

## VICTORIA FESTIVAL

# Whisky lovers sip to heart's content

Thanks to improved marketing, sales are now better than ever

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The sky opened and angels seemed to sing one day 30 years ago when Victoria's Nigel Drever savoured his first taste of whisky.

Last Saturday, he and 474 other whisky lovers gathered at the Victoria Whisky Festival to try to re-create the experience. It's not often whisky lovers can sip to their heart's content on 150 varieties of their favourite tippie in one sitting.

"This one is like standing in the middle of an Atlantic gale," declared Drever, who had just persuaded one of the 40 distillers to dole out a dram from a bottle hidden under the table.

"That last one was like standing on a peat bog, behind a stone wall in a gentle shower."

Since his introduction to his version of the nectar of the gods, Drever has visited

50 distilleries in Scotland and sampled more than 1,200 whiskies in his quest to find the perfect one. He found nirvana, but then found better nirvanas four more times.

While the market for whisky is strong today, it was not always the case.

"Our idea of marketing back in the '60s was an advertisement that showed a guy in a skirt holding a bottle," remembered Mike Nicolson, a retired master distiller from Scotland who now lives in Sidney.

"We're lucky to still be here."

The industry learned from the same people who successfully marketed cognac to the world. Ironically, today more whisky is sold in one month in France than cognac in a year. More than five bottles are shipped every second to that country.

Nicolson said some of the growth has come from

women as they experiment to satisfy their curiosity about the liquor.

Women more often than not have a better "nose" for the liquid than men, he said.

Eight years ago, Tina Gaudet-Farquharson was introduced to whisky by her ex-boyfriend. She started off with lighter Irish whiskies before switching to scotch.

Now she has more than 12 different whiskies at home and regularly meets with three or four friends to enjoy a drink or two.

"Whisky is like good food," said Gaudet-Farquharson, 39.

"I enjoy its taste and simplicity. Over the years I have learned what I like and why I like them."

While some people say they don't consider whisky a man's drink anymore, she has experienced otherwise. Whenever she goes out on a date, her choice of after-dinner beverage is sure to garner a reaction.

"Some find it intriguing, but some men are intimidated," she said.

An increase in consump-

tion has sparked competition from around the world — even in Victoria.

Victoria Spirits is a distillery on Old West Saanich Road, which is maturing its first batch — that by law has to be matured for a minimum of three years before it can be considered a whisky.

"We're not trying to compete against the big boys," said Bryan Murray, company president.

"Our first offering will consist of three casks [about 100 bottles per cask] that will be ready for bottling in about 15 months."

While the age of a whisky is often used as a determinant of its smoothness, he said older doesn't necessarily mean better. He thinks his use of a wood-fired still and smaller casks produces flavours faster than traditional methods. Experts and the public will find out if that is the case in just over a year.

While some participants got slowly inebriated in the course of the evening, Jim Murray, author of *The Whisky Bible*, a whisky

## WHISKY TRIVIA

The ancient Celts believed their fiery brew could bring back the dead.

The Americans and Irish add an "e" their drink, as in "whiskey."

Only whisky made in Scotland can be called "scotch."

Canada is the largest producer of whisky outside the United Kingdom and the U.S.

Japan is the largest producer outside the U.K. and North America. It is also home to the largest whisky distillery in the world.

The other countries that produce whisky include Australia, Chile, India, Italy, Jamaica, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Sweden and Thailand.

drinker's guide, was as sober as a judge.

"If I had to drink every whisky I review, I would be dead," said Murray, whose book lists more than 4,500 tasting notes.

"I have been doing this full time for 20 years and have only gotten drunk once — and that was an accident."

To rate a whisky, Murray

smells and tastes a sample. He does not swallow. The former reporter has an encyclopedic memory for his craft and compares the whiskies he encounters to people.

"Whisky is about life," said Murray, who is also a consultant blender for distilleries.

"I treat all of them as personalities. In the last year, it's like I met 1,066 different people."

After three hours of intense sampling, the evening wound to a close. Distillers with whisky from as far away as Japan, India and Tasmania put away their bottles.

Happy patrons filed out — none appeared drunk. Nobody reported observing the sky opening and angels singing for them — but there is always next year. [parrais@timescolonist.com](mailto:parrais@timescolonist.com)

## Coming Thursday

After visiting the whisky festival, our wine and spirits columnist Garth Eichel looks at some fine whiskies that will soon be available in Victoria. In Go.