

# Decanter

## Christmas whiskies for all

*There's arguably no better time to raise a glass of warming whisky than during the festive season, but which style to choose? Get timely help from our guide to the perfect drop to suit every palate.*



Richard Woodard December 7, 2023



It's 20 years since US psychologist Barry Schwartz wrote *The Paradox of Choice – Why More is Less*, a book which addresses a particular anxiety prevalent in modern society.

Schwartz argues that having more choice, rather than opening up opportunities, instead leaves us with a sense of powerlessness. It's a sentiment that will be familiar to anyone who's scrolled through Netflix menus or Spotify playlists... What should I choose? How do I choose? And what if I miss out on something great?

**Whisky** lovers know that feeling, too. There are more whiskies, from more places, with more flavours and styles, than ever before – and never is that phenomenon more evident than at Christmas, when we are bombarded with a multitude of tempting bottles.

The good news? Whether you're hunting down present options for loved ones, self-gifting with a special treat, or just looking for a tasty dram to offer Santa on Christmas Eve, the perfect whisky does exist.

Not objectively perfect – that's probably impossible, not to mention dull – but ideal instead for a particular occasion, or person. The perfect whisky is really a perfect whisky moment: a coming together of people, place, time and liquid to give joy. And what better time for that than Christmas?



## The perfect whisky for novices

Everyone's beginning in whisky is different, but there's usually a dram that converts you from curious outsider to devoted fan. It may not be a light whisky – for some, an Islay peat bomb will be the clincher – but your flavour preferences can help light the way. So, if you love lipsmacking, zesty fruit, then **Glenmorangie 10 Year Old** (Alc 40%, £27-£40/70cl Widely available) is a classic gateway malt. But those who hanker after something darker might plump for **Glenfarclas 105 Cask Strength** (60%, £52-£70/70cl Widely available), a big, friendly Sherry giant.

### **Green Spot Single Pot Still Irish Whiskey, Ireland**

A modern classic, this is a fantastic example of single pot still Irish whiskey, with singing, tangy orchard fruit, a dry cereal backbone and an appealing finish of toffee and spice. Pure drinking pleasure. **Alcohol** 40%

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## The perfect whisky for Scotch lovers

Finding a whisky that universally pleases fans of Scotch is extraordinarily tricky, if not downright impossible. Do you go smoky – but not too smoky – with the peat/fruit/oak poise of **Highland Park 18 Year Old Viking Pride** (43%, £115- £139/70cl Widely available)?

Or veer towards the super-fruity with a classic expression from a sometimes overlooked distillery, such as **Longmorn 18 Year Old Secret Speyside Collection** (48%, £103-£111/70cl Widely available), positively dripping with juicy mango and pineapple?

### **Compass Box Artist Blend, Scotland**

True Scotch lovers never dismiss blends – especially not when they're as appealing and balanced as this beauty from John Glaser at Compass Box. A tribute to Edinburgh, its malt-heavy recipe (55%, Linkwood to the fore, alongside Balmenach and Clynelish) offers a whistle-clean all-rounder, with punchy orchard fruit, caramel and a mouthwatering salinity. **Alc** 43%

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## The perfect whisky for single malt fans

Single malts are all about character, and place. It's hard to separate the taste of Laphroaig, Ardbeg or Lagavulin from the seaweed reek of Islay's Kildalton coast. But associations between flavour and locale can shift. Speyside is a kaleidoscope of styles, from lightly fruity to heavily funky. For that reason, I adore Mossburn Vintage Casks' bottling of **Benrinnes 2008** (54.9%, £73.95-£80/70cl Widely available) for its softening of the distillery's meaty distillate via an ex-Moscatel cask.

### **Meikle Tòir 5 Year Old The Original, Scotland**

Doubly exciting: the first peated GlenAllachie (near Dufftown in Speyside) from Master Distiller Billy Walker, and the first release since he opted to extend fermentation times to a formidable 160 hours. St Fergus mainland peat brings scents of smoked cashew, with aromas of coffee roaster, nutmeg and a lick of dark honey. **Alc** 50%

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## The perfect whisky for American admirers

The American whiskey scene is one of the most dynamic on the planet now: rye is resurgent, they're pushing bourbon boundaries in Kentucky and beyond, and craft distillers are pursuing esoteric grains and experimental techniques – as well as creating highly distinctive American single malt expressions. Beyond craft pioneers such as Westland, Westward and Balcones, there's an almost endless variety of spirits to explore via independent bottlings: Dad's Hat, Copperworks and Ironroot Republic are all names to conjure with.

### **Michter's US\*1 Unblended American Whiskey, USA**

Michter's unites American whiskey past and present, its small-batch bourbons and ryes exemplifying the US distilling renaissance. This can't be called bourbon for reasons too dull to go into, but never mind: it's an indulgent American classic brimming with sweet corn, dried apricot, butterscotch and a supremely creamy texture. **Alc** 41.7%

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## The perfect whisky for Irish whiskey fanatics

Ireland's whiskey excitement levels are reaching new heights now that some of the younger distilleries are bottling increasingly mature liquid. The list of names to watch is lengthening, from provenance-rich Waterford to delicious Dingle; meanwhile, Dublin's once vast whiskey industry has been revived by the likes of Teeling.

