

VICTORIA WHISKY FESTIVAL

26 January 2016 by *Davin de Kergommeaux*

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Now in its 11th year, the Victoria Whisky Festival is Canada's must-attend whisky show – despite the challenges of holding the event in such a tightly controlled market. Davin de Kergommeaux reports.



A masterclass of tightly regulated whisky? Must be a Canadian whisky festival.

Across the street from the Hotel Grand Pacific, floatplanes glide in and out of the scenic Inner Harbour, carrying Vancouver-based businessmen, tourists and politicians to and fro. Ferries to Seattle are steps from the hotel door. Though just 80,000 souls strong (350,000 metropolitan), Victoria is the capital of British Columbia. The Hotel Grand Pacific, which hosts the Victoria Whisky Festival, is right next door to the camera-ready legislature.

In fact, walking six minutes from the hotel, you can stand among west-coast Indian totem poles in Thunderbird Park carved by Gitksan, Haida, and Kwakwaka'wakw artists. They stand in the shadow of a more recent masterwork: the provincial parliament buildings with their greened copper roofs.

Nearby, the Museum of British Columbia houses a collection of artefacts that tell the history of the province. Over there's the Korean War Memorial, a carillon, and a bronze sculpture of that uniquely Canadian artist, Emily Carr.

Often as you walk between these symbolic constructions, you can hear the sound of a piper clad in full Highland regalia. He's at the harbour, busking where the tour buses usually decant.

Detour: a two-minute walk takes you instead to **The Bengal Lounge** at the Empress Hotel where, this year, Dave Broom and I shared not whiskies but Martinis, as did many festival-goers.



The opulent Bengal Lounge will no longer exist by next year's Victoria Whisky Festival.

The Raj is still alive and well in the Bengal, which is Victoria's oldest and most historic, and now senescent, cocktail bar. The punkah ceiling fans and a tiger skin above the crackling fire will disappear in five months, when this jewel in the crown finally closes. This will still leave **Clive's**, the **Argyle Attic**, **Little Jumbo**, **Bard & Banker**, **Irish Times**, and several other decent whisky/cocktail bars that are within an easy walk of the festival.

One of the delights of Victoria is that January is walking weather in this part of British Columbia, another reason why this whisky festival has become much more than what happens at the event itself.

People move from club to club for brand-centred tutored tastings and celebrations with whisky ambassadors in town for the festival from Scotland, Ireland, England, Kentucky, Japan, Taiwan, France and India.

The 1,700 tickets to the official festival events (475 for Saturday's consumer tasting) sell out in minutes, though with so much else happening in what is now Victoria Whisky Week, that's hardly surprising. Forced to skip one of the masterclasses to attend another? Chances are you'll find that same brand ambassador around the corner at a local club, pouring whiskies for the crowd.

Surprisingly, Canada is not an easy place to host a whisky festival, perhaps because of our colonial past rather than the lingering shadow of Prohibition. The major obstacle is actually getting whisky to sample.

Unlike in Europe or Asia, where 1,000 or more whiskies may be on pour, Victoria is limited to fewer than 300 choices. Officially, that is. Another 100 or so high-end drams will materialise at after-parties and receptions held in private rooms.



James Wills ensured family-run Islay distillery Kilchoman was represented at the Victoria Whisky Festival.

Why are some of the rarest drams not poured in the public consumer tasting? Two words to stop all whisky-loving Canadians dead in their tracks: liquor boards.

Government monopoly sales of alcohol in Canada require festivals to buy all the whisky they serve from the province where that festival is held. In fact, Victoria manages well. Consider the challenge of holding a festival in Ontario, where the liquor board sells only 140 different whiskies, most of them mundane blends. Toronto may be the largest whisky market in the country, but if you want to mount a decent whisky festival in Canada, you have to go 2,700 miles to the west.

In just 11 years, Victoria has made enormous progress with this festival, despite the challenges of turning this quaint tourist town into Canada's whisky epicentre.

Festival president Lawrence Graham, says he had to learn on the job. 'For a while I experimented with the lesser spirits and in the course of that misadventure was slowly introduced to single malts.'

His conversion began in 1992 when, as an Army Reserve officer, he managed an Officers' Mess and its whisky collection. 'Captain Don Wagner started it,' he says of their single malt selection. 'He was actually the Big Bang person as far as whisky in Victoria. I carried it forward and the collection allowed like-minded people to meet.'

It was a group of these like-minded folk who went on to establish the festival as a charitable event with profits donated to children's good causes.

This year's four-day affair began on Thursday, 14 January with the **Canadian Whisky Awards** banquet and presentations. The awards, judged blind by a panel of 10, honour the very best whiskies produced in Canada, crowning Lot No. 40 from Corby Distillers as the whisky of the year. Meanwhile, down the hall, Alwynne Gwilt led 100 people on a spirited journey through a century of Scotch whisky.

On Friday, whisky lovers could choose from seven grand tastings presented by Glenfiddich, Canadian Club, Amrut, Buffalo Trace, The Glenlivet, Highland Park, and an independent bottlers' showcase.

Then, on Saturday, we went to school – whisky school – with 36 masterclasses, run with Swiss precision but in a relaxed social atmosphere. That evening's consumer tasting required two large ballrooms, each with a never-ending buffet. Providing food is designed to avoid drunkenness; those who need one are offered a free ride home by volunteer designated drivers.

Organisers, volunteers and guests celebrated the success of the festival on Sunday, with what else but a five-course whisky dinner. Food and whisky pairings can often be forced (it's not rare meat and red wine, for Pete's sake!) but these drams and dishes were more the first *slàinte mhath* to the 12-year-old edition of the festival in 2017.

In October, tickets will go on sale for the 12th **Victoria Whisky Festival**. If you plan to attend one whisky event in Canada, this is it. So, when the time comes, act fast – or you'll wish you had.