



Scotch

This month I am taking on the very intimidating section of scotch. I have always heard how scotch is a very much acquired taste. Many people love scotch but its not usually the first time they drank it. The regions produce so many different kinds of flavorings and characteristics that you really need to find the taste and region that best suits you. I'm going to try and simplify scotch as much as I possible can but I hope this gives a little bit of direction if you are interested in trying scotch.

The first thing I am going to go over with you about Scotch whiskey is how there are different categories of scotch. There is blended whiskey which is usually about 2/3 grain whiskey and the last 1/3 malt whiskeys. Usually these whiskeys are a mixture from several different distilleries. This process started in the 19th century to tame down some of the strong tastes associated with malt whiskey. This process is also much cheaper and easier than the distillation of malt whiskey. Most of the other scotch whiskeys are malt whiskeys; this is the kind we will mostly focus on. There are a lot of them out and each and everyone has its own unique characteristics. Malt whiskey is produced by 100% malted barley.

In the category of malt whiskey there are two sub divisions as well. The first is single malt whiskey. This product is produced from one single distillery. The second sub division is vatted malt whiskey, this is when different malt whiskies from more than one distillery are blended together to make a consistent product.

There are actually four regions in Scotland that whiskey comes from. These regions are Speyside, Highlands, Lowlands and Islay.

- *More than half of all the distilleries in Scotland are in the most central Speyside region. When tasting scotch from this region there is no certain typical characteristics that give away its region. They do*

however tend to have quite a strong smell and the taste can have quite the range.

- The Highlands region covers much more area than any other region, but comes in second when you're talking about the number of distilleries. Being the highlands area is so large it really has many different micro-climates. As a result of this it's very hard to identify and really specific characteristics of this region. They do typically have a little bit more of an expressive and more distinct flavoring than the lowlands.*
- The lowlands region is the closest to England. The lowland region really has an overall mild smell compared to the strong Islay region.*
- The Islay region is one that really puts out whiskey with the most distinctive smell and tastes. Most of the Islay regions whiskeys have a very peaty and smoky taste and smell. If you are really into scotch more than likely you can typically pin point these right away. Nowhere seems to have as strong of a smell and taste of peat and smoke as a malt whiskey from the Islay. Don't forget though these are mainly guidelines. There are always exceptions to the rules.*

The distilling and maturation process in malt whiskey is really complex and I honestly could write ten pages on it so I am going to give a brief overview of it. During the malting process barley gets soaked in water for about 2-3 days then spread out to germinate. During the germination process stage that follows enzymes turn the starch into soluble sugars which will be converted into alcohol later in the process. After the malt has been dried out it goes into a malt mill, a device which grinds the dried malt into grist before the next phase begins. During the mashing stage hot water is added to the grist in a large vessel called a mash tun. This is where the starch in the barley is converted into the fermentable sugars needed to fully produce alcohol later on. The liquid that runs off as a result to this process is called the wort which actually will become the scotch. During the fermentation the sugars in the wort are converted into alcohol by the adding of special yeast strains. The real magic happens in the washback, this is a fermentation vessel that allows the yeast strains to convert the wort into a fermented liquid called wash. This often takes 2-4 days.

After all that work it's finally time to distill to try and get the alcohol content where the distilleries would like it. All malt whiskey is distilled in copper pot stills. There are actually two different kinds that are used during distilling process. The first distillation run produces the 'low wines' which have an alcohol percentage of 10-20%. The second distillation run uses a different still and helps fix impurities. Some distilleries also do small batches together to perfect the perfect scotch. At this point it isn't quite whiskey yet because they need to be aged for quite a while yet.

The aging in barrels is really important to the scotch whiskey. They are only aged in oak barrels. Most of the oak barrels that they do get aged in are the bourbon barrels that are no longer useful to the distilleries. About

90% of malt whiskey gets aged in ex- bourbon oak barrels. The others use ex-sherry oak casks. Both do provide a little bit different taste however they do reuse the casks more than once when they are done with each batch.

One of the more popular brands of scotch whiskey would be Johnnie Walker. It is actually a blended whiskey. Each of their different 'labels' has its own requirements.

- The most popular of these 'labels' would be the Johnnie Walker Red Label. It was introduced in 1909. By 1945, Red Label was the worlds best selling scotch whiskey, and today is still number one.*
- Black Label was created in 1820 and originally known as "Walkers Old Highland Whiskey". It was relaunched under its new name Black label in 1909. As many as 40 whiskeys, each aged 12 years or more make up this complex blend.*
- Green Label was introduced in 2004 and is a pure malt scotch whiskey. It is blended from four characteristic single malts (each at least 15 yrs old) which create a balanced freshness and smoke flavoring.*
- Gold label launched in 1995, is crafted from only a small number of Scotland's most renowned distilleries. Each of these had to be aged for a minimum of 18 years.*
- Blue Label is the rarest and most exclusive blend. Released in 1992 it is individually labeled by bottle. It is created by the most unique and premium whiskeys in the world.*
- The newest addition is Double Black. This was just released in 2011. Unlike Black Label there is no age requirement when it comes to this specific label. It is however aged in highly charred oak barrels which give it a little bit more of a smoke flavoring.*

Dewar's White label is also another favorite blended scotch whiskey. It actually had its start in 1846. By the time the founder, John Dewar, passed away in 1880 it was a main street scotch and had created quite the name for itself. There are up to 40 different whiskeys from all over Scotland that goes into Dewar's. Each and every batch is tested and approved by the master blender. When you taste Dewar's White Label try to pick up on the honey, a little vanilla and a touch of smokiness to it.

Glenlivet single malt scotch is one of the most well known single malt scotches. It has been around since the early 1800s and has never really slowed down. There are a few different ages to choose from and each is unique in its own way.

- Glenlivet 12 yr single malt tends to have a little fruity overtone. It has some honey, vanilla and even a little bit of ginger at the end.*
- The 18 yr Glenlivet also has some of the same qualities but also has a greater oak taste being it was aged longer. It also has some sweetness to it however it also has the taste of some spices as well.*

- *The 21 yr Glenlivet is a batch produced whiskey using only specific hand produced casks. It is a complex whiskey with sherry and wood notes. It is very much a full bodied whiskey there are a lot of complexity to this scotch.*
- *Glenlivet also has a Nadurra. This is a scotch whiskey which using the same practices of the 19th century. It's not chill filtered which is a little different than most scotch whiskeys these days. It gives it a bold taste and it will feel a little richer in your mouth.*

Scotch really has a lot to it and I would really recommend anyone who is interested to research a little bit more. There is so much to it and defiantly give scotch a try. If you try it once and don't like it wait for a while and try a different kind of scotch. Scotch is really an acquired taste and I wouldn't expect loving scotch right away; however people's pallets change all the time. Some day you may find yourself really enjoying a little bit of scotch. Its defiantly everyone should try at least a couple times in their life.

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