

SPIRITS News

K&L's exclusive imports and single barrel selections are rolling in.



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Getting Back to Basics—at Cask Strength

By David Driscoll

As my colleague Jeff Jones and I sat on the plane to Scotland this past March, I said to him, “I’d like to find some alternatives to the standard heavy peat, heavy sherry formula that we seem to have fallen into.

Rather than respond to the market, I’d like to start guiding it.” I don’t think I’m alone in my appreciation for nuance, subtlety, complexity and delicacy when it comes to classic Scotch whisky. While I’ve enjoyed the last decade of fashionable trends as they pertain to single malt, I don’t know anyone out there who cut their teeth on bold, brash whiskies like the heavily sherried, cask-strength Aberlour A’Bunadh or the incredibly peaty blast of pepper that is the Bruichladdich Octomore. Most of us started with old-fashioned Scotch like Glenlivet 12 or Glenmorangie 10, then worked our way forward from there. Lately I’ve been feeling a little nostalgic for those early days of drinking, so I decided to make that a theme for this year’s trip: getting back to basics. That not only meant the basics of classic Scotch whisky enjoyment, but also a time when whiskies were interesting, dynamic and much more affordable. Of course, we’re not in control of pricing when it comes to supply. All we can do as a retailer is find creative ways to work backward once we know the costs. As someone who’s spent the better part of two years reeling from the housing costs of the Bay Area, I was even more determined to alleviate some of the frustration that has resulted from the rising price of fine Scotch whisky. How we were going to do it, I wasn’t sure, but come hell or high water I was going to find a way.

When we finally arrived at the Glasgow office of Hunter Laing late in the afternoon, it was as if Andrew Laing had read my mind. There on the table were dozens of different samples, of various ages, all in precisely the style I was looking for. “It’s like you tapped into my subconscious!” I

told him. Not only were the whiskies fundamentally classic in style, they were reasonably priced. Hunter Laing is the brand of the Laing whisky dynasty from whom we purchase our Hepburn’s Choice-labeled malts, as well as several of our Faultline Scotch and rum selections. Joining us for the first time this year was Hunter Laing’s master blender Tom Aitken, who used to blend for Dewar’s back when Bacardi first bought the brand. Tasting samples with a veteran who understands the inner workings and the history behind some of these lesser-known distilleries is invaluable. For example, when Jeff and I tasted the first cask—a 1998 Royal Brackla—we were completely taken aback. The whisky was a light straw color, but on the palate it was heavy, rich, mouthcoating and supple. “I’ve never tasted a Royal Brackla sample like that before,” I said to Tom, who responded by explaining that Diageo used the distillery as a sort of experimental lab during that time. They made all sorts of different styles back then, and the quality could be wildly varying.

But the hits didn’t stop there. We moved through similar styles of whisky, each rather light and unassuming in appearance, but chock-full of character. A young Macallan glided like silk over our tongues. A 1991 Glen Keith in second-fill sherry showcased a perfect balance between fruit and vanilla. Other unpeated, unsherried selections from distilleries that can’t be named were also spectacular. The peated selections we did find were classic in style, nothing young or experimental, just good, old-fashioned Scotch.

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An array of samples at the Glasgow office of Hunter Laing & Co.

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Tasting and finding great whiskies are one thing—arranging for their transportation, price and labeling is an entirely different task. However, I'm happy to report that after several months of logistical ping pong, we've brought some of these fantastic whiskies from Glasgow to K&L and they're ready for your approval.

Hepburn's Choice Selections

1991 John McCrae (Balvenie) 24 Year Old "Hepburn's Choice" Single Barrel Cask Strength Blended Malt Scotch Whisky (\$129.99)

While it's become common practice over the years for independent bottlers to label their single malt whiskies by distillery, there are a handful of producers who do not want their brand name to be mentioned or utilized by a competitor when selling casks to a third party company for blending use. To prevent that from happening, some producers practice "teaspooning," meaning they add a teaspoon of a second whisky into the cask, instantly changing the whisky from a "single" malt into a "blended" malt. Once the whisky is "blended," the name of the distillery can no longer be used on the label, because it's technically no longer a single distillery bottling. However, when you taste this John McCrae blended malt whisky (aka teaspooned Balvenie), we're pretty sure you're going to be as thrilled as we are. To get a single cask of Balvenie is almost unheard of, and getting one this good for this price is a rare treat indeed. The nose is candied ginger, round vanilla, and sweet malty grains, and the palate builds into more cereal grains, dried fruits, honey, resin and a beautiful, classic, old-fashioned Highland Scotch finish of sweet, biscuity malted barley.

Royal Brackla 17 Year Old "Hepburn's Choice" Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Scotch Whisky (\$59.99)

We'd of course heard of the Bacardi-owned distillery, known for its role in blended whiskies, but we'd never tasted one quite like this. This particular cask was absolutely stunning. It is straw colored and light to the eye, but packed with so much flavor it's incredible. There are definitely

phenolic elements at play, very subtle hints of peat that work as an undercurrent to all the sweet stone fruit and vanilla. The combination of grain and fruit is like a burst of classic malt goodness, but on the finish it turns savory with hints of sagebrush and white pepper. All in all, this is an incredibly dynamic malt for the price and a great introduction to the distillery for newcomers. Bacardi has since turned Royal Brackla into its own single malt brand that should be on American shelves soon.

