

Asian boom helps fuel whisky renaissance



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Single-malt whisky has a checkered 500-year history, pockmarked by temperance movements, prohibition, illicit stills, smuggling and taxation, interspersed with a series of economic boom and bust cycles. But in all this time, pure malt whisky has never known the popularity it enjoys today.

The renaissance malt whisky is witnessing owes a lot to improved techniques, better products and a growing following of sophisticates. This, combined with exponential increase in demand from India and China,

has seen dormant distilleries in Scotland reactivated, existing ones expanded, and a host of startup distilleries there and around the world. While some argue rapid expansion is affecting quality, particularly among some large producers, many distillers in Scotland and elsewhere are producing limited quantities of premium malt whisky in a range of styles that are truly brilliant. Regrettably, many of the best products are still not available in B.C., but a handful of distillers and distributors are making inroads through the Liquor Control and Licensing Branch, with more and more specialty products being released to our local market. Those lucky few with tickets to the Victoria Whisky Festival last weekend were among the first in B.C. to taste several of these sublime new offerings, but fret not: B.C. Liquor Stores and private retailers are, or soon will be, carrying a number of remarkable malt whiskies, including the following notables:

Arran — 14 Year Old Starting at \$90

Reactivated in 1995, the only distillery on the Isle of Arran in Ireland is hitting its stride with the release of its 14 Year Old. Aged in a combination of sherry and bourbon casks, it has distinct notes of almond, vanilla, caramel and marzipan, combined with a hint of spice and brine. The combination evolves progressively in the mouth, leaving a long, smooth finish. Scheduled for release this week, it is a remarkable value for a superb 14-year-old whisky.

Bruichladdich — the Organic Starting at \$80

While "organic" is an often overused marketing term, Bruichladdich's the Organic is worthy of the name as the only certified organic whisky made from 100 per cent organic Scottish barley. It's lovely, too: slightly peaty with an oleaginous mouth-feel, it expresses

notes of soft grain, tropical fruit and baking spices in a smooth, dry finish.

Compass Box Whisky Company — the Spice Tree Starting at \$75

Notwithstanding a spat with the Scottish Whisky Association in 1995 over non-standard methods, whisky-maker John Glaser has developed a loyal following for his small batches of blended malt whiskies, gathered from select northern Highland distilleries and aged in American oak and heavily toasted French oak heads. Scheduled for release next week, the Spice Tree has big character with pronounced aromas of ginger, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg and vanilla that are revealed on the mouth in a full-bodied and harmonious balance of spice and sweet.

Penderyn — Madeira Starting at \$89

Under pressure from a



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Bruichladdich — The Organic whisky.

fervent temperance movement, the last distillery in Wales closed in 1903, and with it died centuries of Welsh wysgi (whisky)-making tradition. That is, until Penderyn resurrected those traditions in 2000 with a range of remarkably smooth whiskies. Their Madeira-finished wysgi is a great "starter single malt" for those with an aversion to peaty varieties. Aged in Madeira casks, it is light in style, with delicate notes of

cream toffee and new leather, combined with tropical fruit, raisins and vanilla.

Sullivan's Cove — Cask Strength, Port Maturation Starting at \$107

For much of the 18th and early 19th century, the penalty for illicit distillers and whisky smugglers was transportation to Australia. It is poetic justice then that one of the finest single-malt producers in the world is Sullivan's Cove in Tasmania. The Cask Strength, port maturation, is a particularly fine example with a rich maltiness and influences of oak, balanced with sweet fruit, honey, anise and nutty cocoa.

Note: If B.C. Liquor Stores or your local private retailer don't carry these malt whiskies, your best bet is the Strath Ale, Wine and Spirit Merchants at 919 Douglas St., which arguably has the best range of whiskies for sale in the city.