

A decade on, the labors pay off

► SCOTLAND
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cap, and someone to remind you to drive on the left side of the road. There are points that are fundamental in the process of whisky-making, like the starch to sugar conversion of malting, the fermentation, distillation, and barrel aging. Other parts, such as the water's source, the time the malt spends drying over burning peat, the shape of the stills, or proximity to the sea make each distillery's offerings unique.

At The Balvenie along the River Spey in Dufftown, maltman Brian Nicoll is an old salt in the world of Scotch. Nicoll works at one of the few distilleries that still malts its own barley, a step most producers farm out to centralized facilities.

In a fast-clipped brogue that forces outsiders to lean in and pay attention, Nicoll explains the process, from barley arriving in trucks from southern Scotland to soaking it in tanks before setting it out to dry in a six-inch-thick layer called the germination floor.

We walk through concrete aisles and Nicoll motions for me to put my hand into the grain. It's warm. "It's like an electric blanket," he says, sticking his hand in. "It's the friction."

The soaking and slow drying force the grain to germinate, boosting its sugar content, which plays a key part in fermentation. Once the barley has begun to sprout, this "green malt" is dried in a giant kiln to halt the growing. If the kiln uses an appreciable amount of peat, it gives the grain a smoky nose.

Even with the help of machines, moving and turning the floor is a backbreaking process. "This place is so physical — you're covered in sweat," says Nicoll. "We call it the Balvenie gym. You work hard and feel good at the end of the day."

Making single-malt Scotch whisky (as opposed to a blend using spirits from multiple distilleries) is a straightforward process with thousands of variations. After malting, the grain is ground into grist and mixed with hot water in a vat called a mash tun to produce a nonalcoholic liquid called wort. This is transferred to a larger vessel called a washback where yeast is added and fermentation happens in two days of violent foaming — literally brewing



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Port Ellen on the island of Islay, seen from the mainland ferry.

to create what's now called wash. These rooms can smell like applesauce, bubble gum, and the world's best porridge, but stick your nose too deep into a frothing washback and you might be knocked out by the carbon dioxide that's being produced.

From here, the liquid is distilled twice in giant, swan-necked copper stills and the best of it, known as the heart, body, or middle cut, is matured in oak barrels for at least three years.

Love at first sip is unlikely. It may take a few glasses or a few years, but slowly, like a thin road winding through fog, whisky reveals itself.

The roads between the Speyside region and Kennacraig are a driving enthusiast's dream, flecked with micro-towns, straightaways, S-curves, views of the Loch Ness, and signs that read "Stone Skipping Championships This Saturday!" and "Apples £1/BOX."

The cafe on the ferry from Kennacraig to the island of Islay (pronounced EYE-la) is a sign of good things to come, with representatives of almost every distillery on the island behind the bar — a short and sweet selection that would blow most American bar choices away.

On the ferry, there's an uptick in outdoor gear, boots, and wizened faces. Going up a set of stairs on the deck, the wind nearly stops me. As I look out through the rain and fog, there are sheep on a former spit of land, marooned until the tide goes out. Once Islay comes into view, the most distinctive characteristics of the untamed shoreline are the large, white distilleries, with their names in large black letters.

► A DRAM FOR THE CHILL
Macallan to Ardbeg, via roads dappled with tiny towns at www.boston.com/travel.

Luckily the car didn't bottom out on the road up to Kilchoman distillery. The dirt track winds up through barley fields (used for some maltings) on the way to one of the only buildings for miles.

"On Islay, you work in a distillery, you work on a farm, or you're a fisherman," says Malcolm Rennie, Kilchoman manager and Islay native. "People still leave their keys in the car. Everybody waves. Once you've been here for a while, it's hard to leave."

The son and brother of coopers, Rennie has been making whisky for 25 years, including a long stint as a mashman and distiller at Ardbeg distillery before helping found Kilchoman in 2005.

Here on a farm with horse stables, one of Scotland's newest distilleries is, in some ways, the most traditional. "This is how it used to be. The farm produces the barley and farmers made whisky because they had all the raw materials," Rennie says. "That was the ethos. It was what a distillery was."

That's also the way it worked for centuries until excise taxes in the 19th and early 20th centuries squelched most home distilling. "After that, they tucked the stills into a barn," Rennie says, grinning as if he still knows some bootleg operations. His distillery, one of Scotland's smallest, isn't too far from those early models.

Old-school or no, what Rennie and every other whisky distiller wants is to consistently create

what he calls "a good, clean spirit."

