



Malt Maniacs #13

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E-pistle #13/12 – Erin’s Mega-Malt-Tasting

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When I became interested in malt whisky in 1994, the first two whisky books I bought were both by Michael Jackson. On the subject of Irish malt whiskey, MJ's 'World Guide to Whisky' says that Bushmills 10 y.o. is "the only single malt Irish whiskey". The 3rd edition of the 'Malt Whisky Companion' adds a 34 y.o. Coleraine, as a cask from that long-closed distillery had just been bottled then, and Tyrconnell, the first bottling from a recently established distillery called Cooley. Jim Murray, in his 'Irish Whiskey Almanac', also published in 1994, describes four more expressions: a 5 y.o. Bushmills for the Italian market, two Cadenhead bottlings of Bushmills and Bushmills Millennium tasted as a 'work in progress'.

Ten years on from this handful of Bushmills bottlings plus one each from Coleraine and Cooley, I felt it would be interesting to take stock of the Irish malt whiskey situation and bring together what I could for a large comparative tasting. I must say I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm shown by almost all of the main players in making samples and bottles available to me. I also had some bottlings on my shelves or could pick them up easily and got some help from a few fellow maniacs and malts-L-ers. Thanks to all of you, you know who you are! In all, I managed to get 29 different bottlings (plus a handful of cask samples) and I think that makes this one of the largest comparative tastings of Irish malt whiskeys ever published.

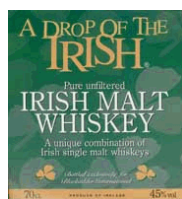
So, how to bring some structure to such a large tasting? Well, what I decided to do is first taste and comment on the OB expression from a distillery. Once I have put those on a 'mental taste map', I will look at the IB bottlings, asking what OB expressions they are most similar to and what they add to the distillery taste spectrum already on the 'map'. Joining me in the tastings is my girlfriend Irma. We work well together tasting a whisk(e)y, bouncing notes and associations of each other, so the tasting notes you'll read are the result of these 'bouncings'. By the way, if you don't see a %abv given that means it's bottled at 40%; I'll explicitly mention any other bottling strength. Also, if I don't mention an age, it means none is stated on the label, box or company web-site.



The logical place to start is with Ireland's oldest operating whiskey distillery, **Bushmills**. Exactly when it was established isn't clear. According to McGuire's thorough study of the history of the Irish whiskey industry, it may have existed as early as 1782 or it may have been established sometime during the late 18th or early 19th century (we all know that 1608 is a marketing myth, so I won't go into that now). Bushmills does not use any peat for drying its malt, triple-distils all its whiskeys and makes use of a range of cask types for maturation.



Bushmills 10 y.o. is partly matured in bourbon casks, partly in sherry casks. Light malt, some vanilla and fudge, a touch of fruit, toffee, and a slightly drying finish. All very soft and smooth and easily drinkable. Compared to when I last tasted it a few years ago, it seems to have a bit fuller taste. Maybe a slightly higher proportion of sherry casks used recently? **Bushmills 16 y.o.** is based on the same strategy of part-bourbon, part-sherry maturation, but the two constituents are then married in port pipes before bottling. The sherry clearly comes through with nutty notes. There is toffee-fudge and also some flowery notes? The port pipes impart a clear fruity-winey character and the whole is richer and with more depth than the 10 y.o. The **Bushmills 21 y.o.** finally has a similar maturation scheme, but the bourbon and sherry matured whiskey are sent to madeira casks for their honeymoon. Less sherry and a richer nose. Cookies and wine, but not so fruity as in the 16 y.o. Somewhat softer, with a dry finish. A tightly complex dram, the most sophisticated and balanced of the three. In a way it's also the least 'Irish' of the three and sometimes I think I detect the faintest whiff of peat smoke. Clearly, that can't come from the drying of the malt, as Bushmills doesn't use peat (although some processes during fermentation and maturation can also produce phenolics). Definitely an intriguing whiskey!



There are only a handful of IB bottling of Bushmills. For instance, Blackadder has bottled a Bushmills at 45% under the label **A Drop of the Irish**. Soft fruit (blackcurrants?), sometimes chocolate and vanilla. Pretty light, with an oily mouthfeel and a drying finish. Great Spirits bottles Irish malt whiskeys with a vintage year under the Knappogue Castle label. The **Knappogue Castle 1993** is 8

y.o. and fully bourbon-matured. Very soft, faint vanilla, cocos?, very light fruits, honey?? **Knappogue Castle 1994** is 10 y.o. and, again, bourbon-matured. Creamy with fresh fruity-floral notes (elderflowers, grapes, pine apple). Quite similar to the 1993, but clearly with a bit more flavour and body.