1991 Glen Keith 24 Year Old "Hepburn's Choice" Single Sherry Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Scotch Whisky (\$89.99)

This single sherry butt cask of Glen Keith is another K&L "refill" selection, meaning we purposely looked for whisky matured in sherry casks that had been used previously for the same purpose. The result of refill aging is that the whisky still takes on some

of the richer, fruity, sherry-esque flavors, but much more mildly, helping to maintain the integrity of the inherent malt character. In looking for delicious Scotch whisky that tastes like old-fashioned Scotch whisky, we came upon this outstanding Glen Keith: a Speyside distillery that's part of the Chivas portfolio. The whisky is classic Highland in style. The nose explodes with cereal grains, apricots and pear, vanilla and the faintest hint of almond. The palate shows a bit of rich Oloroso character, briefly, before giving way to the more standard dried stone fruit flavors and supple, malty deliciousness. It's the price, however, that really grabs your attention: 24-year-old, cask strength, single barrel, Speyside single malt for \$89.99?! Sherry aged, no less! Thank goodness it was a big barrel, because we're sure this is going to be quite popular.

Stay tuned for more selections from Hepburn's Choice, as we expect to have more incredible values available as fall arrives.

The other half of the Laing empire is Douglas Laing, the original family business with whom we bottle the K&L Old Particular single cask selections. The nice part about purchasing from both sides of the Laing operation is that each has its own set of whiskies, with stocks that represent a wide spectrum of distilleries and styles. We met Chris, Fred and Kara at the company's Glasgow office to sit down and taste a number of old-fashioned whiskies from both the malt and grain family. What's interesting about grain Scotch whisky is that because it's so misunderstood, the prices are quite reasonable in comparison to malt. Grain whisky is what's combined with single malt to create blended Scotch whiskies like Johnnie Walker or Dewar's. It's generally distilled from corn, rye, wheat or unmalted barley and aged in neutral casks to create a soft, rich and easy-drinking canvas for the malt whisky to play upon. When bottled as its own entity, the results can be rather run-of-the-mill. However, if you leave grain whisky to sit in wood for four-plus decades, the flavors begin to congeal and concentrate, and the wood turns into



Tasting whisky samples with the staff at Douglas Laing in Glasgow.

decadent layers of honey, syrup, molasses and caramel. As luck would have it, the folks at Douglas Laing were sitting on some very nice, mature casks of both grain and malt.

Old Particular Selections

1966 Invergordon 50 Year Old “Old Particular” K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Cask Strength Grain Scotch Whisky (\$279.99)

Last year we sold a 50-year-old grain whisky for \$300 and it sold out in less than 24 hours. This time around we’ve managed to shave \$20 off the price tag without reducing the quality or age one bit! The Invergordon 50 is alive and well after five decades, with loads of toasted oak, butterscotch, marzipan and honey flavors that ease over the palate with a delicate and lithe profile. Casks of Invergordon, long one of Scotland’s stalwarts for grain whisky production, are readily available, but few with this level of maturation and depth. Considering the price and the flavor profile, don’t expect this one to last long. Only 247 bottles available.

1974 Garnheath 42 Year Old “Old Particular” K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Cask Strength Grain Scotch Whisky (\$249.99) In yet another of our lost whisky collection (meaning distilleries that have since closed and/or been demolished), we bring you an absolutely stunning cask of 42-year-old Garnheath, a grain whisky from the once-active distillery site inside of Inver House’s Moffat site, located just east of Glasgow on the road to Edinburgh. The distillery was located next to another closed malt-producing site, Glenflagler. Closed in the mid-eighties, now just a memory and a story to share among friends, the spirit of Garnheath lives on (literally) in this single barrel, cask strength edition bottled just for K&L. Not only is the Garnheath a lost legend, this 42-year-old edition is one of the smoothest, roundest, most luxurious whiskies we’ve ever had the pleasure of selling. It rolls across the tongue effortlessly, coating the palate with rich waves of caramel, honey and maple syrup. In classic grain whisky style, there’s no maltiness or smoke here. It’s just four glorious decades of barrel maturation

at work: orange zest, candied sugar and apricot. A whisky classic in the making and a piece of history, to boot.

1990 Bunnahabhain 25 Year Old “Old Particular” K&L Exclusive Single Barrel Cask Strength Single Malt Scotch Whisky (\$149.99)

This will surely go down as one of the great single malt deals of the year, and it appears to be even more of a deal considering the new \$900 price tag the distillery is asking for the official release. This particular iteration is like a tropical daydream on the nose: fresh peach and sugar cane float lazily across the surprisingly sweet palate. It’s aged in hogshead, however, and there’s no sherry and little to no smoke in this expression. Its brilliance,

nonetheless, is a testament to the inherent fruit of the whisky and the benefits of slow, steady maturation in fine cooperage. The finish is all sweet grains and malted barley with touches of salt and the sea. Islay fans will be thrilled. Bunnahabhain fans won’t want to miss it. And you get all of that goodness at cask strength for \$149.99 thanks to our Direct Import pricing.

