



SINGLE MALT NOT SCOTCH

IN SEARCH OF THE NEXT GREAT
SINGLE MALT NATION

BY JONNY MCCORMICK

Single malt ages at
Warengem Distillery
in France.

Indisputably, scotch is the world's most popular style of whisky, with single malt regarded as the epitome of this fine spirit, cherished for its unparalleled quality. While I make my home in Scotland and have a passion for her whiskies, my role as *Whisky Advocate's* world whisky reviewer presents me with a steady stream of fascinating whiskies from India, Taiwan, Mexico, Israel, Australia, and beyond!

Just 20 years ago, it would have been considered laughable that anyone could challenge Scotland's dominance of single malt—but

WARENGEM DISTILLERY



Warenghem Distillery general manager David Roussier (left) and master distiller Erwan Lefebvre sample a cask.

Japan gave scotch lovers reason to pause. Today, I'm in awe of the proliferation of whisky from around the world, and the vast range of countries that stand proudly behind high-quality products.

A global community of distillers is transporting single malt whisky to new places, literally. By adding their own creativity and local techniques, resulting in exciting flavors and geographical styles, the single malt world is changing quickly. Because I sample and evaluate whisky blind, not knowing the identity of what I am tasting, I can tell you that Japan is not the last nation that will surprise us by joining the big leagues of single malt.

In another 20 years, it just might be France, Sweden, or Germany that rivals Scotland for single malt popularity. So if you're weary of looking in the rearview mirror at the single malt whiskies you may have missed, it's time to look to the horizon and consider the great things to come.

Building a Whisky Nation

"There was no Welsh whisky around when we started; there was no reputation," admits Stephen Davies, the chief executive of Penderyn Distillery in Wales. Penderyn began distilling in 2000, and it now exports 30% of its whiskies, with France and the U.S. being its fastest growing markets. Davies identifies two key factors that helped Penderyn get to this point: being distinctive and knowing what it stands for. "We have two copper pot stills, the Penderyn Faraday stills, which give us a light-style single malt whisky which is

uniquely Penderyn, and up until recently was uniquely Welsh." You won't find stills like them making single malt in Scotland, which instinctively makes me inquisitive to retaste some of their whiskies. Penderyn Sherrywood has impressive layers of succulent fruits, baking spices, and coffee notes, while the Penderyn Portwood combines moreish flavors of chocolate, dates, and forest honey.

Penderyn is focused on becoming better known in the U.S. by telling its story. "We're not scotch, we're not familiar, and even the country of Wales is not familiar to many people in the States," expresses Davies. After meeting a guest at a tasting in New York who mistakenly believed that Wales was an island located off the coast of Scotland, Davies now carries a map at all times.

This ancient Celtic country may boast more castles per square mile than anywhere else, but Davies finds that modern whisky drinkers relate equally well to Welsh stars such as Gareth Bale, the country's top international soccer player, and actors like Matthew Rhys, Anthony Hopkins, Michael Sheen, and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

"As a country, volume is never going to be the big thing; it's got to be about quality and being world class," Davies says. He attempted to draft Welsh whisky regulations three or four years ago, but since Penderyn was the country's only distillery, the Welsh government struck consideration. Now, with the number of Welsh distilleries increasing, he's considering pursuing regulations again. "I want to build in quality standards to make sure that we don't fall foul of the inconsistencies seen in other countries," Davies says. In 2019, Penderyn revealed plans to build a second distillery and visitor center in Llandudno to attract whisky lovers from north Wales. Aber Falls Distillery in Abergwyngregyn, owned by the multinational Halewood International, is close by. "As a relatively young industry, we have the opportunity to be more innovative than our friends in Scotland or Ireland, but within certain parameters. As a country, why on earth couldn't we sustain half a dozen really good distilleries when there are so many in Scotland?"

Single malt scotch's identifiers are indicative of origin, and region and distillery names are frequently used as shorthand for the flavor encapsulated within; we have an understanding of what we mean when we talk about a scotch from Speyside or Islay. It may

be unrealistic to expect relatively new whisky nations like Wales to conform to anything that could be generalized as a national style, but while pigeonholing by geographical flavor is appealing, there is no advantage in everything tasting the same.

