

Around Town at Whisky Fest: Canada's high-spirited secret

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Whisky Bible author Jim Murray prepares for his tastings of global award winners. Photograph by: LYLE STAFFORD, Times Colonist

Forget about the Oscars and the Canadian Screen Awards.

It was the Canadian Whisky Awards that had people talking — and moved by sensational spirits — on Thursday night.

And the winner was ... John K. Hall, crowned Canadian Whisky of the Year after a blind tasting competition.

“What a year to be a whisky lover!” host Davin de Kergommeaux told a crowd of 60 whisky aficionados at the awards dinner that kicked off the third annual Victoria Whisky Festival at Hotel Grand Pacific. Other winners included Forty Creek Port Wood Reserve, named Connoisseur Whisky of the Year; Gibson’s Finest Rare 18-year-old; and Canadian Rockies 21-year-old.

Opening night was also highlighted by 2013 Whisky Bible author Jim Murray’s grand tasting of global award-winners.

It was all part of what cynics might assume is an excuse for a big booze-up, but is in fact serious business.

You didn't have to be Scottish to appreciate the wee drams at the festival ending today. Highlights included dinners, tastings or master classes presented by Glenrothes Distillery of Cutty Sark fame; the legendary Grand Glenmorangie; McLean-Scotland and other distilleries; Saturday's consumer tasting; and festival president Lawrence Graham's Nikka master class showcasing Japanese whisky.

There was much more at the sold-out event that de Kergommeaux, who has been to all the big ones including the Malt Maniacs Awards, raves about — a sentiment he says is shared by distillers.

“It's the best organized and most fun,” said the Ottawa-based author of *Canadian Whisky: The Portable Expert*.

“Victoria has become the epicentre for connoisseur whisky in Canada. It blows Toronto away.”

Part of his mission is to dispel beliefs Canadian whisky is inferior to its global counterparts, a myth perpetuated by an abundance of “bottom shelf” domestic products that are so popular as mixers.

Higher-end whisky such as Hiram Walker's Lot 40, he said, is comparable to a \$125 single malt scotch at one-third the price.

“If they find out a whisky is Canadian, a lot of people decide they don't like it,” de Kergommeaux said. “People can be insecure about their own taste so they have to be told what to like.”

Whisky festival tickets sold out in less than three hours, said co-founder Iain Hooey, who isn't surprised by its popularity.

“I think it's because we've shown the whisky-making community that Victoria not only has a desire for whisky from around the world, but has also garnered incredible knowledge about the products,” he said. “The festival has earned its reputation by being respectful of what a whisky festival should look like, and our social responsibility,” Hooey said.

Organizers don't charge fees for tables or to put on master classes, and every penny goes to charity — Greater Victoria Crimestoppers and the Q's TLC Fund for Kids, whose volunteers provide imbibing participants with a safe ride home.

“They're fascinated by the fact men and women put this on for the love of the spirit.”