We were supposed to have three other Old Particular selections to share with you (an 18-year-old Auchentoshan, 28-year-old Glenturret, and 19-year-old Arran), but upon discovering their incredibly low pricing online, our customers snatched up every last bottle before we could get this newsletter out. It just goes to show that our efforts to bring value back to the category are being well received, and we couldn’t be happier about it. Make sure you keep your eyes peeled to the **K&L website**, because we still have a few tricks up our sleeve. There are some incredible deals in the works for later this fall.



It’s not easy to tune out a bagpiping busker of Glasgow.



The picturesque area of Hérisson, home to an unusual French whisky.

Le French Whisky Est Arrivé

By David Othenin-Girard

France is not a place known for its whisky. Wine, brandy, cheese—these are things that are distinctly French. But you may be surprised to know that France is the world's top consumer of Scotch whisky by volume. More than 13 million cases of Scotch are consumed there every year. The French are also well-known lovers of distillation. Whether in Alsace, Normandy or any other region, the French love to distill and consume spirits.

It should be no surprise that over the last 20 years, nearly 40 French whisky distilleries have opened up. These are often small, artisan distillers who make a tiny bit of whisky as part of their standard business, but some have committed fully to the category. Even more impressive, despite their countrymen's astronomical consumption of Scotch whisky, these new distillers have, by and large, committed to crafting products that are completely unique to their region, even going so far as to specifically avoid influences from other types of whisky to ensure their distinctiveness. We've been on a search over the last year for the best, most compelling offerings from the wide world of French whisky, and we are now proud to offer these special products exclusively at K&L.

Uberach

When I first arrived in Uberach my worst fears were confirmed: the distillery doors were sealed shut. I'd arrived in town without ever actually making contact with the distillery. My emails to the website had gone unnoticed and the phones seemed to ring off the hook. After three unsuccessful days of scouring Switzerland for the next great single malt (it's not in Switzerland), I'd decided to drive to Alsace

on a chance. But there I stood, the bright Alsatian sun gleaming and the unassuming little distillery looking like it hadn't been used in years. In fact, everything about Uberach is unassuming. The strikingly beautiful drive from Basel had gone by in a flash, darting between the small Alsatian villages; they all start to blend together. I'd arrived early in the small, sleepy hamlet, not more than a bend in the road really, and nearly missed it. Just a grouping of several homes, most of them rather modern and not as picturesque as other villages in the area. A tiny boulangerie, a miniscule bistro and this desolate distillery were all I saw. As I drove through the sleepy streets I came across a small industrial area just outside town. Some modern modular buildings had been erected there, but again no sign of life. The local organic brewery sat silently, but I noticed a small wine shop in the corner. I spent the next hour quizzing the shopkeeper about Alsace, eau de vie and, of course, malt whisky. Uberach, despite its small stature, was in fact home to *two* world-class distilleries. Alsace, you see, is blessed with an incredible abundance of fresh fruit. The finest soils and climate create what many consider to be the fruit basket of France. Until recently, distillers mostly made their living off their neighbors, distilling the excess fruit from local orchards and selling it back to the growers. The very best developed relationships with their best growers and began producing superior quality eau de vies. That's how the Bertrand Distillery started some 150 years ago, their founder's motto a good indication of the commitment to quality: "Seeking perfection through the love of a job well done."

As I left the wine store, the shopkeeper assured me that someone would eventually be by the distillery to open up. I ducked into the little bistro and quickly realized the reason the streets had seemed so desolate: the entire town was gathered inside that little restaurant. Construction workers, businessmen, young professionals, all had stopped their work day by noon to walk into this restaurant, order a bottle of wine and enjoy some of the most exceptional food I'd had the whole trip.

A glass of the local Pinot and the noix de veau with chanterelles put my worries at ease. After my exceptional lunch at Restaurant de la Forêt, I made my way back to the distillery.

By this time, the front doors were wide open, exposing the beautiful, antique alembic stills shining in the sunlight. I made my way around the building until I found a little office staffed by a very elegant woman. I think she was quite surprised to have an American there, and she ushered me into a small gift shop and introduced me to a distillery worker who walked me through the lineup. Stylistically, the range of casks, all sourced from French wine regions, function very similarly to the aging options in Scotland, with new and used French oak correlating with bourbon or virgin oak; Banyuls giving an almost Oloroso sherry quality; the Rasteau and Rivesaltes acting like port pipes and the vin jaune bringing some flinty mushroom, somewhat similar to the effects of a fino sherry aging. When I asked my guide if any of the malts we had tried would be available, he said almost certainly no. Everything was made in small batches and production is tiny, so he couldn't guarantee that anything would be available.

We'd have to wait for the owner, Mr. Metzger, he said. Demoralized, but not defeated, I thanked the generous staff, left my card and prayed for the best. As I was walking out, Isabelle called down from the office, "Wait, wait, I have Mr. Metzger on the phone." I rushed back to the office and took the phone to hear a gruff voice ask me what I planned to do and why I was there. I said that I worked for one of the best stores in the States and that we would be honored to be their partner in California. Seeming surprised, but not at all shocked that I'd loved his whisky, Mr. Metzger said that I was the first American to ever visit the distillery. He then informed me that he won't allow his product to be sold on just any shelf in just any store. He selects his partners exactly for their commitment to independent producers, quality and integrity. I smiled and said, "You sir, I believe, are a perfect fit for us."

