

ONE-CASK WONDERS

The world's premium malt whisky society brings its singular offerings to Indian shores

By Girija Duggal

THIS past August, 273 bottles of a single cask, single malt whisky labelled, simply, 129.1, were made available for purchase online and at select venues around the world. The labels on the bottles didn't identify the distillery the cask was sourced from, and the rather poetic moniker and description they carried merely gave buyers clues to the spirit's tasting notes and region of origin. Despite such vagueness, all the bottles released online sold out within 14 minutes of the launch; the others didn't take much longer to be snapped up, either.

This record sale serves as an apt indication of the kind of cachet the Scotch Malt Whisky Society (SMWS) and its single-cask releases command amongst whisky aficionados. With more than 26,000 members across 18 countries, the 30-year-old private membership society prides itself on being the largest of its kind in the world. Its aim is to foster appreciation of a category of whisky that is rarely found on the market—single cask, single malt. Each year, it sources the most unique casks from distilleries around the world, which it then bottles unfiltered and undiluted and sells under its own label.

Last month SMWS re-entered India (a 2009 advent had been unsuccessful due to logistic hurdles), with formal launches taking place in Mumbai and Pune.

"Simply put, the society's objective is 'To leave no nose upturned,'" says Ashwin Deo, founder and managing director of Trinity Vintners and the man responsible for SMWS's foray into the country. "Since the society has access to 129 distilleries, the range of whiskies available is extremely large. However, the quantity of whisky [per cask] averages 300 bottles and once the cask is over, that particular whisky is finished for life. So these whiskies are extremely rare."

Its founding members, a motley group of friends in Edinburgh, Scotland, soon discovered that they had



The malt whiskies are identified by numbers and quirky names. The members' room (left; inset) at the society's headquarters in Scotland

tapped a rich vein with their informal initiative—membership grew so fast that in 1983, they formally established SMWS at The Vaults in Leith, Scotland.

AS FOR the decision to not identify the distillery on the label, Deo says, "The minute the distillery name is mentioned, one may well start imagining the style of the whisky and therefore limit or colour the experience with a pre-conceived notion." That is why SMWS has formulated a unique approach to the label, with quirky names for each whisky. "However, you'll always find a clever tip that will

help you identify the distillery should you choose to follow the lead," says Deo.

Thus the words "from Islay's biggest distillery" yield a clue to the origins of Cask No. 53.168 (named Elastoplast on a Roasted Tongue), while "Elgin's younger distillery" points the way to the birth place of Cask No. 35.48 (J.K. Rowling Meets C.S. Lewis). These and 14 other equally whimsically-named malts feature among the first set made available to Indian members at the society's partner establishments—the Burgundy Room at the JW Marriott, Mumbai and Paasha and Bar 101 at the JW Marriott, Pune. A



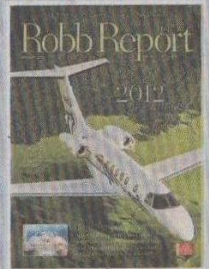
selection of 10 to 16 bottlings will be added every quarter.

Member benefits include preferential pricing on drams at these venues, (priced between ₹17,500 to ₹90,000), and invitations to a host of whisky appreciation events.

Deo also hopes to take the society to cities like Bangalore, Delhi and Hyderabad.

At the end of the day, SMWS promises to inject a dose of fun into malt appreciation. "Our whiskies are exceptional, but we try not to take ourselves too seriously," says SMWS managing director Paul Miles.

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