That, in turn, has prompted established names to raise their game, including an increasingly impressive range of aged whiskeys from Bushmills, and Irish Distillers' experimental Method & Madness releases.

### **Midleton Barry Crockett Legacy, Ireland**

This takes the single pot still template of Green Spot and adds layers and layers of depth. There's a savoury cereal backbone and a finish that edges into date and liquorice territory, but at the core lies the tangy, spice-dusted fruit: candied orange peel, poached apple and dried apricot. **Alc** 46%

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## The perfect whisky for world whisky explorers

The most exciting whisky nation right now? Stick a pin in an atlas and go from there. How about India and the rise of Rampur, Paul John and a host of newer operators? Or the Antipodes, including New Zealand's brilliant Cardrona or Australia's Starward?

What about the Nordics, where a spirit of fearless innovation prevails, from terrific ryes to whiskies scented with smoked alder or nettle? And then there's England, home to the likes of Cotswolds and The Lakes distilleries. Exciting times indeed.

### **Rampur Double Cask, India**

Expect great things from Rampur in the years ahead. Meanwhile, this is a splendid starting-point: a mix of ex-bourbon and Sherry wood creates a rich whisky with ripe mango edging into darker, dried fruit territory, baking spices and an enticing, toffee-butterscotch finish. **Alc** 45%

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## The perfect whisky for Sherry devotees

Sherried whiskies are made for Christmas. Flavours of dried fruit, cinnamon and brown sugar offer an obvious reminder of festive cake and pudding – and on cold nights there's comfort in their rich embrace. Macallan, Glenfarclas, Aberlour and Tamdhu exemplify the Scotch template, but great Sherried whiskies are made all over the world: a personal favourite is **Kavalan Triple Sherry Cask** (40%, £82.70- £88/70cl Widely available), matured in oloroso, PX and Moscatel Sherry casks and a sweetly seductive winter dram.

**Berry Bros & Rudd Linkwood 2010 Cask #301235 Pedro Ximénez finish (Christmas Edition), Scotland**

I love this for its restraint – not shouting too loudly with the Sherry cask flavours, but allowing those festive associations to build – clove-spiked orange, fig and treacle, plus a savoury undertow of spice and pleasantly drying oak. **Alc** 52.4%

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## The perfect whisky for peat freaks

The diversity of smoke-accented drams is growing by the day, from Islay's maritime classics to the earthier mainland character expressed by the likes of Ardmore and peated Glenturret. Meanwhile, youthful releases from Skye's Torabhaig show huge promise.

But Scotland doesn't have a monopoly on peat, as some wonderfully smoky releases coming from the US, the Nordics and England (check out White Peak/Wire Works) illustrate. Dublin's **Teeling Blackpitts** (46%, £46.90-£61.95 Widely available), with its enticing scents of char-grilled pineapple and clove, is a belter.

**Port Askaig 8 Year Old, Scotland**

A revamped recipe has breathed new life into this Islay classic, reinforcing the billowing beach bonfire smoke with lighter scents of pine resin and dried thyme. A mix of cask types – bourbon, toasted American oak, PX butts, refill hogsheads – brings structure and breadth. **Alc** 45.8%

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## The perfect whisky for terroir nuts

Does whisky have... terroir? Many whiskies – single malts most obviously – embody a sense of place. If you transplanted everything to a different location, would the whisky taste the same?

Open to debate, but many distillers are now focusing intently on raw materials, and where they're grown, to reinforce this sense of provenance. Bruichladdich on Islay has long been a standard-bearer for this approach – check out **Bruichladdich Bere Barley** 2012 (50%, £85-£114 Widely available) – and Westland in Washington state has done similarly pioneering work.

### **Waterford Cuvée Argot, Ireland**

Waterford has been fixated on 'téireoir' (its Gaelic take on the term) since its foundation, with a formidable stable of 'single farm origin' malt whiskies. This assemblage of several of them displays the blender's art, and it's a hugely vibrant, characterful whisky of fruit basket aromas, sweet shop flavours and just a whisper of peppery smoke. **Alc** 47%

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## The perfect whisky for collectors

If the average whisky fan is spoiled for choice in 2023, the well above-average (in terms of disposable income) individual may be experiencing pangs of Schwartzian angst. Diageo's Prima & Ultima (as well as Special Releases), the House of Hazelwood collection from the Grant family's stocks, Gordon & MacPhail's Recollection Series... not to mention recent, long-aged one-off releases from the likes of Glen Scotia, Tomatin, Littlemill... I could go on.

### **Littlemill The Vanguard Collection, Chapter One Robert Muir 45 Year Old, Scotland**

Littlemill was unloved for most of its long history, falling silent for the last time in 1994 and destroyed by fire a decade later. So this 45-year-old Lowland malt has a phoenix-like quality to it, replete with hedgerow

scents of rose and honeysuckle, juicy orchard fruit and a pinch of nutmeg. The silky, vanilla-heavy finish lingers long on the palate. **Alc** 50.5%