When I returned to Alsace this year, I finally got to meet the proprietor of the spectacular Bertrand Distillery. Jean Metzger is unflappable and direct, but also kind and gracious. He's a total local, but loves to go surfing in Sri Lanka and works as a lifeguard at the local pool to make ends meet. He's first and foremost a wine lover, wine before whisky without a doubt. It was this passion for wine that ultimately led him to attempt something special in the burgeoning category of Whisky d'Alsace. The AOC classification is finally done after nearly a decade of work (a big deal here in France), but distilling beer is not a new thing here. In fact, the distillery has a shared trademark (with two other local distillers) for an eau de vie of beer called Fleur de Biere that goes back many years. His first distillation of single malt (a wort containing no hops and 100% malted barley) was in 2003. While it was not the first malt whisky distilled in Alsace, Jean figures it was likely the second, and he makes a point of the fact that it was the first to be distilled with beer brewed in the same place as the distillation. The organic brewery next door is responsible for mashing and fermenting. This is why he calls it Uberach, homage to the place he feels is an essential element to the spirit's character. Other than the sense of terroir that he's trying to capture, the other element that is essential—as is true with almost all whisky—is the *élevage*, or aging.

That brings us to the barrels. Oh, God: the barrels he has are just silly. It's a veritable Rolodex of France's finest wine producers. It should be noted that while Metzger does work with some of France's most renowned and exciting wine producers, he does not feel that the intensity of the wine influence necessarily means better whisky. Certain casks, like the first-fill Banyuls (a fortified wine something akin to port), turn out rich, inky whiskies that are obviously heavily marked by the flavor of the wine. Jean prefers those same casks on the second or third fill. He's concerned with highlighting the malt and making sure the flavor of the spirit is not completely overshadowed by the cask influence.

I think that his most impressive whiskies are the oldest, with the most intense cask influence, but perhaps that will change as the quality of spirit and the average age improve. On that note, I did get a chance to taste a two-week-old spirit peated to 40ppm that has replaced the

less peaty versions from earlier distillations. It's clear that there's been a massive improvement in the base spirit over the last 13 years. This new spirit is full of sweet malt and earthy peat playing perfectly together. While it doesn't feel like a young Islay (it is malted on locally sourced peat, of course), the closest thing I can compare it to is the wonderful young spirit coming out of Kilchoman.

Unfortunately, due to many factors, the distillery can only produce a few weeks out of the year. With his small stills and bootstrap attitude, he's filling less than 30 barrels a year. We'll be lucky if we see any of Mr. Metzger's exceptional single cask products this year, but in the meantime you can check out his wonderfully unique and utterly quirky assemblage he bottled for especially for us.

Uberach "Assemblage" Alsace Single Malt Whisky (\$59.99) Using organic pilsner malt, about one-third of which is very lightly peated, Metzger adds the purest water in France, sourced from the legendary Vosges Nature Reserve. The beer is fermented using the brewer's yeast from the organic brewery down the way to about 6% ABV. It is then meticulously distilled twice in tiny, traditional Alsatian copper pots before being filled into either vin jaune, Rivasaltes, Rasteau, new French oak or Banyuls casks. Each of these unique barrels provides a completely different flavor after maturation. This small batch is a selection from some of the distillery's older stocks (around 6 years old), of reused French oak barrel and a second-use Banyuls cask, selected and bottled by hand exclusively for K&L Wine Merchants. Expect big, powerful aromas of ripe pear, candied yellow plum and malty grains. Only 160 bottles.



Hedgehog

The next wild French whisky that we stumbled upon is the very unusual Hedgehog whisky from the commune of Hérisson in Allier. The Hedgehog is unlike *any* other whisky in the world. It comes out of one man's passion and determination to make a truly unique regional whisky without the influence of any other production style or method. I mean, this guy—the whisky is distilled under the pseudonym *Mr. Balthazar*—literally didn't do any research on other ways to make whisky.

Located in the department of Allier, the center of France and the historic realm of the Duke of Bourbon, Hérisson (which means "Hedgehog" in French) is a popular summertime destination for theater lovers. Whisky lovers who venture behind the famous Church of St-Sauveur will find the workshop where Hedgehog was first produced in 1983. And on the wall inside the workshop is an old joke of W.C. Fields, slightly modified to fit the circumstances of this whisky: "One should always carry a small bottle of Hedgehog in case of a snake bite. And one should always have a small snake handy."

Hedgehog Single Grain French Whisky (\$44.99) Allier is renowned for two products, grain and oak. Together these two ingredients make something that hadn't been produced in the region in modern times: whisky! Mr. Balthazar begins with the finest organic corn grown within miles of the distillery. This is then milled with locally malted barley and mixed with a small amount of milled local rye. In the American style, the entire wort—with no filtration—is fermented slowly over a 10 to 14 day fermentation. After double distillation in a copper pot, at 60% ABV the spirit fills new barrels fashioned from the famous Tronçais oak. These barrels, used by the world's great wine and cognac producers, are the most sought-after in the industry. After one year in these new casks, the whisky is transferred for a minimum of three years into ex-cognac barrels where it mellows and matures. The result is one of the most unique spirits available anywhere in the world, and K&L is the exclusive US purveyor of this fine whisky. We received a tiny allocation.



