



SCOTCH TAPE

What do you get if you mix bureaucratic red tape with freezers, wine making techniques and rocket fuel? Rule breaking whiskies with a law suit chaser

WORDS | BILL MACKINTOSH

USUALLY ANNOUNCING NEW TRENDS IN WHISKY SIMPLY MEANS USING THEM FOR COCKTAILS. But new methods used in the whisky-making process have increased tensions between the independent whisky makers and the industry's guardian, the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA)¹, about what can and can't be called Scotch. One whisky maker was forced to scrap his product under threat of law, a second distilled a whisky so pure it was used to power a racing car, and a third

created a whisky that is designed (whisper it) to be stored in the freezer.

The whisky that has caused most of the upset is Spice Tree, a single malt² that had been matured with staves³ made of French oak⁴. Sourced from a forest in Vosges by John Glaser, a London-based American, the treatment ensured Spice Tree received critical acclaim when it came out four years ago. Even the SWA liked it, but four weeks later Glaser's Compass Box ▶

*See footnotes on next page

Company received a lawyer's letter from the Association saying the whisky contravened the 1989 legislation governing what is and what isn't Scotch whisky.

Said Glaser, whose headquarters are in London: "We found new fresh oak of the highest quality, brought them back to Broxburn (near Edinburgh where Compass Box is matured), put them into barrels that had effectively nothing left to give for six months and the result was a whisky of beautiful character." After the legal ban, Glaser was told by the SWA what he was doing had never been done before in Scotland – although it is common among winemakers – and therefore it is not traditional under their interpretation of the law.

Beaten, but not bowed, Compass Box has returned with a new Spice Tree, again featuring heavily oaked wood, this time in the barrel ends. Glaser said: "The whisky has been in these barrels for two years and has attained a lovely character. We are not trying to stir a pot here, just trying to make great whisky. To me evolution and innovation is very much a part of the whisky-making craft, as is the constant search for the techniques and processes that help us improve the product."

That attention to details appears to have paid dividends. The company has won



OVER A BARREL: ABOVE, WHISKY-MAKER JOHN GLASER GOT INTO TROUBLE FOR USING WOODEN STAVES TO GIVE HIS WHISKY A FULLER FLAVOUR; BELOW, MARK REYNIER'S QUADRUPLE-DISTILLED WHISKY WAS POWERFUL ENOUGH TO FUEL A RACE CAR

“We are not trying to stir the pot here, just trying to make great whisky”

more than 60 awards in the past few years, including Innovator of the Year from the respected *Whisky* magazine.

Voyager asked the SWA if the new Spice Tree conformed to the 1989 law. Spokesman David Williamson replied: "On the basis of the limited detail he has now provided to you, we don't see any problem with the process we understand is being used – provided of course there are no internal chips⁵, staves or other structures in the casks."

Other whisky makers who have fallen foul of the SWA include Mark Reynier, managing director of Bruichladdich Distillery on the Hebridean island of Islay. His four times

FOOTNOTES

¹ The Scotch Whisky Association (SWA), which has roots back to 1917, is the trade association which protects the integrity of Scotch whisky worldwide. On several occasions it has even turned to the law to protect the name Scotch, particularly in India and Thailand. More recently it has lost a long-standing battle to prevent Canadian single malt whisky producer Glenora Distillers calling its whisky 'Glen Breton'. The SWA argued it could confuse people and make them think it was produced in Scotland.

² Single Malt Scotch is a type of single malt whisky, distilled by a single distillery in a pot still, using malted barley as the only grain.

³ John Glaser suspended wooden staves – long strips of oak – in casks that already contained maturing whisky. He believed that heavily toasting the staves gave a fuller flavour. The SWA ruled it illegal.

⁴ Most wood used in whisky-making comes from America or Spain, although oak from other countries can be used. Whisky must mature in oak barrels in Scotland for a minimum of three years before it can legally be called Scotch whisky. Three types are used: *Quercus alba* ('white oak' from America), *quercus petraea* ('sessile oak') which is found across Europe, notably in France and is most commonly used for wine cooperage, and *quercus robur* ('pedunculate oak'), also found across Europe.

⁵ Some winemakers place free-floating oak chips into their barrels to help speed the maturation process and impart fuller flavours. Compass Box did not contain free-floating chips.





