

Talking Whiskey

by Shameek Popat



A conversation with
Dr Paul McLaughlin,
a Canadian dentist with
a great love for a dram

Shameek Popat: Tell me about yourself and how you got into your love of whiskey.

Paul McLaughlin: I've been a dentist for more than 20 years now, living in Nova Scotia, Canada, with a lovely wife and a son who's teaching me what it's like to live with teenagers. (Kidding! He's a great kid.) I've been drinking Canadian whiskies for quite some time; there always was a bottle of Crown Royal to be had at the local bottle store or a friend's house. I remember being with a friend who bought me my first taste of Scotch whisky—a Johnny Walker, I can't remember which. It was jarringly different from rye, but quite good all the same. At about the same time, our bottle stores began expanding their selections of all types of whiskey, so began my collection.

SP: You recently did a Springbank Whisky course in Campbeltown.

PM: Springbank Whisky School was an amazing week. To be able to put yourself to work in a live, unrestricted distillery and learn firsthand all the steps that turn grain into liquid—what a fortunate thing for a whiskey lover to experience! You're basically working

alongside everyone there, from shovelling barley to building boxes for shipping. You get as much out of the experience as you put into it. Our group was quite involved, whether we were clearing the malt floor at 6 a.m. or checking the spirit still at midnight. The dedication of the employees to their work and the respect for the final product is very evident. Of course, being able to peruse the warehouses with a whiskey thief and glass from time to time was a nice reward for a hard day's work!

SP: That sounds like a great experience, and I'm going to put it in my bucket list. OK, not an easy question to answer, but what are your top three whiskies?

PM: Since I truly select a dram on the mood I'm in, I really can't tell you what my top three favourite whiskies are. Looking at the number of empty bottles in my basement, I can tell you what we go through the most in terms of volume in my bar. ... I'd have to say that Té Bheag is one of my top 'purchased' whiskies. It's a well-rounded yet inexpensive Gaelic blend

that passes well in a flask among colleagues. My next would be Canadian Club Chairman's Select 100% Rye. It's again easy on the pocketbook, stocked well in the bottle stores, and a very good representation of what Canadian rye is. Lastly, Jura Superstition. It's a good-tempered Island dram that has enough smoke and spice to satisfy most Scotch whisky connoisseurs.

SP: I haven't tried the Té Bheag but love the other two, and am a big fan of Jura whiskies; I'm enjoying Jura One for the Road by master blender Willie Cochrane at the moment. What, in your opinion, is the most important thing regarding whisky? Is it the location of the distillery, the water, grain, bottling, casking, terroir or aging process?

PM: I don't believe that there's that *one* important step to making whiskey. I do think that each distillery will focus on one of those aspects to produce its representative product. Terroir will not be so evident in a triple-distilled whisky, but cask selection and aging will absolutely impart flavour and character (think Auchentoshan Three Wood). Maybe your water source isn't important to a distillery that sits near sea level when you know your peated spirit will be weathered and ultimately affected by salt water and low temperatures. (Bowmore's No. 1 Vault is a good example.)

As you develop a particular taste for whiskey, I think you gravitate toward a





certain style that is emphasized by one or more of those variables. Whereas I may prefer an older malted barley spirit that came out of a mouldy dunnage, you may prefer a corn-based spirit racked in new oak for a couple of years.

Most whiskey 'authorities' and distillery tour guides will say that the cask imparts 60 percent or more of the character of the final product. It's not uncommon for a seasoned whiskey lover to be able to tell what type of cask was used if tasting blind, so I think cask and wood selection is pretty important. After nosing and sampling the beer, low wines and new-make spirit at Springbank, I can definitely say that cask isn't everything—there's a nose and palate profile that carries straight through those steps and even survives 10 years of resting in wood in a warehouse. That's something to think about!

SP: A nice answer! The whole package makes each whiskey individual, not one single thing. What do you think about blended whiskeys, or are you just a single-malt guy?

PM: I'm just going to throw this out there and let the arguments begin. Most single malts are blended (vatted) together from a number of casks at a distillery before being bottled, or allowed to rest in a neutral (third- or fourth-fill) barrel before bottling. A blended whiskey is basically doing the same thing with product from more than one distillery (blended whiskeys do not always contain neutral spirit, but now we're getting a little complicated on the nomenclature.) Technically, the only way to avoid drinking a blended whiskey is to drink single-cask bottlings.

Personally, I enjoy blends and have many in my collection. If a master blender has both access to quality ingredients and an ability to mix something tasty, just enjoy it. Have you ever refused to eat a tasty pizza simply because the mushrooms and cheese didn't come from the same farm? We have to be careful of this single-cask or single-malt snobbery that some people develop over time. If a cask-strength bottling is your preferred drink, then fine, but don't discourage the art of blending when it can produce something good.

SP: I totally agree. One of my favourites is Johnnie Walker Blue Label. Would you recommend people buying certain whiskeys for investment?

PM: Yes and no. I think certain whiskeys will absolutely increase in price over time. I've seen a couple in my collection double and triple in value on the secondary market compared with what I paid for it. I guess if you've the knack to buy the right ones at the right time, then why not make a dollar/pound (or thousand)? Whiskey speculation is not my strong point, however. My collection is an open one, with a small number of bottles not opened simply because they're being saved for a special occasion. I don't like the idea that I shouldn't open a certain bottle because I'm trying to make money from it.

SP: I always say that if you leave good whiskey on the shelf, you have completely missed the point of whiskey. It only has meaning when you drink it! What is your most wonderful whiskey experience so far?

PM: Besides Springbank Whisky School, it was being chosen to be part of

the tasting group for the Arran White Stag second release just last year. The distillery managed to get the three single-cask samples to me in Canada—no small feat, considering Canada's tight liquor importation rules!—and actually used some of my tasting notes for the official release. The race was on for my wife and me to get to Lochranza to get my bottle before the airlines stopped direct flights from Canada. We managed to get to the distillery at same time my bottle was hand-delivered from the packaging plant in Glasgow. They presented me with Bottle No. 1 in James McTaggart's tasting room. Amazing experience.

SP: That's a great story worth retelling over a dram! Any advice you can give us regarding whiskey?

PM: Our olfactory system processes much of what we taste, yet I see most people at a warehouse tasting take a quick sniff before tossing the liquid down. If you truly want to appreciate whiskey, take the time to nose it. Even after you take your first sip, sniff it again. Experience all the liquid has to offer. If you just want to get drunk, do vodka shots.

SP: Can you pair whiskey with food, and if yes, what's your best pairing?

PM: When it comes to pairing whiskey with food, the sky's the limit. It comes down to personal preference. One of my favourites is pan-seared scallops (in butter with just salt and pepper) served with a Redbreast 12-Year-Old. Always a hit.

SP: I'll have to try that! Finally, what's your favourite whiskey quote?

PM: "Life's too short to drink bad whiskey." ■