The Scotch Whisky Regulations protect what we know and understand about scotch and deserve considerable credit for protecting the stature and quality of the nation's single malt. Some nations, like India and Japan, are succeeding by paying attention to overseas

regulations rather than working within a uniform set of standards to please the home market. India's Amrut capitalized on making and exporting single malt whisky, while the country's producers of molasses-based "whisky" were prevented from legally selling their product as whisky in Europe and the U.S. Although not single malt, Japanese rice

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Penderyn Distillery in Wales (top);
CEO Stephen Davies (below)

whisky found an appreciative market in the U.S. while not being legally recognized as whisky in Europe. However, it's worth noting that some countries have few relatively large distilleries making single malt, and a lack of regulations can leave the whole industry vulnerable. As the number of distilleries grows, it increases the chances that a bad actor might appear and undermine the movement. When boundaries become blurred, it can affect the perception of its quality: Someone always spoils the party. Ireland appears to be leading the way with the Irish Whiskey Association and the Irish Whiskey Technical File, even if the country's most unique selling point is single pot still Irish whiskey rather than single malt. Other nations would do well to emulate their approach.

Vive La France

Already a great whisky-drinking nation, France has excellent prospects as a whisky-producer too. Locally grown barley, skilled coopers, oak forests, a varied climate, an abundance of wine casks, and traditions of brandy distillation form the foundation for making whisky. "I certainly hope we get momentum behind French whisky, like we saw with Japanese whisky," says David Roussier, general manager of Armorik Distillery, the producer of Armorik single malt. "We don't have as much history as Japanese whisky, but I think with more French whiskies on the market, people will hear about them, which should help to build the category." The Federation of French

Whisky is still in its infancy and its first objective is to ensure that French whisky is mashed, fermented, distilled, and matured in France. "Our country is famous for spirits, we have access to distribution networks, and everything appears to be lining up for French whisky," says Roussier. "Armorik, being the pioneer, should both lead the way and benefit from it."

The fresh, fruity appeal of Armorik Double Maturation is easy to fall in love with, as is Yeun Elez Jobic, Warengem's peated whisky, which has lemon sponge cake, honeyed apple, and aromatic smoke. Warengem Distillery has doubled capacity, enabling it to lay down stock for age-statement releases and limited editions. "Recently, we opened the first dedicated whisky visitor center in France to show people how we produce our whisky," says Roussier proudly. "I really think the Scots did a lot to show people what they were doing and how, and that helped them to build strong relationships with people. It's now time for us to do the same and promote the authenticity of Bretagne [Brittany] and its whiskies. I'm convinced France has everything to become a great whisky nation, but we are not there yet and we have to remain humble and patient.



Whisky takes time, and France won't become a whisky nation just by opening 50 distilleries in five years, but if 50 distilleries are able to live through the next 10 to 20 years, then who knows?"

Distillers can make the most amazing tasting whisky in the world, but that alone is not enough if no one beyond a 20-mile radius of the distillery can buy it. To build a great

whisky nation takes a well-regulated industry actively promoting the distinctiveness of its country's whisky to an international audience. Here's where the flashes of brilliant innovation shine through: burning peat in a shipping container to flavor the malt at Mackmyra in Sweden, then storing it underground in a mine rather than a dunnage warehouse, or building a "spectrum" cask from four or five different woods at Amrut to create a unique and flavorful finish. As pioneering distilleries cultivate an audience thirsty for more, then new distillers will be encouraged to start up and put their own spin on their nation's style of whisky until the volume of exports helps that country reach a tipping point.

Bringing It Home

"In 20 years' time, my goal is that the whisky section in a liquor store will look like the wine

department, with selections broken out by geography, says Fred Barnet, founder of Georgia based Anthem Imports. According to Barnet, Anthem represents the largest portfolio of European and world whiskies available in the U.S. Beyond scotch, bourbon, and Japanese whisky, Barnet's vision would see whisky lovers walking straight for the German, Nordic, or South African whisky section. "People have no problem buying a wine or beer from another country, so I want to break down those barriers for whisky."

