malt-whiskey trend is also a recognition that in a global market thirsty for new spirits, the national love affair with corn- and rye-based brown liquor is hardly the only story. Indeed, distillers say the bulk of the interest in their single malts comes from overseas.

"The malt whiskey thing is something you're seeing around the world," with great new whiskeys appearing from unexpected locales like India and Taiwan, said Lew Bryson, managing editor of the magazine Whisky Advocate. "Malt whiskey is huge."

Most of the American whiskeys are single malts — that is, produced entirely at one distillery, from the same type of barley — by default; distillers here, unlike their Scottish counterparts, do little blending. But while many embrace their single-maltedness, and the inevitable comparison with their Scotch cousins, some shy away, preferring to pitch themselves as another drink entirely.

The American whiskeys tend to fall roughly into two categories. Some, like Balcones, Leviathan and St. George, a well-regarded single malt from Alameda, Calif., use Scotch as a model, with some even importing peat-smoked malt directly from Scotland.



Chip Tate, distiller, takes a sniff of whiskey. Allison V. Smith for The New York Times

Steve McCarthy, who makes the heavily peated McCarthy's Single Malt, alongside a range of eaux-de-vie, at the Clear Creek Distillery in Portland, Ore., said he was inspired to create a Scotch-style whiskey after tasting a 16-year-old Lagavulin on a trip around Ireland in 1992. "I thought, 'I would like to go home and make that,' " he said.

Some 15 years after Mr. McCarthy's first release, even many hard-core Scotch drinkers say he succeeded.

"I was skeptical at first," said Nathan Keeney, a computer programmer and Scotch devotee from San Jose, Calif. "But if I were in a blind tasting, I wouldn't have been able to tell you it didn't come from Islay," the Scottish island home of world-famous peat monsters like Ardbeg and Laphroaig.

Unlike those Scottish distillers, however, American whiskey makers face few limits on what they can call "single malt" — a freedom that many have grabbed with both hands. Theirs is the second category of American single malts: a catchall grouping where the sole defining characteristic is aggressive innovation.

Wasmund's, a whiskey from Sperryville, Va., gets some of its signature fruit notes from a bag of apple wood chips that steeps in the barrel along with the aging whiskey, a process that might cause a Highlands distiller to jump out of his kilt.

To create its Pine Barrens Single Malt, Long Island Spirits, in Baiting Hollow, N.Y., starts by distilling a commercial beer — Old Howling Bastard, a barley wine from the nearby Blue Point Brewing Company — and then aging it in oak barrels.

The result is hoppy and bready, with strong citrus notes, a world away from the mellow smokiness of a typical Scotch. And that, said Richard Stabile, the owner of Long Island Spirits, is the point. “It’s part of the pioneer spirit to try to do something by putting your own signature on it,” he said. “I’m not trying to make someone else’s product.”



Pine Barrens, a whiskey made by Long Island Spirits. Long Island Spirits

Innovation isn't just about putting one's mark on a style, though. One of the few rules governing American malt whiskeys is a federal law, enacted in 1938, requiring that they be at least partly aged in previously unused oak barrels. Unfortunately, malted barley is delicate and prone to lose

its flavor in new oak, which is why Scottish distillers prefer barrels that once held sherry, port or bourbon.

To compensate, American distillers often start with a more robust, flavorful mash than a typical Scotch, which can better stand up to new oak, flavor that continues to shine through after the whiskey is bottled.

They also rely on America's higher temperatures, and bigger temperature swings, to speed the aging process. "A hot day in Scotland is 75 degrees," said Mr. Tate, of Balcones. "Seventy-five degrees isn't even a hot day in January here."

As a result, even Balcones, despite its peat and smoky notes, is unlikely to be confused with an Islay Scotch. "A lot of what we do is riffing on old traditions in new ways," Mr. Tate said. "It's like fusion cooking."

In this way, American craft distilling is following the same path trod by wine making and craft brewing. What started with a close adherence to Old World styles — Bordeaux, Vienna lager — gave way in time to new categories like California cabernets and American Pale Ale.

And it's that relentless creativity, as much as the quality, that is winning worldwide adherents for American single malts.

Mr. McCarthy, who says he plans to expand production in the next year, is pleasantly frustrated with his whiskey's growing global following. "I get calls from Japan for my entire inventory," he said. "I labor over my eaux de vie, but the product they all want is whiskey."

For a Taste of Local Spirits

Many American single malts are unavailable outside a small radius of their distilleries, but these can usually be found in large cities or online:

BALCONES TEXAS SINGLE MALT WHISKEY (Balcones Distillery, Waco, Tex.)

True to its Lone Star provenance, this whiskey is spicy and aggressive, full of rich, dark fruit flavors, with honey and caramel on the finish.

HUDSON SINGLE MALT WHISKEY (Tuthilltown Spirits, Gardiner, N.Y.)

Look for baking spices, oak and pepper on the nose, with more pepper and a touch of vanilla on the palate.

MCCARTHY'S OREGON SINGLE MALT WHISKEY (Clear Creek Distillery, Portland, Ore.)

This Islay-style single malt is Scotch in all but its name. It has tons of smoke and iodine, though it's soft enough to draw from outside the circle of peat-heads.

ST. GEORGE SINGLE MALT WHISKEY (St. George Spirits, Alameda, Calif.)

Like Scotch distillers, St. George draws on a library of component whiskeys aged in different types of barrels to produce each batch. The current expression is packed with tropical fruits and very light on the smoke.

TRIPLE SMOKE (Corsair Distillery, Nashville, and Bowling Green, Ky.)

Corsair smokes its barley in three batches — one each over cherry wood, beechwood and peat — for a mellow, smoky flavor.

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