



The finished article?

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Finishing. Ask the question, light the blue touch paper and retire to a safe distance.

There are few subjects more likely to get Whisky nuts around the world animated and vociferously putting their contrary points of view (We can discuss the relative merits of E150 and chill-filtering later!). Should one finish, or should one not?

The practice of almost maturing a Whisky in one type of cask and then finishing the job in something completely different has been dividing Whisky drinkers for years. The practice has its supporters and its detractors. The supporters, the fans of Glenmorangie, Bruichladdich, Dalmore, Balvenie et al, would say that the second cask brings something new to the party, another facet, adding complexity.

The detractors would say that the practice is more like that of an affair in a marriage and rather than adding a new element to the flavour profile, it merely obscures the true flavour balance of the body of spirit and it's original cask.

Just to make things a little more complicated there is of course a third opinion set. At this point I feel that I should declare an interest, as this is where I find myself. So the following will be completely subjective. In my opinion the most important thing for any distillery or brand owner, is a strong identity. When you get any bottle of Ardbeg, Glenrothes, Caol Ila, you have a pretty good idea of the sort of flavours, before the first drop of whisky has even touched the rim of your favourite Glencairn. This sense of identity is what we are actually buying. In most shops we don't have the opportunity of trying a whisky before we buy it (and before you start, yes I know there are exceptions, but I have yet to find a tasting bar in a

branch of Tesco and that is where most bottles really are sold) so we have to rely on what we know about that brand. When we pick up a bottle of Arbeg, we know what we're in for. We know what Ardbeg means, not matter which limited edition, age statement, version they are selling this week. Conversely, what is the distillery style of Bruichladdich or Glenmorangie?. Could someone tell me. I used to know, but now to be frank I now have no idea at all.

Now before you get the wrong end of the stick I am not saying that all finishing is wrong.

Dalmore is an excellent example of how finishing is part of the style of the whisky itself. When you compare a distillery bottling to that of a single cask offering from a decent indie, the difference is often quite dramatic, thereby proving the point of both offerings.

The whiskies I have issues with, are those where you feel that the finishing is just a way of saving a whisky, which would otherwise simply not be good enough to put in a bottle.

That's all very well for the big brands, but what about independent bottlers? Here I think it's a lot simpler. Independent bottlers do what a distillery can't do. Rather than giving you an example of the distillery style, they offer a glimpse at a much more tightly focused expression, not of the distillery, but of that particular cask, or run of casks. So why on earth would an indie ever bother with finishing? Good question, I've no idea. Now please understand that I am differentiating between a traditional indie and the likes of Compass Box (Is there anyone like Compass Box?). John Glaser's raison d'être is making whiskies that are not made anywhere else, be they finished or not.

Douglas Laing, Duncan Taylor, Berry Bros. & Rudd, etc, by contrast just concentrate on finding really good casks of whisky and putting the whisky in a bottle. Simple.

But coming back to the matter in hand, is finishing a good idea? I think that, it is best summed up by Doug from Berrys', who says: "A beautiful woman doesn't need make-up. I find a synthetic quality in some wood finishes and prefer to see what nature has delivered uninterrupted over time." Thank you Mr. McIvor, I'd say that sums it up very nicely.