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Differences between Single Cask bottlings and Distillery bottlings

In Scotland, and certainly in many other countries as well, Single Malt Whisky from a Single Cask means, by definition, Whisky which has been bottled from an individually aging cask. On the other hand, the term “distillery bottlings” refers to Single Malt Whisky in the bottle blended or mixed from many casks usually of different production batches and even different ages, but still from a single distillery. Typically, Single Cask Whisky is non-chill filtered, bottled at cask strength and limited to a number of below 1,000 bottles. Distillery bottlings, however, are usually diluted to a bottling strength of between 40% and 46% alcohol, thus often chill-filtered and the number of bottles is only limited to the innumerable selected casks married or vatted with each other.

So one might think Single Cask bottlings are better than distillery bottlings as they are pure, unique, individual and singular. Whilst this is often the case, it isn't necessarily always true! Why is that? Well, let's think about a musician playing the first violin in front of an orchestra. If you are a great musician playing the violin very well everybody in the audience will glory in your music and admire your performance as first violin. In this case it is a blessing for all. But what if you are not playing that well? Uncompromisingly, your mistakes will be fully exposed. The spotlight is thrown on you and there's no place for you to hide. No one's there for compensating your deficits. In that case participation in the orchestra behind you with numerous violins being able to iron out your faults certainly will be the better choice. The same can be said for individual Whisky casks, which highlights the importance of careful cask selection and bottling at the peak of perfection; two things the Douglas Laing team take very seriously indeed!

There are many Single Cask bottlings reaching the market and, due to the continuing Whisky boom, this number is increasing very rapidly. No doubt, many of them are delicate, great, gorgeous, having the privilege to perform as first violin. Especially those from reputable independent bottlers, such as Douglas Laing, Cadenhead, Signatory or Gordon & MacPhail. They are unique and can never be purchased again. Admittedly, there are also Single Cask bottlings that, to me, are not as complex or refined as the others. In my opinion, it would have been better to mingle those with other Casks before being bottled, or figuratively, to play the violin within the orchestra, which can often result in a complex, balanced Blended Malt, such as Douglas Laing's Remarkable Regional Malts. In distillery bottlings, Casks are married with others to maintain a consistency in colour and flavour, so that the bottle you buy will always taste the same.

Whisky drinkers buying a standard bottling already know in advance what they get for their money and there is no need to taste first before they buy. For example, if I buy one of my favourite distillery bottlings, Bunnahabhain 18 Years Old, I already know what to expect in the dumpy green bottle: dried dark fruits, sherry flavours, earthy notes mixed with malted barley, delicate toffee, hints of leather with a whiff of dark bitter chocolate and marzipan shining through. In short, a complex, full-bodied, rich and round, great balanced Whisky with an impressive finish. So far, I haven't been disappointed. Recently, I was sent a review sample of an old Bunnahabhain Single Sherry Cask from an independent bottler. The colour was almost black with bold, rich Sherry flavours, almost entirely dominating the Whisky. Certainly one for the Sherried Whisky aficionado but for me, the Distillery character was lost completely. The point I am making here is that for some Whisky drinkers, this Bunnahabhain Single Cask would have been a wonderful surprise of a sherry bomb, but for someone expecting the classic distillery character, it wasn't for me.

Many Whisky drinkers, including myself, are hunters and gatherers; buying novel Single Cask bottlings is fascinating and exerts a special pull on us. But it can also be risky! So if you can, sample Single Casks whenever you can at shop tastings or Whisky shows, read reviews and stick to reputable independent bottlers such as Douglas Laing & Co and you will avoid disappointment!

Thank you to Heinz for writing this piece for Douglas Laing & Co.