Michel Couvreur

This leads us to the final K&L whisky that's fanning the flames of French whisky fandom. While we've worked with this producer for years, it is only recently that we've been able to buy directly from the importer and bring you this great whisky at an even better price. Although the man himself passed away a few years ago, his legacy lives on in the caves beneath Bouze-lès-Beaune, through the masterful work of his protégé and successor Jean-Arnaud Frantzen. J.A., as we affectionately call him, is every bit as passionate about whisky as Mr. Couvreur and has big plans for this idiosyncratic whisky brand. You can count on the fact that we'll be there every step of the way. In the meantime, we've got the best pricing and selection anywhere in the country on these exceptional Couvreur whiskies.

Michel Couvreur "Blossoming Auld Sherried" K&L Exclusive Malt Whisky (\$219.99) The Blossoming Auld Sherry is a recreation of the legendary malt whiskies of the Victorian era, a time when sherry and Scotch were both kept on hand in the cellars of England and Scotland's great estates and drawn for consumption as needed. Matured in one single butt of the freshest possible Montilla-Moriles casks, this whisky is redolent of that great wine of Jerez in a way that's simply not available in modern bottlings. This ultra-saturated butt from a solera started in the 1950s at Toro Albalá is one of a kind. Couvreur is the only producer



able to buy from the venerable bodega, and they receive the choicest butts delivered still wet to the cellars in Burgundy. The cask was kept in medium humidity for the majority of its maturation before being moved to the wettest part of Couvreur's cellar, where the extractive atmosphere is at a maximum. Age is inconsequential in terms of the quality here, but it is indeed older than all but the most expensive of Couvreur's offerings. A triumph!

Michel Couvreur "Peaty Overaged" K&L Exclusive Malt Whisky (\$82.99) Our peated version of the incredible sherry expression is a seamless creation that drinks like the best version of Johnnie Black ever, mixed with the most supple and soft expression of Macallan. It's a lush, unfiltered, creamy, caramel-laden dream of a whisky composed only of malts 12 years and older. There's a bit of peat on the finish, but the soft sherry is the star. (Note: do *not* cut the hard wax seal; tap it so that it breaks.)



Michel Couvreur "Pale Single Single" Malt Whisky (\$99.99) The Pale Single is a lighter style of whisky, in a very different style than his other expressions. Expect a quite fruity and floral bouquet, but with a lingering note of toasted almonds and savory richness. This bottling of the Pale Single Single was aged for more than 10 years in fino sherry casks. It begins its life in the middle-humidity part of the cellar before a final three years in the most humid part of the cellar. This reduces the original fill strength of 70% to at least 56%, a huge reduction in a relatively short period of time. Before bottling, Couvreur slowly reduces to a drinking strength of 45%.



Michel Couvreur "Very Sherried" 27 Year Old Single Cask Single Malt Whisky (\$699.99) This is the Holy Grail of Couvreur's cellars, from the oldest stocks and from a single cask that was pre-selected through exceptional cask management over the last three decades. Tropical style with a fascinating, sensual fragrance. Dark amber and slightly reddish in color with ripe and lush aromas. Notes of fallen fruit, toffee, damp earth and spicy oak, with a hint of mint and anise. Rich, full, thick and somewhat viscous, this evolves on the palate, with a very long finish.

A New Renaissance of the Italian Spirit

By David Driscoll

A few years ago, back when I still ran a regular podcast and did interviews with distillers from all over the world, I conducted an audio interview with the Nonino sisters—the three famous (and beautiful) heirs to the Nonino family distillery in Italy's Friuli region, one of the country's most famous grappa producers. We were hoping to bring attention to the traditional and regional spirits of Italy—a blossoming category we thought would be of immense interest to our cocktail consumers who couldn't seem to get enough Campari and sweet vermouth to satiate their thirst. In 2016, however, that message is no longer in need of broadcast. The vast and complex world of Italian spirits is no longer a secret. The word is out: the cat is completely out of the bag. The category is all the rage with today's curious cocktail drinkers, and bartenders across America are continuing to innovate and create exciting new drinks from the country's long-held and spirited traditions. If you thought there were few Italian cocktails beyond the ubiquitous Negroni and Aperol Spritz these days, think again. You'll find the Nonino family's amaro recipe on drink menus across the nation mixed with whiskey, rum, Cognac, tequila, cachaca and even mezcal. The combination of sweet spices with bitter herbs adds an incredible depth to a number of different libations, no matter what the base ingredient. Amaro means "bitter" in Italian, and as America seems to have lost its sweet tooth as it pertains to alcohol over the last decade, it has developed a real taste for Italy's unique category of bitter liqueurs known as amari. Spirits that were once sipped neat as a way to settle the stomach after dinner are now moving to the forefront of the meal. As the awareness for Italy's historic regional spirits has continued to spread, it's brought with it a new renaissance of distillation in the old country and the resurrection of a category once associated with older generations long past. It's also opened the door for new developments in Italy, casting a wider spotlight on distillers who are branching out into whiskey and even gin. I caught up once again with Elisabetta Nonino this past week to pick her brain about the recent explosion and find out how her family is adapting to the trend.

