



THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 004

Scotch Whisky

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By law, a whisky cannot be called Scotch until it has matured in oak casks in Scotland for at least three years - and if you see the words "single malt," it means every drop was made from malted barley at one distillery, not that it comes from a single cask. Those two rules do more to shape the spirit in your glass than any tasting note ever could. This is Guide 004 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

What Legally Counts as Scotch

Scotch whisky is defined by UK law, currently the Scotch Whisky Regulations 2009, and the rules are strict. It must be produced at a distillery in Scotland from water and malted barley (other whole grains are allowed for grain whisky), fermented only with yeast, distilled to less than 94.8% alcohol by volume, and matured in Scotland in oak casks no larger than 700 litres for a minimum of three years. It must also be bottled at no less than 40% ABV, and nothing may be added except water and plain caramel colouring (E150A).

These regulations are why an age statement on a bottle - say, "12 years" - always refers to the youngest whisky in the blend, never the oldest or an average. It is also why so-called "whisky" made and aged outside Scotland cannot use the word Scotch, a protection enforced internationally by the Scotch Whisky Association.

The Five Official Categories

There are five legally defined types. Single malt is made from malted barley at one distillery using pot stills. Single grain is made at one distillery but can include other cereals and is usually produced in continuous column stills. The three "blended" categories combine whiskies: blended malt mixes single malts from more than one distillery, blended grain does the same with grain whiskies, and blended Scotch - by far the biggest seller worldwide - marries malt and grain together.

The word "single" trips people up constantly. It does not mean one barrel or one batch. It means one distillery. A single malt is typically a marriage of many casks from that one site, which is how distilleries keep a consistent house style year after year.

How It Is Actually Made

Malt whisky begins with barley that is steeped in water, allowed to germinate, then dried in a kiln - this is malting. The dried malt is milled, mixed with hot water to extract sugars (mashing), then fermented with yeast to produce a beer-like liquid called wash. That wash is distilled, traditionally twice in copper pot stills, and the resulting clear spirit is filled into oak casks to mature. Grain whisky follows a broadly similar path but uses column stills that run continuously and can take other cereals such as wheat or maize.

Maturation does most of the heavy lifting on flavour and colour. New-make spirit runs off the still colourless; the amber tones and much of the character come from years spent in oak, very often casks that previously held bourbon or sherry. A meaningful share of the spirit evaporates through the cask each year, a loss distillers have long called the "angels' share."

Where That Smoky Flavour Comes From

The intense smoky, medicinal note found in many Islay whiskies is not a distillery accident - it comes from peat. When barley is dried over a peat fire during malting, smoke compounds called phenols cling to the grain and carry through to the finished spirit. The level is measured in parts per million of phenols, which is why enthusiasts talk about a whisky's "ppm."

Crucially, not all Scotch is smoky. Many Speyside and Highland malts use unpeated or only lightly peated barley and taste of fruit, honey, cereal or sherried richness instead. Peat is a stylistic choice tied to region and tradition, not a defining feature of Scotch as a whole.

Regions, and What They Do and Don't Tell You

The regulations recognise protected regional names: Highland, Lowland, Speyside, Islay and Campbeltown. Speyside, a concentrated pocket in the north-east, is home to the largest number of distilleries, while Campbeltown, once a whisky boomtown, now has only a handful. These regions describe geography and carry loose stylistic reputations - Islay for peat, Speyside for elegance - but they are not flavour guarantees.

Plenty of distilleries make whiskies that defy their regional stereotype, and a single site may produce both peated and unpeated expressions. Treat region as a starting point for exploration rather than a rule about what will be in the glass.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Older whisky is always better. Age is not a quality score. Extra years in oak can add depth, but they can also let the cask overwhelm the spirit. Many celebrated bottlings carry no age statement at all, and plenty of younger whiskies win top honours.

Myth: Adding water or ice ruins it. A few drops of water are commonly used even by distillery blenders, because they can open up aromas that are locked in at higher strength. How you drink it is a matter of preference, not a mistake.

Myth: The colour tells you how good or how old it is. Colour comes largely from the cask and can be adjusted with permitted caramel colouring, so a darker whisky is not necessarily older or better than a paler one.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between whisky and whiskey?

It is mostly a matter of spelling convention. Scotch is spelled "whisky" without an "e," as is whisky from Japan and Canada, while Irish and most American producers use "whiskey." The spelling signals the tradition it comes from rather than a difference in the drink's legal definition.

Does Scotch keep improving in the bottle?

No. Unlike wine, Scotch stops maturing the moment it leaves the cask. An unopened bottle stored upright, away from heat and direct light, will stay essentially the same for years. Once opened, air slowly changes it, so a bottle left half-full for a long time may taste a little flatter over time.

Is "single malt" better than "blended"?

Not inherently. Blended Scotch accounts for the large majority of what the world drinks, and skilled blending is a craft in its own right, aimed at balance and consistency. Single malts showcase one distillery's character, but "better" comes down to the individual bottle and your own taste, not the category.