

The Exceptional Grain

Don Sutcliffe had a successful career importing and distributing spirits, but always dreamed of creating his own blended Scotch Whisky. This year, as our **JEFF LIPSMAN** discovers, 1,500 bottles of that dream are being released, and as its name suggests, it's good stuff.



Scotch Tapes
Don taps his glass and explains a good Scotch Whisky comes with stories

Aroma Therapy
Uyen Nguyen, The Gorge pastry chef, savors the scent



Photos by Jeff Lipsman

No Pain No Grain
Bert Berdis sips the results of Don's search for the best grains



Don Sutcliffe tips the bottle of Scotch into my glass. “Take a first smell, then you might add a drop or two of water,” he suggests. “Before dinner I add water. After dinner I don’t.”

Don spent his career importing and distributing spirits, but he dreamed of creating his own. “In 1987 I took my first trip to Scotland, to The Macallan. It changed my life.” He taps his Scotch glass to focus attention and adds, as if letting me in on a secret, “This is about telling stories.”

Sutcliffe became friends with The Macallan’s legendary single-malt Scotch maker, Willie Phillips. “We always wanted to do a project together.” The project Sutcliffe had in mind was a distinctive blended Scotch whisky, handcrafted in small batches and made from select barrels.

“We sat down and said we wanted to make a really interesting whisky, a grain whisky. We wanted a selection of different distillers, of different grains, of different years. And so we set about this process of locating barrels. No one would have 30-year-old Carsebridge available; you had to find it the back of the barrel room, almost forgotten, because what are they going to do with it?” That single cask of Carsebridge, along with another from North British Distillery and one from Loch Lomond, was just enough to create the 1,500 bottles of the Exceptional Grain.

The Exceptional Grain, their first entry, is a 100% blended grain whisky. By way of comparison, single-malt Scotches can be aggressive in flavor, with alcoholic aromas, and strong flavors of peat and smoke. But blended whiskies have a broader palate and

are generally softer. As Sutcliffe explains, “I enjoy an elegant whisky—nuanced, softer. So we will never make a heavy peat, heavy smoke whisky.”

For the Exceptional Grain, Sutcliffe and Phillips first identified 15 barrels in storage long forgotten by Scotland’s whisky distillers. They then narrowed it down to three select barrels. To give their blend some backbone, vanilla, and wood, they selected a 13-year-old corn whisky from North British. From Loch Lomond Distillery they selected a four-year-old wheat whisky that provides a lively little bit of alcohol and

notes of fruit, lemon and blackberry. Finally, a rare barrel of wheat whisky from Carsebridge, a distillery that has been closed for over 25 years, gives the Exceptional Grain depth and a toffee characteristic that only comes from aging. The three components were married in sherry casks, and you can smell a little bit of the sherry on the front and taste it on the back.

Sutcliffe notes that unengaged barrels of whisky are virtually nonexistent, as worldwide demand far exceeds scarce resources. “If you want to make this exact whisky tomorrow,” he says, “you have to wait 30 years.”

While there are just 1,500 bottles of the Exceptional Grain for the world, it is only the first of Sutcliffe’s planned offerings. Noting that each small batch will be unique, he promises an Exceptional Malt in the fall, and an Exceptional Blend in 2015. Available at select wine and spirits shops now. 