David: I just tried to order more Amaro Nonino yesterday and I was told by the distributor that the product has back-ordered because—once again—it's sold out from the supplier. This is becoming a regular thing! You must be seeing record sales in the United States right now due to our country's current fascination with amari.

Elisabetta: It's doing very, very well, both in the United States and in Canada. There's a big amaro trend in North America right now, especially with the mixology scene.

David: Are you visiting more with bartenders and sommeliers these days rather than with retailers and supermarkets?

Elisabetta: Yes, I was just at Tales of the Cocktail in New Orleans. It's funny because in Europe the bartenders are saying that London is the origin of this new interest in amari. On Monday, we had a meeting because they're starting a new mixologist fair and event in Italy, so there were a few bartenders at the meeting saying that London was the



Elisabetta, Antonella, and Cristina Nonino with a bottle of their Moscato grappa.

source. But I told them: I don't think so. I think it's coming from the US, especially the West Coast. Starting about eight to ten years ago we saw interest in San Francisco, Seattle and Portland for amari, so I think it started there. Don't you agree?

David: Yes, I do. I remember seeing Manhattans made with Amaro Nonino instead of vermouth back in 2007 when I first started exploring the Bay Area bar scene.

Elisabetta: There is a massive consumption of amaro happening in the American cocktail scene. They are the pioneers, in my opinion. If you study the history of American cocktails before and during Prohibition when alcohol was illegal, I think that's the origin of today's mixology. The beauty is that Europe—and especially Italy with amaro—has a long tradition of classic liqueurs. In Italy we make amari, liqueurs and bitters—we use all three terms. They have always been of a very high quality and a very precise flavor. We used to drink them straight, but the American mixologists have shown that it's possible to use them in a different way with very good results.

David: Are you seeing bartenders in Europe follow suit?

Elisabetta: In London, yes, because that's the most important place for cocktails in Europe right now. In Berlin, too, from what I've heard. There are a lot of famous bartenders in London right now who are Italian, so they understand the tradition and the history of vermouth and bitters from Italy. Globalization has helped to spread these ideas, I think. What I have noticed, however, is that in Europe we often use fewer ingredients in our cocktails than what's normal in the US.

David: As someone with a long family tradition of producing after-dinner spirits, what does your family think about this new trend of drinking Nonino products as part of a cocktail before dinner?

Elisabetta: We are excited! It's a great thing. I think it's also the best way to introduce younger people to spirits, so that eventually—when they are adults—they can appreciate grappa and amaro by itself. When I was young and just starting to drink grappa or a glass of wine, I didn't really like it. I think I was like most young people—I wasn't

used to it yet. In Italy and in my family, we are used to eating and drinking very good products, but when you are in your early twenties it's difficult to appreciate that quality when it comes to spirits. If you start by mixing it, however, you can dilute the alcohol a bit and start to understand the flavor slowly. Then, when you are in your thirties or forties, you can start to appreciate grappa and amaro the traditional way. With cocktails, this same evolution works perfectly.

David: Do you think grappa will follow the same path as amaro? Are you using grappa in cocktails now?

Elisabetta: Yes, and we are proud to be one of the pioneers to use grappa in cocktails. We have a cocktail that my mother helped develop at the Grand Hotel bar in Rome made with our grappa, so we have been interested in grappa cocktails for some time. But the real moment has been in the last five years. It's nice to see more young people appreciating spirits and not linking grappa or amaro to merely something that their grandparents would drink.

David: People in the US are fascinated by that tradition, I think. It's almost cooler because your grandparents did drink these spirits. How do you feel when you come to America and see all these young bartenders mixing your family's traditional spirits in a new way?

Elisabetta: It's incredible because in the US, people are really in love with Italian spirits right now, especially the amari. It's nice to see so many amari that I remember from my youth—that I remember from the advertisements—come back. In Italy, they had all but disappeared. We've been producing our amaro since 1945, but it was originally produced and sold just in Friuli. It was a regional product. My parents were always very focused on pure spirits and distillation—brandy and grappa—whereas the amaro is a mix of ingredients with a brandy base. To see a regional spirit like that become popular in the US makes us very proud of our tradition. It's also nice to see a renewed focus on quality in spirits. People everywhere are appreciating the high quality of what Italy is doing, but in a different way. In this case, globalization is a good thing.

David: Are young people and bartenders in Italy now embracing their country's traditional spirits as well?

Elisabetta: Yes, in the big cities we're starting to see more cocktail bars. Compared to the US it's a very small number, but it's increasing. The bartenders and mixologists are all very young people—in their twenties and early thirties—and they are very interested in the history. They love to research the ingredients and the historical background of cocktails as well. Maybe they weren't interested in spirits at first, but they fell in love after learning more and more about the history and the tradition involved. There's a high level of knowledge required today to make classic cocktails. When there is research, there is usually an increase in quality as well, so I think we'll continue to see good things. Research and innovation go hand-in-hand.

