

SCOTCH WHISKY – IS OLDER ALWAYS BETTER?



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In 2010, the Scotch whisky company Chivas Brothers launched the global consumer campaign “The Age Matters” advocating the importance and value of the age statements to consumers. The aim of the campaign was to enable consumers to fully understand the age statement on a whisky label (referring to the youngest whisky in the bottle) and to appreciate the value of the premium product they are purchasing.

This initiative suggests that “the older the whisky, the better it is.” But is this true? Does age matter? Is older whisky automatically always better than its younger counterpart? My answer is; “not necessarily!” According to Dutch whisky writer and Keeper of the Quaich, Hans Offringa, age is a number; maturation is character. This means that you can’t reliably use the age on the label of a bottle of whisky as a solely indicator of quality. Generally speaking, spirits don't necessarily get better with age. Whereas some whiskies want to stay for a long time in a wooden cask, others should be bottled sooner. As with wines, spirits can peak at a certain time becoming complex, subtle and balanced, then slowly decline in quality thereafter. If a whisky, however, stays in the cask for a too long period of time, it may become bitter and tannic, turning into “oak juice” in worst case. On the contrary, when the maturation period hasn’t been long enough, the product usually is a bit harsh, metallic and unbalanced.

Many experts believe that as much as 65 percent of a whisky's final flavour comes from the cask it is matured in. As per Hiram Walker’s Master Blender, Dr. Don Livermore, the type of cask (e.g., use of American oak or European oak), the number of times a cask is used, and the cask manufacturing process substantially affect the properties of the finished whisky. It is not only the right amount of flavours being absorbed from the wood which has an impact on the quality and character of whisky but also congeners deriving from the spirit itself. The levels of chemical compounds, such as acids, esters, and aldehydes increase during the maturation process. Ethyl acetate is an ester consisting of ethanol and its oxidised form, acetic acid, performed by reaction with oxygen while the cask is “breathing”. It is another indicator of age of whisky imparting a pleasant fruity aroma in low concentrations.

However, over time ethyl acetate will continue to gradually increase during maturation, until the whisky is removed from the cask and bottled. Spirits with an excessive age can have ethyl acetate contents so high that it imparts an off-odour being similar to an industrial chemical or “airplane glue”.

Learning to leave a cask to reach its full potential, undeterred by its age, is a hard skill performed in perfect manner by the reputable independent bottler, Douglas Laing & Co. Introduced in 2014, the new Xtra Old Particular (XOP) range features the best stocks of particularly old and personally selected Single Casks of both malt and grain whiskies, without colouring, or chill-filtration and at cask strength. For those whiskies having reached their maximum peak earlier, Douglas Laing & Co. introduced the Old Particular range. This encompasses a broad spectrum of different single malts and grain whiskies and tends to showcase mid-age, well matured examples in their natural state.

I was lucky enough to be able to taste an Invergordon single grain Scotch whisky distilled in 1966 and set aside to mature in a refill hogshead until 2016. Released as part of Douglas Laing's XOP range, this 50 year old whisky is a cracking example of a well matured grain. Rich in levels; fruity, spicy with a lovely balance of oaky spiciness and bourbon derived flavours. Here the interaction between oak cask and maturing whisky has reached its absolute peak after half a century. Another example that good quality whisky doesn't necessarily need to be very old is an 11 year old Strathclyde single grain whisky recently released in 2017 as part of their Old Particular range. It shows sweet layers of vanilla, toffee, and dried fruits, well-balanced with oak, spice and pleasant notes of pine needles. A delicate and rich whisky with good character and complexity.



Older whisky is not necessarily better than younger whisky. Each cask of whisky is different, so is their optimal aging time. But what is for sure are two things. Old whiskies are relatively rare and they carry a high price tag. Thus, before spending a significant amount of money to own such a rare bottle, make sure to try a sample on whisky shows before you buy.