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Moved by the spirit

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Speyside, a rumpled, salmon-splashed patch of hill country midway between Inverness and Aberdeen, is the engine of Scotch malt whisky production. Two-thirds of the country's malt distilleries are found there, the majority of them within a 40-sq km box clustered around Elgin, Rothas and Dufftown.

Scotland's other, often far-flung malt distilleries are the rags and remnants of the lost age of farm distilling; Speyside, by contrast, produces more spirit today than its 17th-century farmers would have dreamt possible. With its neat little distilleries tucked modestly away in grey villages and green valleys, piping their steam and scent about flower-filled woods, this is an industrial landscape of which even William Morris would have approved.

Why Speyside? An early embrace of legal distilling thanks to legislation steered through parliament by the local laird, the Duke of Gordon, gave the region a head start; the railway age helped with a further shove. The golden grain of the Black Isle grew nearby. Europe's phylloxera epidemic, a wine-making tragedy but a rosy dawn for whisky distillers, saw another 23 distilleries join the pack. The skills pool which brimmed about this distilling cluster, and the support of ancillary trades to service the distilleries, soon put Speyside so far ahead as to be out of reach of its competitors. Where it remains.

Regional style is a vexed topic in whisky literature, since the personality of every dram could be changed utterly by a switch in the malt specification, distilling protocols or wood regime. Nonetheless it is possible to speak of a Speyside ideal, perhaps because many distilleries consciously set their sights on the graceful, nuanced and finely balanced spirit produced by the region's first star distillery, The Glenlivet. That ideal of finesse, delicacy, intricacy, refreshment and poise remains. Speyside is, in every sense, Scotch whisky's Bordeaux.

And the best? The plethora of dated, selected and single-cask bottlings available to malt enthusiasts nowadays makes this an unanswerable question. I have selected the following ten malts, though, on the basis of blind tasting from among what are, globally speaking, the more widely distributed expressions of fifteen leading distilleries. "The greatest" may be a chimera, but greatness itself isn't. There's plenty of it here.

1. Glenfiddich 12 Year Old

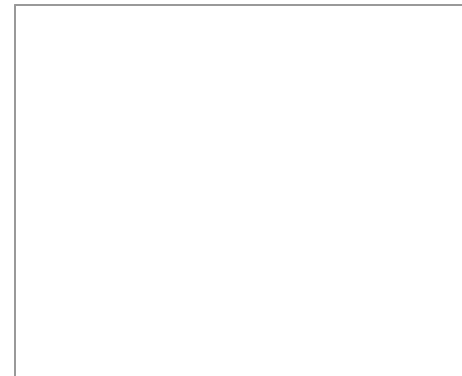
I was, frankly, surprised to find this emerge as the top-scoring malt by a whisker - but there's no doubt that the slow metamorphosis (over the turn of the millennium) from the old, undated Special Reserve to this 12 Year Old has paid dividends for Glenfiddich. That simple putty-like sappiness has gone, to be replaced by a wine-like aromatic profile of great complexity and less sweetness than most: flowers, grass, hazels, filled in with pools of light and shade. On the palate, this is dense, aristocratic and close-knit, with notes of orange, vanilla, tobacco leaf and dark plum. Beautifully distilled and aged: not a hint of coarseness anywhere.

2. Singleton of Dufftown 12 Year Old

Another surprise, but the restorative work that Diageo has done in refining this malt (and overhauling its packaging) is glorious. Sumptuous aromatic composition, as you'd expect from Speyside: plumply downy, with grass, moss and heather notes. On the palate, a deeper, grander soul than the aroma suggested: dark, forceful, with some chocolate and raisin richness and Latakia-tobacco austerities. Hard to fault, and a great after-dinner dram. (Look out for the Singleton of Glen Ord in Asia and the Singleton of Glendullan in the USA: all three "Singletons" have been cosseted in European oak to great effect.)

3. Cragganmore 12 Year Old

I expected this malt to sing - and it did. It's a splendidly athletic, rangy baritone, with a gratifyingly invasive, wide, bright-day aromatic profile: leather, cobnut, almond, tangerine, the sweet wood just peepingly evident. The pure, intense, driving flavours are almost salty, and there's some measured pecan-nut richness in the finish. Speyside is



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rarely this muscular and thrusting - but there's plenty of intricacy behind the boom.

4. Glenlivet 12 Year Old

It's not the showiest dram in the region, but Glenlivet's pretty, lacy subtleties can still take your breath away, and I can't think of a better bottle to begin a Speyside education with. White chocolate, hazel, birch leaf and Seville orange tease the nose. On the palate, this truly seems the cream of the barley: seamless and gentle, brocaded with heathery grace notes. The whisky equivalent of a great white Pessac-Léognan, full of understated, pressed-linen charm.

5. Balvenie Doublewood 12 Year Old

You've got to like woody whisky to enjoy this, but if you do, you'll find it pushes every button. Aromatically rumbustious, a dense compost of raisin and spice: on the nose alone, I thought the wood overdone. But in the mouth it works improbably well: warm, creamy, unctuous, toothsome and gratifying. If you want to smoke a cigar as you sip, this is the dram to choose: the flavour of smouldering leaf needs that responsive sweetness.

6. Strathisla 12 Year Old

Another enticing, dancing Speyside jewel which deserves a broader public. The aroma is the Spey personified: creamy, subtle, softly leafy, a touch of orange, heathery-fresh. On the palate, it is far lighter and less muscular than Cragganmore, for example, but full of supple charm, softness and intricacy, suggesting icing sugar, cream, orange and honey. Like its sister-distillery The Glenlivet, a malt in a lacy ruff.

7. Aberlour 10 Year Old

Consummate use of wood, here: soft, mellow, restrained, almost peachy, giving the dappled and harmonious impression which is so close to the Speyside ideal. On the palate, it is perfectly pitched between the sweet (chocolate digestive biscuits) and the dry, with plenty of understated refinement. Nourishing and complete.

8. Cardhu Special Cask Reserve

After an exciting decade where its international success almost proved too much for it, Cardhu has now settled down (for those markets allotted it) as an "unaged" blend which combines junior and very senior casks. It's an exciting malt: dense, lush, intense and aromatic, with some toffee, fudge, chocolate and liquorice but also (those old casks?) a whiff of rustic stableyard lurking behind.

9. Glenfarclas 21 Year Old

This proudly independent distillery produces a wide range of expressions; direct-fired stills and the preponderant use of sherry wood provide more of a taste of the past than most. The wood dominates the aromas of this dram, and there's also some earthy complexities reminiscent of the scents of a traditional dunnage warehouse. As with Balvenie's Doublewood, though, any sense of aromatic imbalance is restored by the flavour, which is complex and satisfying, the wood sweetness meeting its match in the still- fresh depths of the spirit. There's even a touch of the crystallised violet so typical of old Cognac.

10. Macallan 18 Year Old

With Balvenie and Glenfarclas, the third of Speyside's sherried triumvirate, and often considered the greatest of the three. It was held in check in my tasting by a slight woody rawness. Macallan's stills are much smaller than those of Glenfarclas and Balvenie, and this, too, gives the spirit a gutsiness and a force which makes it a great blending malt, but which can knock the drinker sideways. In that sense, it's the opposite of The Glenlivet. If you're looking for the power and the glory in a dram of Speyside malt, though, look no further.

A ndrew Jefford is author of 'Peat Smoke and Spirit: A Portrait of Islay and its Whiskies'
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