

Chilled out colour

Tim Forbes and Ed Bates go head to head over the issue of chill-filtration and colouring

Tim: A new grassroots movement of whisky fans is championing a 'less-is-more' philosophy towards single malt whisky. The Campaign for Real Whisky began last year on the WhiskyWhiskyWhisky online forum and became a wide-ranging debate, garnering hundreds of responses and attracting thousands of readers.

So, what's it all about? Forum founder Mark Connolly: "I see this as a way of consumers having a voice rather than the Scotch Whisky Association, who are a voice for the industry. More people are becoming aware most whisky has been artificially coloured and treated to remove certain compounds that turns cloudy in low temperatures." Indeed, the use of spirit caramel (E150a) and chill-filtration are deeply embedded throughout the industry. But the Campaign for Real Whisky is challenging these practices.

But why should we care? Well, a lot of malt fans want their whisky to be its natural colour and prefer the use of standard 'barrier filtration' which doesn't affect texture. The fundamental objections to colour and chill-filtration are simple: E150 is an artificial additive; it's not a part of distillation or maturation. Caramel colouring is therefore an unnatural (and arguably deceitful) vanity process that makes a whisky look older and more interesting than it actually is. A lot of people also believe that it dulls the whisky's flavours and leaves a bitter note in the finish. Chill-filtration is a reductive vanity process necessary to prevent cloudiness in blends; but not for whiskies over 46%, which don't cloud. Are these chill-filtered as well, and if so, why? Not to deliberately affect texture, surely? Clearer labelling would remove this confusion. Wouldn't more informative labels and a frank acknowledgement of the realities of batch variation be better for the industry in the long run? These processes increase production cost and are demonstrably unnecessary in many cases, so why are we paying more for an inferior product?

It's understood that blends have to be uniform colour and unclouded for emerging markets. That's fine. However, the argument that industry representatives have to know that they're tasting the same thing everywhere they go seems bananas – are they really saying that they deliberately sell a more expensive and arguably inferior product to millions for the convenience of a few hundred salesmen?

The producers insist that E150 is only for colour continuity and that the amount used is negligible. What, then, is the justification for the presence of E150 in a 40 Years Old limited edition? The Campaign for Real Whisky is focused on achievable goals: they are not asking that caramel or chill-filtration be banned, just we should be told. Such goals are hardly unreasonable, after all, declaration of E150 has been mandatory in Germany and Scandinavia for years. Look out for 'Mit Farbstoff' or

'Med Karamel' on the back label. If producers can do this simple labelling for those countries, why not for the rest of us?

One tactic used by the industry when these thorny points arise is to try to muddy the waters with arguments along the lines of 'Look, lots of things affect the flavour of whisky and we can't tell everyone about all of those factors because it's too complicated and hardly anyone cares'. Not the most enlightened attitude to the idea of educating consumers.

However, it seems clear that pettifogging and smoke and mirrors are unlikely to suffice for long. The campaign is gathering momentum, and sooner or later the big guys are going to have to address these issues and admit that batch variation exists.

The standard industry defence of E150 is dismissive: 'The quantities involved don't affect the flavour, please go away'. But this assertion has never been proved, and now that a growing number of people believe otherwise, the producers' position seems shaky. In informal conversations with industry folk, one sometimes hears, 'If you do a taste test, people prefer whisky with added caramel'. In other words, 'Look, if it tastes good, who cares?' Yet if caramel does affect flavour, this contravenes SWA rules expressly forbidding the use of flavourings and the whole argument collapses.

Ed: Tim makes some very valid points. The sort of whiskies he's talking about, good honest drams, sitting in proper glasses without ice or E150 and with all those lovely un-chillfiltered textural qualities are the sort of whiskies that Tim, me and anyone else who knows anything about whisky would want to drink. But that is my point.

I'm not sure about you, but unless your family name is Wills or Nelstrop, it's unlikely you have a distillery in your back garden. If we did we could just sit back and make the whisky that we want to drink. But we don't. We rely on the output of the Scottish whisky industry.

In that last sentence the most important word was industry.

The whisky industry is Scotland's biggest and most important industry that contributes billion of pounds a year to the Scottish economy and directly employs more than 10,000 people.

The problem is that the industry is very much a global one which naturally concentrates on bigger whisky markets than the UK. To the big players in Scotch, the USA, China, Russia, India, Taiwan and Brazil are much more important. The big players are of course the giants of the drinks world, Diageo, Pernod Ricard, etc. The whisky drinkers who matter are those packing out the style bars of Shanghai, New York, Mumbai Taipei and São Paulo. Within the structure Diageo itself, Reserve Brands which looks after their range of Single Malts, is subordinate to the global

brands such as Johnnie Walker.

Is Walker really that important to Diageo? Yes it is. You only have to look at the numbers. Between them Walker Red and Walker Black sell something like 180,000,000 bottles. Now that is a very, very big number. It's the sort of number that accountants get really excited about and marketing guys come over all funny. How does that compare to the best selling malts? Well Glenfiddich, the best selling Malt brand sells around 10,000,000 bottles. Overall blends out sell malts at a ratio of around 15:1. Now you can see why Lewis Hamilton has the striding man on his crash helmet and why Vijay Mallya, who owns the Force India F1 team as well as the Whyte and Mackay portfolio, chooses to have Whyte and Mackay, rather than Dalmore stickers on his F1 cars.

So whether you or I like it or not brands matter, they matter a lot. Now, as any marketing manager worth their salt will tell you, the thing about brands is that they are all about the message and that message must be the same wherever the brand is being sold. This is why it really is important that when you go into a fashionable whisky bar in New York's lower East side or in Ren Ai Rd, Taipei, that your glass (complete with ice!!) will look and taste the same. If that means adding some E150 and chill-filtering the whisky then so be it.

This all means that when the same marketing department rolls in the global brand ambassador to promote the brand the script does not have to change.

Tim's argument is a valid one but, quite rightly it is that of a purist. Nothing wrong with that at all, but as I hope I've illustrated it just is not relevant to the world of whisky drinking. And because it is a world of whisky, that's why the industry has to use E150 and chill-filtering as tools to maintain the growth of the brand of Scotch. The point can best be explained by the two glasses in front of me. One is an old Caol Ila, nothing added or taken away. Quite, quite delicious. The other glass is a 15 Years Old blend, not sold in the UK, a really nice drop which is worryingly easy to drink. It's been coloured and chill-filtered to within an inch of its life and is a totally different beast to the aged Islay in the other glass. If we want to continue to enjoy such wonderful whiskies as the Caol Ila then the brand owners and distillers have to carry on making whiskies such as this blend. We cannot have one without the other.