

Whisky expert details craft, innovation and flavour at Victoria festival



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1 / 2 Canadian whisky expert Davin de Kergommeaux held a preview tasting ahead of the Victoria Whisky Festival. | Bailey Seymour/Victoria News Staff

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Canada may be known for our diverse network of eateries, rich food culture, and cheap, but world-renowned beer, but one author believes the great white North should also be celebrated for the golden-

hued liquor that has long been a part of the country's history: whisky.

Just ahead of the Canadian Whisky Awards and the Victoria Whisky Festival, renowned Canadian whisky expert and founder of the awards, Davin de Kergommeaux, led a preview tasting with industry professionals and media personalities on Thursday, Jan. 16.

Canadian whisky is more regulated compared to other countries, especially our American counterparts, in that the federal Food and Drugs Act requires liquor labelled as 'Canadian whisky' to be mashed, distilled and aged in Canada, to be aged in wood vessels for at least three years, and it must contain at least 40 per cent alcohol by volume.

"One rule that Canada has is that it must have the aroma and taste characteristics typical of Canadian whisky," he told the crowd. "It must taste like Canadian whisky, and so what does that mean? Well, to me, that means caramel at the beginning, pepper in the middle, pith at the end, and then 10,000 other things hung on that."

Though it's possible the first whisky distiller in Canada was in Quebec starting around the mid-1700s (although, that's still under speculation), the first recorded commercial sale of whisky in the country was Thomas Molson, son of John Molson of the Molson Brewery, who started exporting whisky to England from his Montreal distillery in the early 1800s.

"They were making a fortune. They were making more money with whisky than they were with beer," de Kergommeaux told the crowd. "However, there were political implications to being a distiller. John Molson Sr. had died, and the third generation, Thomas' kids, weren't interested in being distillers."

The first Canadian whisky brand, de Kergommeaux says, was Canadian Club. Founded in Detroit in 1858, the distillery however soon moved to Windsor, Ontario due to prohibition in the U.S.

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"Now there were other whiskies that were made before them, but you cannot have a brand until you can guarantee that the whisky is always going to taste the same, and the only way to do that is to put it in a bottle and seal it shut," he said.

He then took the crowd through the flavour notes of a whisky that he said is a highlight of this year, the 18-year-old Canadian Club Classic.

"The Canadian Club is a lot brighter, it's more fragrant," he said. "To me, [it's] an absolute masterpiece. I think I called it ballet in a bottle."

De Kergommeaux says Canadian whisky has maintained an "abysmal" reputation until fairly recently as the liquor started to get more recognition on the world stage.

"People are starting to take Canadian whisky really seriously," he said. "When I started with Canadian whisky, well it's getting close to 20 years ago, really only Crown Royal, Canadian Club and Forty Creek were at any of the shows, and people would [call it] brown vodka."

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Over the rest of the festival, which is being held at the Hotel Grand Pacific, Friday evening will host eight tastings presented by Nikka, Amrut, The Dalmore, Glencadam, bottler Gordon and MacPhail and The Strath's whisky curator Adam Bradshaw.

Saturday will feature a full lineup of masterclasses, with 44 to be presented throughout the day. Whisky enthusiasts can look forward to more than 200 drams from 50 distilleries representing 11 countries including Scotland, Ireland, England, Canada, United States, Japan, Taiwan, India, Finland, Switzerland and France.

For more information, visit www.victoriawhiskyfestival.com.

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After a stint with the Calgary Herald and the Nanaimo Bulletin, I ended up at the Black Press Victoria Hub in March 2024

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