“Freezing the whisky takes away the strong smell”

distilled⁶ spirit was condemned even before it was made, because of fears over its very high alcoholic content. To prove the purity of the spirit, Reynier invited BBC presenters James May and Oz Clarke to test-drive a car running purely on the stuff. A 150mph Radical SR4 racing car from Radical Sportscars, the Peterborough-based manufacturer, was selected for the test in August 2008.

Reynier says: “The Radical car test was about purity of spirit. According to a racing car team

FOOTNOTES (continued)

⁶ Virtually all Scotch is double distilled. Two stills, the large copper kettle-like vessels found in every distillery, are used. The first, known as the wash still, is filled with pre-heated fermented wort (the liquid produced by mixing water, yeast and malted barley – the three ingredients of whisky). It is heated again and the vapours, which rise to the top of the still, are collected in a condenser where they are converted back into liquid form. After this first distillation the spirit is pumped into the still, and boiled again. As the liquid vaporises and climbs up the neck, the condensed liquid is separated; the early spirit is directed to a separate receiver tank, along with the later spirits. Only the middle part is used to make whisky. Irish whiskey is triple distilled. In 2008 Bruichladdich master distiller Jim McEwan distilled the spirit used in the car stunt four times.

⁷ Grain whisky is a mix of cereals, including some malted barley, which is added to single malts to make blended whiskies. Recently, there has been renewed interest in drinking single grain whiskies. Compass Box has produced a blended grain whisky called Hedonism, known for its soft and sweet style.



FROSTY RECEPTION: ABOVE, THE SNOW GROUSE IS AIMED AT THE YOUNGER AND MORE MAINSTREAM DRINKER. IT IS DESIGNED TO BE SERVED STRAIGHT FROM THE FREEZER, WHICH MAKES IT SMOOTHER

owner, if it was as pure as we said it was (four times distilled at 90%) then it ought to be able to drive an unmodified car engine. It worked a treat. Of course the price of distillation, duty and VAT made the price £120 a gallon or £26 a litre.”

In a bid to appeal to a younger generation of drinkers, one of Scotland’s most traditional whisky makers, the Edrington Group, which makes The Famous Grouse as well as Macallan and Highland Park single malts, has produced a whisky designed to be served direct from the freezer.

This sounds like heresy but brand heritage director Derek Brown defends the introduction of The Snow Grouse. Brown says the whisky – made from grain spirit and matured in oak casks – is light, delicate and vanilla-sweet with a smooth taste. “Given the style of serving it straight from the freezer, we feel it will particularly appeal to both men and women looking for something new and different and to a slightly younger audience (aged 25+) than the usual 35+ males,” he said.

Given that it’s frozen does it still taste of whisky? “Yes, but by freezing the whisky, it takes away the initial strong whisky smell that non-whisky drinkers often don’t like.”

But surely he can imagine that the great whisky makers of yore might be spinning in their graves? “They might! However, people have put ice in whisky for years, so this is just taking that idea a bit further. Also some great whisky makers would be pleased to see grain whisky taking centre stage. Often grain whisky⁷ is seen as the poor cousin in

comparison to malt whisky, yet it is a very important ingredient and can deliver a range of great flavours that often get overlooked.” ♥
www.compassboxwhisky.com
www.bruichladdich.com
www.famousgrouse.com



WIN A CASE OF OLD PULTENEY WK499

WHILE SOME DISTILLERS SHAKE UP THE SCOTCH BUSINESS, others choose to pay tribute to their heritage. The Old Pulteney distillery in Wick is saluting its hometown’s fishing history with Old Pulteney WK499, a single malt available exclusively through travel retail outlets.

This Scotch takes its alphanumeric suffix from the licence plate of one of Wick’s two remaining herring drifters, the Isabella Fortuna. During the 19th century, when this northerly Highland town was the largest fishing port in Europe, thousands of such boats launched from the town’s harbour each day. Though the fishing industry has since dwindled, both the town and the distillery owe an enormous debt of gratitude to these Victorian fishing boats and crew.

Uncoloured and non-chill filtered, Old Pulteney WK499 is matured in ex-bourbon barrels, giving it a fine vanilla and toffee flavours. **If you would like to win a case of Old Pulteney WK499, visit www.bmvoyager.com and follow the links.**

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