The Rare Flavor of Green Malt Whiskey

Green malt isn’t some new marketing tagline for organic and sustainable malt. It refers to barley grain that is actively growing, and just a handful of distilleries worldwide make whisky with it. Typically, malt is made by tricking raw grain into sprouting and germinating, then it is kilned with air and heat to halt germination and add flavors, aromas, and colors. Most importantly, the process converts the complex starches of the barley into simpler sugars appropriate for alcohol fermentation. All malt is “green” (wet and growing) at some point, but forgoing the kiln to brew with that active, wet, cucumber-scented malt is a rare endeavor that yields some very unusual whiskies.

Green malt can save time and energy during malting and boost efficiency during fermentation, but it comes at a cost. Green malt is tough to work with, spoils rapidly, and it produces unusual flavors—challenges that made the proposition of making an all-green-malt whiskey irresistible for New York’s coppersea Distilling and Corsair Distillery in Nashville.

In contrast to the round, soft aromas of kilned malt whiskey, green malt whiskey is intriguingly tight and raw. “The big change is when you’re using heat to actually kiln it,” explains Corsair co-founder Darek Bell. “That’s when you get those biscuit and baked bread flavors.” Bell describes Corsair’s all-barley green malt as a blank canvas lacking the mark of fire—like raw food versus cooked.

Coppersea distiller Christopher Williams got the idea to make green malt whisky from a century-old Scotch whisky trade manual. The text described a one-of-a-kind whisky made by illicit distillers who skipped peat-kilning their malt to avoid creating smoke and attracting unwanted attention.

“I read that and I said, ‘I want to be able to make that, because I want to know what that tastes like,’” says Williams. “We are a distillery that adores the sort of bizarre idiosyncrasies of historical whisky styles, and that’s what we’re trying to reach back to and understand.”

At the time, Coppersea was just getting started and they didn’t have a kiln, but they knew how to malt, so the green malt rye was the first whiskey they made.

“The green malt rye has this very floral and sort of a baking spice quality, so you’ve got nutmeg, cinnamon, and then this great kind of honeysuckle,” says Williams. “Our green malt barley is also herby, but in a completely different way—cucumbers, black tea, it almost has this wasabi or horseradish quality, and continued on page 36
Whisky Time Travelers

Scotch whisky has often traded on its history, and some producers have even sought to recreate whiskies of the past, like Macallan with its Decades Series, Glenfiddich’s The Original 1963, and Mackinlay’s Stacklten whisky, replicated by Whyte & Mackay a few years ago. Those products all drew on existing stocks of old whisky to match the modern flavor profile. No one had dreamed of attempting to recreate a whisky that no longer exists at all. That is, until now. The Lost Distillery Company releases Scotch whiskies named for distilleries that haven’t operated for decades. The blended malts aren’t meant to mimic precisely the products that existed way back when, however. “What we can say is if the distillery was still open today, this is the style of whisky they’d be producing,” says co-founder Brian Woods. He and Scott Watson initially aimed to be independent bottlers. “As we were delving into archives to look for a historically relevant name for the business, we came across all these distilleries which had been closed and, I think, forgotten,” Woods explains. “These distilleries were the economic and social heart of very small communities...so all this history is gone.”

Woods and Watson work with Michael Moss, a professor of archival sciences, to research each distillery and determine what its whisky’s flavor profile might have been. They consider ten critical data points, including water source, barley, yeast, source and amount of peat, size and shape of the still, and cask type. “Sometimes we’re really quite fortunate in that we will have tasting notes. We’ll have a record of someone drinking it and the description of it,” Woods says. The company sources casks from 40 working distilleries across Scotland. Each whisky is made in 1000-bottle batches, and there are six currently on offer: Auchnagie, Gerston, Lossit, Stratheden, Towiemore, and Renachie, which is known as Jericho outside the U.S. The Lost Distillery Company publishes its research on its website, letting the amateur whisky historians delve deeply into fascinating minutiae. The company is working on its seventh release, Dalartan, currently available in France and set to launch in other markets soon, and Woods thinks there are about 23 more lost brands that have enough data to build a good profile. “Of course, a lot of [closed] distilleries are still stocked in the market,” he says, noting that the company is respectful of existing trademarks. “We wouldn’t bring out a Rosebank tomorrow, for example.”

—Susannah Zivier-Barton