Cooley was established in 1989 and had a difficult first couple of years during which it got very close to failure. Fortunately it has survived all that and is without a doubt the best single thing that happened to the Irish whiskey industry for quite a while as it broke Irish Distiller's monopoly. I'll taste and discuss OBs first again, then move on to the 'classical' IBs, and finally to a handful of 'own label' bottlings. Unlike Bushmills, Cooley distills its malts twice and matures them exclusively in bourbon casks (originating from Heaven Hill to be precise).



Tyrconnell is the first of Cooley's main brands. A relatively easy whiskey with a delicious nose: very fruity, like sticking your nose in a jar of boiled sweets, pear drops, pineapple cubes, vanilla. The 'hard' fruit of the nose is replaced by softer fruit on the palate, bananas, maybe some cocos? The fruit then gives way to vanilla and more malty notes and a short dry finish. I'm very curious what Tyrconnell would be like at cask strength; I hope Cooley is considering that for the not-too-far-away future.

When **Locke's** was first bottled it had no age statement, but now it is bottled as an 8 y.o. I get toffee, vanilla, malt, sometimes a whiff of mature cheese? Very light peat and maybe tobacco leaves? There are light fruity notes and the finish has a crisp dryness. Quite a complex dram in a subtle way.



The first peated Irish whiskey for something like 35 years, **Connemara** first came on the market without an age statement. Gentle, soft peat in the nose, some vanilla every once in a while. The palate is fruity-sweet, touches of smoke and tobacco. Liquorice? Warming and drying towards the finish. As it's quite young, it obviously lacks the complexity that comes with age, but me being a peatophile I've always been partial to it. Connemara is now also bottled at **12 y.o.** Creamy fruit (somehow the creaminess reminds me of durian), soft peat, blue cheese, warming. The peat becomes more pronounced in the palate (though less so than in the n.a.s.) and the whole is fuller and has more complexity than the n.a.s. version. Incidentally, I really like the 'tube' in which the bottle is sold. It's not made of cardboard, but of inlaid wood. Definitely something that will find another use somewhere in my home. And then **Connemara Cask Strength**. This is the second release of Connemara CS, bottled at 60% and now comes in the same dumpy bottle



as the lower strength version (the first release came in a slender bottle). Fruit and smoke are intricately combined. Tobacco, apples, some vanilla. Quite an oily mouthfeel and dry-woody notes in the finish. Again, the peat is more present in the palate than in the nose, but overall this is less peaty than the lower strength versions. Overall, the peating level of Connemara is only 15 ppm phenol; you sure get a good amount of peat for your phenols!



So, on to the IBs. **Signatory** has a 10 y.o. Irish, bottled at 43%. A soft, mellow dram. Musty fruit, tart apples, light vanilla, touch of acetone, liquorice root, hint of toffee? Sweetish overall and with a finish which is not as dry as Tyrconnell. Another Irish is bottled by **James MacArthur**; this time as a 12 y.o. and at 59.7%. A delicious soft creamy-smoky nose (smoky, not peaty), followed by fruits (dried apples?), toffee and liquorice root. The smokiness comes back late on the palate and leads to a very dry finish. **Cadenhead** bottles a 1992 Cooley at 12 y.o. and 60%. Compared to Connemara CS, it has more peat in the nose and something like kippers. The palate has faint vanilla and fruity, malty and biscuity notes. It has the same kind of oiliness, but a drier finish. Excellent stuff! Before



Knappogue Castle's vintage malt whiskeys were bottlings of Bushmills, there were three Cooley bottlings. The **Knappogue Castle 1992**, bottled in 2000, is the last one of that trio. Very much in the Tyrconnell style, from fruity nose to dry finish, but I do pick up a few more things here which I don't find in Tyrconnell: toffee notes in the nose and palate and some spiciness in the finish. The Celtic Whisky Compagnie brings out two Cooleys, a peated and an unpeated, under the Clonmel label. In the **unpeated Clonmel**, I get green apples, sour fruit, Tyrconnell-like boiled sweets, some vanilla and something perfumy? There's more malt in the palate and the finish is smoother and not as dry as Tyrconnell. In the **peated version**, bottled at 8 y.o., the nose has some sweet





fruit mixed with soft light peat and toffee. There is some vanilla and spikes of fruitiness before the peat takes over the palate; the peat remains quite soft though, making the whole softer than Connemara. Ian MacLeod bottles three Cooleys under the name **Magilligan**. The **unpeated version** is 5 y.o., bottled at 43% and a true single malt, despite the 'Pure Pot Still' on the label. It has a light malty nose, with a touch of fruit. Fresh, biscuits, custard, a bit grainy perhaps? The finish has something which I can't put my finger on. Wine gums?? Then it becomes drier. The