Having recognized the quality and spectrum of world whiskies, Barnet realized that very few were being imported into the U.S., so he set up his business to change that. Barnet scours the world to discover niche whiskies that deserve greater attention, particularly distilleries started by families or friends working together, using locally grown grain. If you are persuaded that the source of the barley used for single malt instills the whisky with terroir, then small producers are the best place to test out the theory. His curiosity is normally roused by the details that set it apart; for example, the water from an ancient glacier used at Teerenpeli Distillery in Finland, where the casks experience a wide range of temperatures through freezing winters and warm summers, entombed inside shipping containers. That's not a style of warehouse you would readily find in Scotland. "I'm trying to bring people something new and radical, and it's crazy because trying to build *and* promote a category at the same time is like building an airplane while also trying to fly it," says Barnet.

Eifel Whisky from Germany has been one of his greatest discoveries to date. Its single malt is a delicious combination of stewed fruits, ground ginger, and chocolate mints, while the 2019 release of its peated single malt really impressed me with its flavors of barbecued meat, dried fig, and gingerbread. Distillery owner Stephan Mohr supplies Anthem Imports with 6,000 bottles a year, but otherwise the whisky is only available in the vicinity of the distillery. The whiskies are wonderfully dark, with attractive labels



Anssi Pyysing, CEO of Finland's Teerenpeli

depicting paintings of the local landscape. The distillery uses a copper patent still and copper pot still, but the secret is in the wood. Mohr loves to experiment and has access to fantastic sherry, German pinot noir, and Bordeaux casks. Experimentation for scotch

whisky producers is costly and more risky, especially at scale. Production of Eifel Whisky is, and will remain, niche. So when Barnet gets his hands on 1,200 bottles of Eifel peated single malt or a batch of Eifel German rye, enlightened whisky buyers are advised to act quickly.

Barnet counts himself among those whisky drinkers who prefer to live on the edge. "Every time I see a whisky from a non-traditional whisky country, I buy it out of respect for the category," says Barnet. "Americans are tough. I think there are certain things we

don't do: We don't buy things we can't pronounce and we don't like to try new things. Barnet believes he's tasted more Austrian

whiskies than anyone else in the U.S. "I read recently that there are 250 whisky distilleries in Germany and 50 in Austria," he reports. That's more than twice as many whisky producers as there are in Scotland.

"Once someone tries Eifel and realizes how good and approachable it is, it makes them more likely to try a whisky from elsewhere, whether it's Wales, France, or South Africa," adds Barnet. "Once they find something they enjoy, they realize that it doesn't have to come from Scotland, Kentucky, or Ireland."

Climate change may also favor certain new whisky producing regions and disadvantage others. Water scarcity, less biodiversity, and more extreme weather events are predicted this century due to climate change.

Distilleries use gallons of water for every bottle of whisky produced, requiring an abundance of cool water to run their condensers. While some people might welcome warmer, drier weather in Scotland, climate change may undermine the ability to successfully mature high-quality scotch over multiple decades. Kavalan Distillery in Taiwan operates in a subtropical climate where it's not possible to produce whiskies with 12, 18, or 25-year age statements, as its whiskies reach peak maturation at a much younger age. Just as the wine growers of southern England hope to inherit the climate in France formerly enjoyed by Champagne, Burgundy, and the Loire Valley, perhaps distillers in Nordic countries are scotch whisky's heir apparent from a climate perspective. Warehouse workers at High Coast Distillery in Sweden have always had to chip away the ice frozen around their casks during midwinter, but this may not be the case in a decade or more. Neither is this climate boon restricted to European distillers, as Japanese distillers may begin to favor Hokkaido over Honshu, or new distillers may find more favorable conditions for the same reason by building in northern Canadian territories and Chinese provinces, or the colder areas of Russia. The parts of the world that can capitalize and thrive in this atmosphere of change will be well-placed to make the whisky world their own.

CLIMATE CHANGE MAY ALSO FAVOR CERTAIN NEW WHISKY PRODUCING REGIONS AND DISADVANTAGE OTHERS.

Independent-minded importers, distributors, and liquor store owners are another key part of helping more people discover these great new whiskies. The whisky world needs adventurous types like Barnet to seek out new discoveries, leaders such as Davies looking beyond his company to take a nationwide perspective, and the cautious optimism of Rousier assembling the necessary elements to enable his nation's whisky to grab the world's attention. Hundreds more like

them stand around the globe, taking bold risks, enjoying life, and making the best whisky they can each and every day. As whisky lovers looking for the next great single malt, we should take our inspiration from them and support their endeavors by being more courageous with what we put in our glass.