David: Do you think the resurgence and research we're seeing now with traditional Italian spirits might lead to innovation at Nonino?

Elisabetta: Yes, we may look back at some old recipes from my grandmother. My father lost his father when he was eight years old, so my grandmother Sylvia Nonino ran the distillery by herself until my father was about twenty. My father learned how to distill from his

mother. When I was in elementary school I remember we had a big selection of liqueurs and amari. My father, however, was more focused on pure distillation. We will probably go back and look at some of those recipes—something linked to tradition, but also innovation.

David: What does the older generation at Nonino think about the new trend of Nonino cocktails?

Elisabetta: In the beginning, they were not really convinced. However, they realized that this is the gateway to traditional appreciation, so it's great. Nowadays when we go out to a restaurant, my mom loves to drink a Nonino grappa and tonic instead of wine. She says she feels better the next day after a cocktail. She doesn't have a headache and she thinks it's better for her overall health. She loves that she can still sense the fresh aromatics of the grappa, but with less alcohol.

David: Lower alcohol drinks are really becoming the norm. We eat differently today than previous generations did. We're not sitting down for multi-course meals, so it makes sense that we would alter our drinking practices around this evolution. It's nice to see, however, that traditional Italian spirits are adapting to that change.

Elisabetta: For sure. That is the beauty when you look at the evolution of the way we eat, the way we dress and the way we live. We're able to appreciate food and drink in ways that weren't possible before. Sixty years ago many people didn't have heat in their home, or air conditioning. Most people did physical jobs to make a living. Now people work in the office, so they eat differently—they don't need a big meal at lunch anymore. Sixty years ago you might eat meat once a week and you were lucky to have it; now you can have it every day if you like. Since then we've moved from fundamental needs based on survival to more specialization. Back then wine was red or white, but now we want to know the vintage, the variety, and the region; with spirits, it's the same.

If you're a whiskey drinker looking to try using the **Nonino Amaro (\$44.99)** in a fun cocktail, here are a few options. Personally, I haven't made a Manhattan with vermouth since trying it this way:

The Amaro Nonino Manhattan

2 oz. rye or bourbon
 3/4 oz. Amaro Nonino
 2 dashes of bitters
 Stir well and strain into a cocktail glass with or without ice. Add a cherry!

There's another drink someone showed me once called the Paper Plane, that, like a Negroni, is easy to remember because it's all equal parts (so long as you remember what those parts are!).

The Paper Plane

3/4 oz. bourbon or rye
 3/4 oz. Amaro Nonino
 3/4 oz. Aperol
 3/4 oz. lemon juice
 Shake with ice and strain into a cocktail glass.



Brown Spirit from the Boot: K&L Exclusive Italian Brandy

By David Driscoll

I've been waiting a long time for this day, the moment when we could start talking about Italy's potential as a serious source of distilled spirits beyond the ubiquitous vermouth, amaro and herbal liqueur selections that are sweeping the cocktail culture.

Distillation has been practiced in Italy since the early days of grappa and medicinal remedies. Unlike what's happening with the craft distillation scene in America, many of the "new" labels we're seeing from Italy come from companies established in the 1800s. In many cases these producers have not only generations of knowledge as it pertains to spirits, but also plenty of back inventory. Take the case of Guido Zarri as an example, the man behind the Villa Zarri brand. In addition to his fantastic amaro, his delicious nocino and his dangerously drinkable ciliegia, Guido has mature stocks of Cognac-style brandy (distilled from Trebbiano, basically Ugni Blanc grown in Italy) dating back to the late 1980s. As if his incredibly well-priced 10- and 21-year-old brandies weren't enough to persuade you of his prowess, I decided to dig a little deeper into his cellars.

"I want to do a single barrel, and I want to do it at full proof. Is that OK with you?" I asked Guido during a phone conversation earlier this year.

"Yes, I actually think it tastes better that way," he replied, almost as if he was embarrassed by that admission.

I laughed and reassured him: "So do a lot of other people."

Last month I decided to do a little survey with some of my most knowledgeable whisky customers. At a private dinner event, I poured each person a small glass of the 1991 Villa Zarri K&L single cask from an advance sample I had received from Guido, then I bid everyone adieu. The next morning I had multiple emails from these guys asking me just what in the hell they had tasted that evening. Most of them were shocked to discover it was brandy. All of them were stunned that it had been distilled in Italy. It was when I told them the potential price that the excitement really got going. I was hoping to sell it for just under a hundred bucks.

Emilia-Romagna is a beautiful place. Located just north of Bologna, the Villa Zarri estate is set in between rolling hills of green. The property itself dates back to 1578 and has hosted scores of parties, concerts, exhibits and events over those many centuries, but distillation at the site is a rather recent development in context. Everything Guido Zarri does in the distillery is exactly as is done in the Charentes: the grapes are the same variety, the stills are the same shape and size, and the strength of the spirit comes off just over 70%, as it does in Cognac. It's in the barrel room, however, that Guido changes direction. Rather than age his brandies in used Limousin oak, he starts each distillate off in new oak casks to impart color and intensity before transferring them into refill barrels over time. He also does not top up the barrels to prevent evaporation, instead choosing to transfer the brandies into fewer and fewer barrels as they begin to lose volume. The result is a richer, darker and more oak-influenced spirit,

one that does not require coloring agents or added sugar to soften the mouthfeel. The brandies are impressive and all-encompassing from the very first sip. But, if you're a whisky fan, wait until you taste that concentrated flavor at 59.7%.

