

SPIRITS

Scotch 101

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Scotch whisky (not "whiskey") is an internationally protected term. In order to be called Scotch, a whisky must be distilled in Scotland from fermented barley, aged in Scotland in oak barrels for at least three years and have an alcohol content between 40% and 94.8% ABV. Built upon this simple concept is a huge Scotch-loving subculture.

Scotch can be broadly divided into two types: malt Scotch, which is made solely from malted barley, and grain Scotch, which involves unmalted grains, although malted grains might also be used. The very popular "single malt Scotch" is malt Scotch entirely from one distillery. "Blended malt Scotch" is a mixture of malt Scotches from more than one distillery and is sometimes referred to as "vatted malt". "Blended Scotch" is a mixture of malt Scotches and grain Scotch. It is quite rare to find bottlings of solely grain Scotch, though a few exist.

Since Scotch is permitted to be aged in used barrels (unlike American whiskey which must be aged in new barrels), each distillery can release many expressions of their whisky. The aging of Scotch for varying lengths of time in American or European oak

barrels of differing sizes that previously held things as diverse as bourbon, rye, rum, wine, sherry or port results in an infinite variety for the Scotch lover. As there are those who have sampled thousands of different beers, there are those who have sampled thousands of expressions of Scotch.

All of these Scotches can be divided among five officially recognized regions: Campbeltown, Highlands, Islay (pronounced "eye-la"), Lowlands and Speyside. Scotches from each of these regions have certain characteristics associated with them. For example, Islay Scotches are known for their intensely smoky and peaty flavors.

As terroir affects wine, the regions of Scotland greatly influence the whiskies produced within them. Elevation and wind differences affect the vegetation that grows in the regions which can influence the characteristics of the peat that may be used to dry the malt. Water running through the Scottish valleys has highly variable mineral content. And as Scotch ages over years, temperature changes cause the oak barrels to expand and contract slightly, causing the cask to literally breathe in the air that surrounds it and the whisky inside to take on additional character. For this reason, Scotches aged in distilleries near the ocean tend to take

on a salty character from the sea air.

Many Scotch lovers will tell you that Scotch is best appreciated "neat", with no water or ice added. Others will say that Scotch opens up with just a couple of drops of water. Still others will add substantial water to cut the high alcohol content of Scotch. And many put ice cubes in their whisky. There is even a current trend to purchase granite stones that can be chilled in the freezer before being placed in whisky, chilling the whisky without diluting it, as melting ice does.

The vast majority of Scotch is cut with water when bottled to achieve consistency in alcohol. So notwithstanding what "neat" Scotch lovers will tell you, adding water to your Scotch will not ruin it; the distilleries do it themselves. That said, in any given volume of Scotch, the percentage of flavor compounds is actually miniscule. Dilution of these can result in loss of character. And just as beer served too cold dulls your taste buds, so does ice-cold Scotch. The bottom line is to enjoy it the way you wish.

With thousands of different expressions at prices ranging from dozens of dollars per bottle to tens of thousands of dollars per bottle, there is at least one Scotch for everyone... or if you're like me, hundreds. Slainte!

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