BEST BETS

The next great single malt regions?
Here are Jonny McCormick's
odds-on favorites.



The picturesque
High Coast Distillery
in Sweden

THE FRONT-RUNNERS

These regions are leading the way, already showing the ability to compete on the world single malt stage.



Nordic

There are numerous Nordic distilleries making intriguing whiskies with innovative techniques: Eimverk in Iceland using sheep dung for drying malt, the meticulous recipes at High Coast in Sweden, the underground maturation of Mackmyra's casks in a mine, the intricate spirit cuts at Spirit of Hven, and the floor malting of local barley at Stauning in Denmark. This is a region bursting with inventive ideas and a commitment to making great-tasting whiskies, which could earn Nordic whiskies a world-class reputation if the right importers can connect them to the people that want to drink them.

TRY THESE

- 93** High Coast Dálvve Spanish Oak • 48% • \$59
- 91** Mackmyra • 46.1% • \$100/liter
- 90** Teerenpeli Kaski • 43% • \$130



Western Europe

France already has a significant number of distilleries, and there is a developing scene of Alpine whiskies from Germany, Italy, Austria, and Switzerland. Many of these distilleries are small, make a variety of other spirits, and favor an eclectic range of wine casks for maturing and finishing whiskies. It is not a region that has attracted large amounts of multinational investment in whisky distilling capacity from the major drinks companies, but the industry is growing steadily and the assortment of whiskies exported increases every year. Coupling the leading distillers with importers to project a national image about the quality of these whiskies could go a long way to help these countries scale up exports to reach a wider audience.

TRY THESE

- 93** Armorik Double Maturation • 46% • \$64
- 93** Eifel Peated (2019 Release) • 46% • \$75
- 92** G. Rozelieures Rare Collection • 40% • \$45

World Whisky

JAPANESE BLENDED

90 Ichiro's Malt & Grain (Batch 17), 46.5%, \$95

A unifying blend of 10 year old Chichibu, with select stocks of American, Canadian, Irish, and scotch whiskies matured in Japan, produces a nose of toffee apple, firm caramel, milk chocolate, ground hazelnut, roasted fennel seed, chopped cilantro stalks, green banana, and struck match. Cereal-led palate with Golden Grahams, light fruits of apricot, peach, and melon, base notes of pepper, moving through butterscotch, toffee, maple syrup, and crème caramel. (U.S. Exclusive)—JM

GERMAN

93 Eifel Single Malt (2019 Edition), 46%, \$70

This latest unpeated vintage has aromas of maple syrup, peanut brittle, sesame snaps, aged balsamic, stretchy cherry taffy, toasted coconut, and snuff tobacco. It's 6 years old, comprising a primary maturation in refill red wine barrels and a 2-year finish in cream sherry casks, producing a syrupy-textured dram with baked desserts of plum and orange, brown sugar, ginger pudding, vanilla, chocolate-covered nuts, and a burnt sugar finish. (2,400 bottles)—JM

92 Eifel German Rye (2019 Edition), 46%, \$65

This is a colossal rye, the result of 2 years in first-fill and refill red wine barrels, and 2 years in malaga casks. The nose suggests a thick, velvety dram of dark rye bread, cinnamon, nutmeg, rosemary, prune juice, sultana, and pecan pie, with herbal undertones. On the palate there is dark smooth toffee, stewed plum, bramble, and spun sugar stalked by ginger, pepper, and cinnamon. Oh, the Manhattans you will make. (2,400 bottles)—JM

93 Eifel Peated Single Malt (2019 Release), 46%, \$75

I'm calling this the pitmaster's dram: the nose has muscular peat smoke, prune juice, savory notes of barbecued brisket bark, venison charcuterie, and a hint of peppermint cream. The palate is a gluttonous feast of sweet dark fruits, milk chocolate, dried fig, plum, sultanas, and ginger, sliding into baked orange and spicy gingerbread, and wallowing luxuriously in chocolate and rich fruit. A welcome addition to Eifel's already impressive range. (1,200 bottles for the U.S.)—JM