On the nose, the aromas meander between stewed fruits, oak spice and burnt vanilla. On the palate, the flavors continue to evolve along the same track, but what shocks you is the richness and the power. I have to imagine that bourbon fans will be drawn to that sheer strength and Scotch fans to the maturity and the concentration. Again, my favorite part about this whole deal is the price. Our very, very best Cognacs typically retail in the \$90 to \$150 range, and that's at the watered-down 40% ABV. Here we've got single barrel, unadulterated brandy at full proof with 24 years of age at \$99.99. It doesn't matter what you like to drink: Scotch, bourbon or Cognac. If you're a fan of brown spirits, you're going to love this. The proof? Our owner just bought a bottle, and he drinks about one glass of brown spirits per year. Looks like we know what this year's selection will be. Don't wait for a better Armagnac or Cognac to come later in the year. There's nothing better than this bottle on the horizon.

Villa Zarri 24 Year Old "K&L Exclusive" Single Barrel Cask Strength Italian Brandy (\$99.99) Nestled in the hills of Emilia-Romagna is the Villa Zarri distillery, a small production run by Guido Zarri with a stunning portfolio of traditional Italian recipes and impeccably aged brandies. The Cognac-style brandies are distilled on an alembic pot still from Trebbiano (the Italian version of Ugni Blanc, same as Cognac) and aged in French Limousin oak for at least 10 years. They are unadulterated, have no added caramel or sugar, and are like fuller, richer, more interesting versions of their French cousins. I was absolutely smitten with the 10- and 21-year-old brandies the first time I tasted them, so much so that I immediately requested barrel samples to hopefully purchase older, higher proof selections directly for K&L in the future. Guido was excited about working with us on a project and provided us with an incredible 1991 vintage 24-year-old brandy at cask strength, combining the richness and the finesse of great Cognac with the power and depth of a fine single malt Scotch. It's not only one of the best brandies I've ever tasted, it's one of the most reasonably priced spirits I've ever tasted for the quality involved. At nearly 60% ABV, there's a lot of heat, so a drop or two of water really helps open up the fruit. Underneath all that power is plenty of rich vanilla, sweet oak, lush stone fruit and Cognac-like finesse, but without all the sticky additives. What you get here is almost like a Glenmorangie version of brandy.



And a Barrel (Or Two) of Rum

By David Othenin-Girard

For more than the 10 years that I've been in this industry, the rum category has been the "next big thing." There have been some successes, some great products sold, but honestly that prediction has never come to fruition. While other brown spirits like bourbon, Scotch and tequila have soared in popularity, rum has remained relatively less explosive. Sure, there's a vibrant tiki culture and a huge amount of very fine rum available, but the category follows the leader, and right now it's walking in circles.

I won't dive further into that hornets' nest here, but the way to break out of the cycle is to find and present world-class products that just happen to be rum. Instead of pigeonholing a category, we need to bring you rum that transcends the ubiquitous, syrupy sweet style and present a picture of rum that's completely new and fresh. We're lucky in that respect because while traipsing through warehouses in Scotland, we occasionally stumble across a barrel that looks starkly different from the others. We *always* taste the rum when it's there. The very best become Faultline, and we ask local artists to design labels for us.

After a few years of not being able to offer any rum under the Faultline label, we're excited to announce the arrival of two very special casks from one of our partners in Scotland that we believe will change your mind about rum forever.

Faultline 15 Year Old "K&L Exclusive" Nicaraguan Single Barrel Rum (\$59.99) This monstrous little cask comes from a distillery, located outside of Chichigalpa on the western coast of Nicaragua, that is widely considered to be one of the finest Spanish-style distilleries outside of Cuba. In fact, many have speculated that this distillery is responsible for much of the expansion of Cuba's rum exports, due to the stark similarities in style and unprecedented growth in that category. Regardless, we *never* see this stuff as a single cask, high proof, unadulterated product, and this does remind me of the most old-school Spanish styles I can remember. Big nose of fudge, caramel, sweet earth, slight barnyard and fresh cut wood. After some time, more coffee and darker fruit flavors. On the palate, it shows great richness with a tiny bit of rum funk to balance out the elegant, sweet, dark flavors.



Faultline 17 Year Old "K&L Exclusive" Caribbean Blend Single Barrel Rum (\$79.99) This is Caribbean rum in the Spanish style. We cannot confirm the source, but it's absolutely delicious. In fact, I have been unable to confirm *any* details of this rum other than that it comes from the Caribbean and it was distilled in 1998. The flavor profile is very much in the old-school, drier style. A big dusty mineral note framed by tropical pineapple, overripe banana and powerful baking spice. On the palate, fresh grassy cane, touches of mint and anise, and dried fruit. This is a totally heady and unique style that won't be available anywhere else.

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