Vintage 1991 has been finished for one year in Oloroso sherry casks in Scotland and is bottled at 46%. Nutty nose (roasted nuts?), sherry (but not overpowering), touch of rubber, fruits in the background. Dark chocolate and vanilla. Quite full-bodied with an oily mouthfeel. Finally, there is an **8 y.o. peated version** of Magilligan, again bottled at 43%. Fruity nose, with the slightest hint of peat, lighter than Connemara. Some malty notes underneath. The palate is the mirror image of the nose: less fruit and more peat, drier than Connemara (almost like liquorice root). Robert A. Merry & Co is a producer of Irish cream liqueurs, but also bottles a single malt: **Merrys**. Faint Tyrconnell-like boiled sweets and buttery notes, which don't develop until the whiskey has spent some time in the glass. Malty and fruity sweetish notes; redcurrants? fudge? Cream



coffee. A light, quietly enjoyable whiskey, provided you give it time. **Clontarf** is bottled by Roaring Water Bay Spirits, which incidentally has recently merged with Great Spirits to form Castle Brands. Before bottling, the whiskey is filtered through charcoal. In other words, the Irish equivalent of 'Jack Daniels'. I must say, this really is not my cup of tea, or rather ball of malt. I get some malty notes, but whatever other nice notes this may have, they're swimming in a sea of vanilla. And when I say swimming I actually mean drowning. I do like vanilla notes in a whisk(e)y, but in Clontarf the vanilla is so overpowering, it is almost sickening. The 'new kids on the

block', the Easy Drinking Whisky Company, bottle an Irish single malt besides two Scottish vatted malts. The **Smooth Sweeter One** has tart apples and raspberry on the nose. I get vanilla and cream, then sweet-malty notes and a dry finish. The last half or so of the taste experience reminds me strongly of Tyrconnell, but the first half, and especially the nose, has a different kind of fruitiness, less hard boiled sweets.



And then to some of the 'own label' bottlings of Cooley. These are bottlings for specific supermarkets and off-licences and are, usually, quite cheap for a single malt. First two UK supermarket bottlings. **Sainsbury's** is very very light. Soft mouthfeel. Faintest touches of sweet fruit, vanilla and malt and a slightly bitter-dry finish. **Waitrose** is not as light as Sainsbury's, but still pretty light. I get some rubber in the nose, some fruit and maybe vanilla. The finish is more bitter and drier.

There is something quite unappealing about this one; possibly a case of pretty mediocre casks. Then a bottling from the French supermarket chain Intermarche labelled **Shanagarry**. Fruity nose, reminiscent of Tyrconnell, but also cardboard notes. Sweetish, a bit dusty, touches of malt and vanilla. Pretty light. Back to the UK, where the off-licence chain Oddbins has a bottling of a peated Cooley: **Slieve na gCloc**. On the nose apples and a hint of peat, vanilla, some boiled sweets. Then there is the typical



Connemara pattern of the peat being more prominent on the palate and the drier finish. It's clearly not as peaty as Connemara though, lighter and thinner. Finally a rather enigmatic bottling: **Ambiente**. When I first came across it, I automatically assumed it was Cooley-distilled. But when I contacted Cooley, they had no records of this label in their files. To make a long story short, Ambiente turned out to have been bottled by a tobacco company in Germany. The label proclaims it to be 'Fine Malt Whiskey - Irish'. Note the lack of the word 'single'. I could be reading too much into that, but could this be a vatted Irish malt? I sent a sample to Cooley for testing and Noel Sweeney was 99.5% certain it indeed originates at Cooley. The taste confirms that: To me it has very much the Tyrconnell fingerprint, but lighter in every aspect. Imagine a diluted Tyrconnell and you've got the picture. Light and inoffensive, but nothing to excite. The bottle is very classy-looking by the way; I'll keep it to use as a vase.



Ireland has three operating whisky distilleries, right? From north to south, we have Bushmills, Cooley and Midleton. We've dealt with Bushmills and Cooley, so what about number three? The **Midleton** distilling complex started production in 1975 and is the place where all the famous brands of blended and pot still Irish whiskey are distilled: Jameson, Powers, Paddy, Tullamore Dew, Midleton VR, Redbreast, Green Spot, etc. Malt whiskey is occasionally distilled at Midleton for use in some of their blends, but they don't bottle it themselves. So no OB Midleton malt. But bottling of a Midleton malt has happened. Exactly who bottled it and how they managed to get the casks is unclear, but the result is a 6 y.o. Midleton malt whiskey called **Erin Go Bragh**. Soft mouthfeel, hints of malt and toffee, perfumy, some leathery notes. All very light and thin with a slightly bitter-dry finish. Until very recently I thought this was the only time Midleton malt was bottled, but then I got my copy of part 2 of Valentino Zagatti's "The Best Collection". And what's there on page 57? A 22 y.o. Erin Go Bragh, distilled in 1963; imported into the US by the same importer as the current 6 y.o. Does this also come from Midleton? There is nothing on the label as shown in the book to suggest it does, but still, it's curious.