"You design your distillery for what you want, but you still don't know exactly what you're going to get," he says. "But people's first taste is what they associate with the distillery. If the spirit quality drops off, I've got to sort it out."

In short, Ardbeg Ten Years Old should always taste like Ardbeg Ten Years Old.

So what if you figure out a way to change the process or even make it better? Rennie shakes his head. The question is moot. "My job is to produce a consistent product."

Producers get around this by offering different ages, blends, and barrelings called "expressions." A Highland Glenmorangie, for instance, ages in barrels made of French or American oak or uses sherry or Sauternes casks while other whiskies are aged in a single cask.

More than 100 of these whiskies and expressions are on display behind Duffie's Bar, a tiny whisky shrine tucked into Bowmore's Lochside Hotel where Philip Gray and Angus Darroch tend bar.

They may make a pound or two pouring drams and pints, but money isn't the primary motivator. Darroch is a stillman and Gray a maltman at the town's eponymous distillery and though they may play up the ethos Rennie refers to — they're bartenders, after all — they believe in it.

"I've been making whisky in the day and selling it on the weekend for 20 years," says Darroch. "It's not just the whisky."

The whole time we're in Scotland, there's no sun. On the fourth day, when we see a ray of light on a faraway hillside, it looks out of place.

Instead, an appreciation for the place comes with bursts of color from thistle, the bright head of a pheasant, defiantly red tractors, or a firm handshake. What comes with more time is an appreciation of the subtleties — shades of green, gold, blue, and even gray that keep you warm when paired with a knowing grin, good conversation, some friends, a fire, and a wee dram.

Breathe. Even if it rains, the whisky will tell you where you are.

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If you go . . .



Malted barley dries in the kiln at the Bowmore Distillery, one of the oldest distilleries in Scotland, dating to 1779.

A visit to a distillery will take up the better part of a morning or afternoon. Many distilleries are prepared for walk-ins, but as a rule, it's better to call ahead. Though not exhaustive, the Scotch Whisky Association's "Distilleries to Visit" document is particularly helpful for trip planning: www.scotch-whisky.org.uk/swa/files/DistilleriesToVisit2009.pdf.

Make sure to factor in time to enjoy your drives. As a Scottish friend reminded me before the trip, "The roads in the Highlands are not necessarily wide and straight." That pretty well applies for all of Scotland.

Where to stay
Castle Hotel

Huntly, Aberdeenshire (near Dufftown)
011-44-1466-792696
www.castlehotel.uk.com
A beautiful family-run castle. Doubles from about \$160.

The Lochside Hotel

Shore Street, Bowmore
Isle of Islay
011-44-1496-810244
www.lochsidehotel.co.uk
A modest spot that overlooks Loch Indaal, houses Duffie's Bar, and boasts wonderful fare in its dining room. Doubles with breakfast about \$135.

What to do
The Balvenie Distillery
Balvenie Maltings, Dufftown
011-44-1340-822-210
www.thebalvenie.com
Kilchoman Distillery
Rockside Farm

Bruichladdich, Isle of Islay
011-44-1496-850-011
www.kilchomandistillery.com

Tasting notes

Specialists devote as much care and attention to whisky tasting as do wine connoisseurs. Each distillery tends to have an original signature blend and offshoots known as signatures, along with different agings. Whiskies tend to hit their stride in their teens and get more complex from there. A few personal favorites: **Bowmore 12 Years Old:** A golden wheat color with walnut, smoke, gingerbread, and green almond scents. Beautiful, long-lasting, sweet aftertaste. An excellent Islay whisky and one of Scotland's finest.

Ardbeg: This Islay distillery battles it out with the more medicinal Laphroaig for the title of "peatiest of the peaty." I got a bottle of its Ten Years Old for Christmas last year and — with big peaty and gingerbread notes, it disappeared in a heartbeat. Fans of peat should seek out their hard-to-find Supernova, which feels like it was wrenched from the earth's core.

Macallan Twelve Years Old: My first-ever whisky. There's a dark amber color in this Highland malt with vanilla, apple, and waxy church-like smells. Take a sip for a subtle attack on the palate and minutes later you'll have an aftertaste that reminds you of the Atomic FireBall you got at the candy store as a kid.

If you go . . .

Cowboys Stadium

925 North Collins St., Arlington
817-892-4400
stadium.dallascowboys.com
Tours 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon-5 Sunday. Adults \$15, children \$12.

Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House

2403 Flora St., Dallas
214-880-0202
www.attpac.org/thevenues/margotbillwinspearoperahouse.aspx

Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre

2400 Flora St., Dallas
214-880-0202
www.attpac.org/thevenues/deecharleswylietheatre.aspx

Where to stay and eat

The Ritz-Carlton Dallas

2121 McKinney Ave.
214-922-0200
Fearing's

214-922-4848
www.ritzcarlton.com
Doubles from \$239. Dinner for two at Fearing's, including appetizer and wine, about \$150.

Fairmont Dallas

1717 North Akard St.
214-720-2020
www.fairmont.com
Doubles from \$120 in winter. Try the innovative fare of chef J.W. Foster in the Pyramid Room.

These new venues make for grand entrances

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160 feet in length, has exceptional HD clarity. So good, in fact, that the Cowboys faithful in the top-most seats rarely look down toward the field during the game, Bury says. Along with the largest video board in the world, the 73,000-seat stadium boasts the longest freestanding arch, the first rack-and-pinion retractable roof, and a glassed-in lounge on the ground floor where fans can watch players run to and from their locker room to the field.

Surprisingly, the line between lowbrow and highbrow culture is blurred, as art plays an essential role in the new venue. Enter Cowboys Stadium at any entrance and you'll be treated to colorful murals and contemporary sculpture — with labels, no less. Bury says that Jones's wife, Gene, was determined to include art in the new stadium. With the help of contemporary curators from the Dallas Museum of Art and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, she selected all of the 17 site-specific art displays.

Open since August, the \$1.2 billion stadium has attracted more than 10,000 visitors a week who simply want to tour the building.

Football might be king in Texas and Cowboys Stadium deserves its acclaim, but there are



RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); DONNA MCWILLIAM/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A team jersey was de rigueur at the Cowboys first regular-season home game; the Wylie Theatre.

two other significant buildings in nearby Dallas that visitors should also experience. The Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House stands directly across from the Dee and Charles Wylie Theatre. Both were unveiled in October as part of the burgeoning downtown Dallas Arts District.

Stroll past the donor pool at the Winspear and you'll spot Jones's name on the list of 130 benefactors who gave more than \$1 million to the new opera house. A slatted canopy extends from the rectangular glass and steel structure to shade folks from the hot Texas sun. But it's

the red oval that rises dramatically through the building that gives the house its contemporary flair. Designed by Foster + Partners under Pritzker Prize-winning architect Norman Foster (the firm behind the expansion at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts), the red egg contains a traditional five-tiered, horseshoe-shaped opera house where every sightline has ample views of the deep stage and the acoustics are magnificent.

The 2,200-seat venue is the new home of the Dallas Opera and Texas Ballet Theater, and a showcase for traveling Broadway



productions like "South Pacific" and "Avenue Q." The glass-enclosed lobby opens like garage doors at intermission so people can flood out onto the concourse, a gesture to the city that this opera house is open to all.

Across the street, the Wylie Theatre also has its stage on the ground floor, surrounded by the plaza. But first you must walk down a concrete ramp and then back up a staircase to make a grand entrance into the 600-seat space. Here's where the fun begins. Designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, another Pritzker winner, and his partner

at the time, Joshua Prince-Ramus, the interior can change with the flip of a switch. The balcony and proscenium wall can both be pulled up into the 11-story tower. So one day, you have a familiar theater and stage, the next day you could have an empty floor better suited for an experimental dance troupe.

From the aluminum tubes that ripple like a stage curtain and form the exterior of the building to an upper level terrace covered in Astroturf, where actors can rest while practicing, you can tell Koolhaas and Prince-Ramus had fun with the whimsical design. There's also ample space to house costumes, props, a small black box theater, and a rooftop deck from which to see how downtown Dallas has evolved.

The Winspear and Wylie are part of the emerging Dallas Arts District, first coined when the Dallas Museum of Art opened in 1984. Five years later, the I.M. Pei-designed Morton H. Meyer Symphony Center was added along the corridor, followed by the light-infused Nasher Sculpture Center in 2003, created by Renzo Piano. Soon to arrive are an outdoor amphitheater and City Performance Hall, set to open next year, and a new 5-acre park connecting downtown with uptown.

Bury tells me that the arts district is ideal for out-of-towners because you can walk from downtown hotels like the Ritz-Carlton and Fairmont Dallas to two of the pillars of Southwestern cuisine, Fearing's and Stephan Pyles, and onward to the night's performance of a play, opera, or symphony.

"You never have to set foot in a car," says Bury, shaking his head. "Not many places you can do that in Texas."

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