

# The Incorporation of Coopers of Glasgow Scholarship Paper

by Tara O'Leary

From the Highlands to the Lowlands, from Speyside to Islay there is a wonderful range of whiskies to be found in Scotland. The differences in style are due to many aspects, including terroir, the water, length of fermentation, shape and size of the still, and not least, the skill and experience of the Master Blender. There is, however, another critical component in the making of these alluring elixirs and that is the barrel in which the whisky is aged.

The barrel and whisky are united at the beginning of the maturation process and with any new relationship, they take a bit of time to warm to one another. Slowly, gently the two start a conversation, the barrel sharing its story of starting life as a Bourbon barrel in Kentucky, and the journey of being rebuilt by an extremely talented team of rugged men known as coopers – a story of reconstruction and skill. The whisky, meanwhile, relates a tale of the inspiration of the Master Blender and of the different distilleries used in the final blend – a story of place and passion. After many years of becoming soulmates, the barrel has imparted all its wisdom and the whisky has benefited by settling down, mellowing and coming into its own.

These coopers are a rare breed and boast a most exceptional talent, but it is not without a great deal of work that they reach their pinnacle. We had the good fortune to visit the Speyside Cooperage in Banffshire to watch this art for ourselves. To become a fully fledged cooper here, one has to endure a four year apprenticeship, during which time, the men learn the precise art of taking a shook (a bundle of staves) and painstakingly fitting them together to create the casks we are so familiar with. This squad of 16 coopers (15 of whom work on rebuilding barrels and one who builds them from scratch) will each reconstruct approximately 20 barrels a day or 100,000 per year. This work is tough and demands a great deal of physical strength, not to mention a good set of ear plugs! Watching as they carefully measure the staves and pound them into place is enough to make anyone tired and yet this is more than a job, it is a craft and one that is in great demand in this part of the world as the numbers of qualified coopers dwindle.

To this great expertise is added that of the Master Blender, none as enthusiastic, passionate or infectious as our host, Richard Patterson of Whyte & Mackay. To spend time with Richard is to get a glimpse into the world of Scotch whisky few have the opportunity to glean. He is debonair in his crisp shirts and ties nearly as colourful as his personality, and will regale you for hours about the history of this amber beverage he grew up admiring, including dates and times of watershed moments. The son of a Master Blender, to say he has whisky in his veins would be an understatement; Patterson eats and sleeps whisky. Actually, perhaps it is better to say that he lives and breathes it, as one of the main responsibilities of a blender is to 'nose' hundreds of barrel samples a day to ensure the blend is progressing in the desired fashion. He is blessed with an olfactory sense capable of differentiating between the subtlest of nuances in the aromas and knows exactly when adjustments are needed and will amaze as he lists the vast array of scents he detects in the glass.

Once Patterson's daily task of nosing the samples is completed, the selection of the blend finished and the filling of the casks concluded, the maturation begins. Throughout Scotland there

are massive warehouses that serve as homes to this most precious of liquids, many with stacks of 25 barrels across and 10 racks high in four bays totalling 1000 casks in all. This represents billions of pounds of whisky and is a huge investment for the industry, not to mention, it makes an impressive sight! This quiet, damp environment is ideal for the development of the whisky and seems like only the most fitting end of a process that is brought about by such talents as the coopers, the blender and all the hard-working people in between. A dram of whisky is a testament to them all.

Unlike wine, only the very best of which can age for longer than a decade, Scotch whisky can survive and improve with age. Patterson introduced us to the secrets and seduction of the whiskies of Dowmore. When creating these blends, he is striving to achieve a specific character that can be recognized as coming from this distillery alone, one of orange marmalade and spice with a dash of sass thrown in for good measure. Many of these whiskies are aged in different casks, some in Bourbon barrels, others in sherry casks, still others in Port, Madeira, Marsala and even Cabernet Sauvignon finishes. Each of these treatments brings an individual element to the forefront and helps achieve the desired final result. An exceptional tasting of an array of different years displayed the underlying style of the house, while also spotlighting each one for its own unique characteristics. The 1980 Dowmore elicited orange zest and soft tangerines from the Oloroso sherry butts it was aged in; whereas the 1974 was pure crepe Suzette round off with a tinge of older orange. The 1966 was a mellifluous beauty bolstered by concentration (of which only 7 bottles are left at a price of £1350 each!) But the pinnacle came in the form of the 1962 which is, to date, the most expensive auctioned whisky at £100,000, it exhibits liquorice, cinnamon, orange peel and a velvety finish unlike any other.

It is no exaggeration to say that good Scotch whisky is an experience worth sharing and savouring, and to have the opportunity to take a firsthand glimpse into the characters, enthusiasm and dedication that goes into the making of each and every bottle, takes the experience of enjoying this drink to a level worthy of such a tradition.