Besides those mentioned and (mostly) tasted so far, there have been several discontinued expressions such as Knappogue Castle 1990 and 1991, Hennessy na Geanna, two Adelphi bottlings (Suir and Slaney) and the malt-which-isn't-a-malt (Preston's Drogheda Millennium Malt). All of these were Cooley-distilled. Then there are and were quite a number of limited edition Bushmills, including some single cask bottlings from bourbon, sherry or rum casks. Plus the SMWS has bottled Bushmills as well as Cooley. From the "only single malt Irish whiskey" in Michael Jackson's book, Irish malts have really taken off in those 10 years. A quick trawl through various books and internet sources gives me well over 70 different Irish malt whiskeys bottled between 1994 and now and I'm sure I missed a few. Not bad if you keep in mind that all bar two come from two distilleries, one of which has only been operating for 15 years. Historically, such a richness of Irish malt whiskey is unique. Besides a short period in the late 18th century, when distilling whiskey from raw (unmalted) grain was prohibited, Irish whiskey distillers have always focused on distilling whiskey from a mixture of malted barley and unmalted grains (now only barley, but rye, wheat and oats were also used in the past). Besides by Bushmills and Coleraine, malt whiskey was made by distilleries like Glen, Waterside, Bandon, Connswater, Gorton and Royal Irish. Most of these made malt whiskey alongside their main pot still

whiskey production, but Glen and Gorton seem to have distilled exclusively from malted barley.

It's interesting to see how the two main Irish malt distilleries 'play' with different parameters. Variation among Bushmills' malts is mainly due to age and cask type. Bourbon, sherry and rum for maturation, port and madeira on top of those for finishing. The distillery sent me three cask samples (%abv unknown) to allow me to get a better feel for what the cask does to the whiskey. All were distilled in 1989 and are 14-15 y.o. The sample from a **bourbon cask** was creamy, toffee-fudge, malt, biscuits and pickled gherkins. The sample from a **(second fill) sherry cask** was fuller in taste and with more body. Dried fruits, toffee. Hardly any sherry in the nose, but there was a touch of it in the finish. Finally, the sample from a **rum cask** was fresh, spicy, with a hint of menthol and a slightly drying finish.



Cooley doesn't yet have that much age variation to play with, but of course time will take care of that. As they exclusively use bourbon casks, their main 'play parameter' is of course peating level. A few years ago, I tasted a number of Cooley cask samples in preparation for an IB bottling that unfortunately never became reality. All of these were distilled in 1992 and tasted at 10 y.o. Here are some of the notes I wrote for the various casks back then: "lots of peat, raspberry, apples, toffee", "soft smoky-peaty, vanilla, balanced sweet notes; luscious!", "butter, peat, butterscotch, dry-ish finish", "light sweet fruitiness, toffee, faintly earthy". I thoroughly enjoyed them all and some of the casks were just superb. Of course, it also gave me the chance to get a wee bit of a feel for variation among casks in the Cooley warehouses. As said, Cooley uses exclusively bourbon casks and only one IB finishes (unpeated) Cooley whiskey in a sherry cask. So I couldn't stop myself musing what kind of cask would be the ultimate finish for a 10+ y.o. Connemara. I'm not so sure about sherry or port; it somehow doesn't fit comfortably in my mind if I try to imagine either of them together with Connemara. One which does 'fit' is a cognac cask. I tasted an absolutely brilliant cognac-finished Caol Ila (bottled by Gordon & MacPhail) where the peat and the cognac were multi-layered in a wonderful way. Sauternes might be another possibility; the Celtic Whisky Co. has bottled a Sauternes-finished Caol Ila where the heavy sweetness of the wine was balanced very well with the peatiness. Or maybe even a Tokaj cask? Edradour is maturing in Tokaj casks and the cask sample I tasted of that one, at just over 1 y.o. shows Tokaj casks can impart rich sweet honey notes.

By the way, given that I had cask samples from both Bushmills and Cooley to taste, I also asked Irish Distillers for a cask sample of Midleton malt. They very politely declined.

What will the future bring to Irish malt whiskeys? Cooley is quietly hoping of firing up the stills at Locke's distillery at some point in the future again; will they make malt and/or pot still whiskey if that happens? Only time will tell



Then there are serious preparations on-going to build a new distillery in Kilbeggan: Coola Mills. Once operating, it will be making both a double-distilled and a triple-distilled single malt (in addition,

they also have plans for a pot still whiskey distilled from malted/unmalted barley and oats). And, fingers crossed, there are the plans for Cloonaughill distillery in the west of Ireland, a project that some of you know I have some connections with.



More than half of the Irish malts in this mega-tasting I had not tasted before and this has definitely given me a solid 'taste basis' from which I can judge future releases. Am I excited about the future of Irish malt whiskeys? You bet!

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