

A matter of age

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Last year Pernod Ricard, the world's second largest (at the time of writing) drinks producer issued a press release, which caused some debate in the blogosphere on the question that 'Age Matters'.

The release states: "According to new research commissioned by Chivas Brothers, 94 per cent of consumers believe the age statement serves as an indicator of quality, 93 per cent believe that older whiskies are better quality and 89 per cent actively look for an age statement when making a decision to purchase." Nothing to argue with there. I am very happy to accept those numbers when you consider that more than 95 per cent of Scots (sorry SWA, but that is grammatically correct) whiskies produced are blends and of those the vast, vast majority are standard blends.

So most whisky sold worldwide is not purchased on the qualitative grounds. The exception being that Scotch has a historical reputation of quality so buying Scotch is seen as buying up. Consider this: Walker Red sells around 120,000,000 bottles a year. I'm sure that if you asked the consumers of those 120,000,000 bottles if they think that Black label, an older version of the same thing, is better, they would agree with you. It is.

So the release continues: "consumers will be encouraged to look for age statements on Scotch whisky, via point-of-sale materials, advertising and public relations. A logo using the language Guaranteed Age Whisky has been created for usage in retail..." But, and it's a VERY BIG BUT, so what? Age and quality are completely different things. In my career some of the worst whiskies I've tried have been the oldest. At my very first Whisky Live I tried a 35 Years Old that was virtually undrinkable. So much wood and sulphur that the flavours of the spirit were totally undetectable.

Conversely did you try the 4½ Years Old Ledaig that sold last year? It was brilliant. Ok so I am a little biased on that one, so how about the young ones that Ardbeg are letting us play with? Then there are Kilchoman and St. George's offerings, which are by definition as young as it gets and there is no argument about the quality.

When new make comes off a still, it's all good.

Then the spirit is introduced to its cask; the start of a beautiful relationship. But as we all know, not all relationships are equal. The very beauty of whisky itself rests on the cask to cask variation.

Each cask is a unique relationship, some will last for decades. Others will not.

To my mind the key to a really good dram can be summed up in one word: balance. A good whisky is a balanced whisky, where the relationship has been a real love affair. Neither spirit nor cask dominating in the end, instead you get that wonderful interplay between the two.

It's these whiskies that really get me, and I guess all of you too, really excited.

So why is Chivas saying we should all buy older whisky?

Would it be too cynical for me to say money?

In the world of whisky the one thing we always have to pay for is time. Older whisky should always be more expensive. Time takes its toll as the angels take their share.