

FOOD AND DRINK

# Whisky festival maintains mellow flavour

Victoria event sticks to populist roots, despite prestigious rating

GRANIA LITWIN  
Times Colonist

When Iain Hooley and Lawrence Graham first concocted the idea of a Victoria Whisky Festival five years ago, they never dreamed it would be such a success.

Today, the mellow event

attracts enthusiasts from as far away as Chicago and Toronto, and is rated the best organized of its kind in the world, by the industry's No. 1 writer, Jim Murray, author of *The Whisky Bible*.

When tickets went on sale, 65 people were already in line — for private tast-

ings, grand tastings, specialty tastings, 29 different master classes, a gourmet meal with whisky pairings — and all 1,250 tickets sold in 2½ hours.

Consultant Andrew Gray, of Bruichladdich Distillery on the Isle of Islay, calls the festival one of the top three worldwide, of about 150.

Why is it so popular? "First of all, our social responsibility is huge," said Hooley. "We give everyone

a ride home, to Sooke or Sidney, in vans driven by volunteers."

They also give all net proceeds, about \$12,000 last year, to the TLC Fund for Kids and the Victoria Jazz Society high school outreach.

"And the festival is not elitist. We could charge more but we don't."

Tickets for this weekend's event at the Hotel Grand Pacific are \$25 for masterclasses and \$165 for

a dinner with sips from 10- to 40-year-old bottles costing up to \$850. (Although some distillers bring "surprise" bottles worth as much as \$2,000.)

During the festival, each tasting is about a quarter ounce, and Hooley explained: "Some take the whole thing in their mouth and let it sit. Others have tiny sips, add water right away, or warm the glass in their hands to enjoy the vapours."

His rules for best enjoyment? Don't eat garlic, soft cheese, ginger or curry before tastings, and don't wear perfume or cologne.

The festival's biggest tasting event, for more than 400 people, features 44 tables, each representing a different distillery or product line, said Hooley, who has been asked many times to put on a similar event in Vancouver, but he said it's too much work. glitwin@tc.canwest.com

## Penderyn distiller to lead class

GRANIA LITWIN  
Times Colonist

Gillian MacDonald has cracked one of the oldest bastions of male supremacy.

At age 29 she is head distiller of the Welsh Whisky Company, which produces Penderyn single malt and a range of other spirits.

"I'm the only distiller in Wales," she said with a hearty laugh, noting that's not hard considering Penderyn is the only one. She is also the only female distiller in Britain.

"It is definitely a male-dominated environment," she said from her home in Cardiff, although there have been a few in history such as one at Laphroaig's after the Second World War.

MacDonald, who is in Victoria to give a sold-out masterclass at

the Victoria Whisky Festival on Saturday afternoon, (see related story) said whisky has also, typically, been thought of as an old man's drink.

"It used to be seen as the drink of 60-plus fellows with white hair, blankets and pipes, but now it's very much for 30-somethings."

MacDonald, a chemistry graduate, was hired by the fledgling company six years ago to learn from master distiller Jim Swan, a leading expert on whisky flavour and composition.

"I hadn't honestly, massively thought of whisky or bog-standard blends before applying for the job, but then the world of whisky opened up."

She is now convinced that women can discern flavours better than men. "Everybody's palate is different, but women

are often more tuned in," and she said more are choosing to drink whisky than ever before.

Because Penderyn was started from scratch, MacDonald had a chance to establish a unique style, on an island awash with dozens of distilleries in Scotland, one in England and three or four in Ireland.

Her main point of difference is the way she distills. "We use a single pot still, whereas most Irish and Scots use two. And we don't peat any of our malt."

While many fuss over the kind of water they use, she said it's the least important part of the process. That said, she uses water from a 50-metre deep bore hole directly beneath the distillery, which is located in a national park. "So our water is very good."

More important than water are distillation and "wood management," which means the casks the liquor ages in. "We have quite a lot of power at this stage," and her resulting spirit is high strength — 46 per cent by volume.

"It's a clear, light, incredibly smooth, packed-flavour spirit." The Prince of Wales came to sample a dram last year and now serves Penderyn single malt at Highgrove, his house in Gloucestershire.

One of her secrets is white oak, ex-bourbon casks from Kentucky. "They use it once, we use it a second or third time. There is a lot of flavour in the wood itself, and it's saturated with this gorgeous bourbon, as well."

She also uses well-travelled Madeira casks made from American white oak which is sent to Portugal as planks and air-seasoned for two years. It is then sent to France for red wine, then back to the Island of Madeira to make "that Christmas cake-fruity flavoured wine," and then MacDonald buys them.

She creates several kinds of whisky — what she calls "expressions," carrying notes of dark fruits, caramel and hazelnuts — and produces about two casks a day, which is tiny considering Jameson fills 800 a day, but volume is growing and bottles are now seen around the world, and in Victoria liquor stores.

She advises drinking whisky at room temperature, perhaps with a few drops of spring water. No chlorinated tap water, and no ice. "The general thinking is that cold things close things up so that's not necessarily the best idea."

"There is always so much to learn," she sighed, "and that's why I love travelling to talk to more experts. This Victoria festival sounds fantastic." glitwin@tc.canwest.com

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