

QUICK PICK

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The dram initiative

Local club aims to bring good whisky to the people ▶ DON TSE

PERHAPS IT'S NO surprise that a place known by outsiders as "Cowtown" is also a whisky town. Calgary has an international reputation for its love of single malt Scotch and, to a lesser extent, other types of whisky (or whiskey, as Irish and American varieties are spelled).

But according to local blogger Curt Robinson (allthingswhisky.com), the whisky scene is a little scattered and disorganized. While there are a lot of people doing a lot of interesting things, particularly in the area of Scotch, there is no organized, independent voice for whisky. There are festivals, tastings and clubs, but all are tied to or associated with a for-profit business, so they don't play well together.

For that reason, Robinson decided to found The Dram Initiative, a truly independent club for whisky lovers. "We use our independence to our advantage in being able to work with all of the local shops, industry folk and ambassadors," he says. "It also means we can set our own agendas and define every aspect of the tastings — from how many we taste to how much they cost... from what the event theme is to who presents it."

For an annual membership fee of \$120, members can attend sit-down tastings every four to six weeks. Each tasting costs about \$35, though the price can vary, depending on what is being served. Keeping in mind that a tasting may include as many as 16 drams of whisky (though eight to 10 would be more usual), this is an incredible bargain in a town awash in some of the world's most expensive Scotch.

In comparison, some other clubs host tastings costing up to \$200. To be fair, more expensive tastings offer value by featuring samples of exceptionally rare and exclusive whisky, but Robinson's point is, regardless of value, \$200 for one evening of entertainment is well beyond the means of most whisky lovers. At the other end of the spectrum, the more modestly priced whisky tastings in Calgary tend to offer more mundane whiskies.

The Dram Initiative is focused on doing better than that. "We also wanted to fill a niche in the local scene as to our costs," says Robinson. "We're proving, event after event, that we can bring top-notch drinks to our members and still have it be relatively affordable."

In addition, a club membership offers discounts at Calgary's major whisky retailers, and other perks that Robinson is negotiating to ensure members get value for their money.

Financial matters aside, Robinson is determined to share his love of whisky with anyone who will give him the time of day. "The club is tailored to be inclusive," he says. "We have members who are brand new to [whisky] and excited to learn, as well as seasoned vets who have collections of their own and simply want to engage with like-minded individuals over good drinks...."

"There's a lot of neat stuff out there for the curious and the open-minded," he says.

For more information about The Dram Initiative, contact Robinson at draminitiative@gmail.com. ▶▶

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— Curt Robinson,
The Dram Initiative



BOOZE