



TO'AK GLOBAL PAIRING CHALLENGE

Pairing Recommendations by Pedro Shanahan from Seven Grand

SEVEN GRAND: THE MECCA OF WHISKEY IN L.A.



Shortly after Carl and I launched our 2014 edition of To'ak Chocolate, we did a tasting event at Seven Grand, generally regarded as the best whiskey bar in Los Angeles.

The place is a veritable library of whiskey selections from around the world, armed with an extremely knowledgeable staff in a stylish downtown space. For whiskey fanatics, there is no other place like it in all of California.

After our tasting event at Seven Grand was over, Carl and I hung out with the staff for a while and started playing around with different To'ak-whiskey pairings. At the time, I naively believed that we were quickly coming to learn all there is to learn in this interesting field, and I'm happy to say that I was proven wrong. I asked one of the bartenders to recommend a smooth un-peated whiskey for us to pair with. He said, "Why un-peated?" I said that I assumed the peat of the whisky would drown out the chocolate, but he respectfully begged to differ. He said something like, "I bet I could put a few peaty whiskies in front of you right now that will change your opinion on

that." Carl and I took him up on his offer, and of course he was right. It turned out that peaty whisky and To'ak chocolate play together like a recently-infatuated couple—they're both intrigued by the differences they find in each other and they simultaneously celebrate their unique commonalities.

This experience set in motion our pursuit of a Laphroaig cask to age our chocolate in. Thus, our Vintage 2015 Single Malt Islay Cask Matured edition is ultimately the result of late-night experiments at Seven Grand. So I felt it was only appropriate to ask the good folks at Seven Grand to recommend whiskey pairings for this particular edition as well as three others. Seven Grand's resident Spirit Guide, Pedro Shanahan, did the honors. After he finalized his recommendations, I talked to him about his choices. The transcript of this conversation is published below.

— Jerry Toth



*Pedro Shanahan
"Spirit Guide" at Seven Grand in L.A.*





JT: Pedro, why don't you start out by telling us a little bit about yourself and Seven Grand.

PS: Sure. So, I am the Spirit Guide for the 213 Hospitality Group, which is headquartered in downtown Los Angeles. We also have bars in San Diego and Austin now, but we started about 10 years ago, opening bars in downtown Los Angeles, and I was on board for the creation of the Seven Grand whiskey bar, which was, at that time located in what was basically part of Skid Row, on 7th and Grand. Now, ten years later, they refer to this area as the "7th Street Corridor", and we were one of the anchor properties that kind of encouraged other businesses to come in. But when we initially started, we were the only business open on our block after 6:00 pm. So, we've seen the whole downtown come up around us.

I helped curate the whiskey collection here, and I self-educated myself in the process of building our whiskey wall. When we opened, we had a couple hundred whiskeys, and now we have over 800. Someone had to go through all the cases of different whiskey and figure out what to buy, and that was my job.

So, I just learned as I went, and now I've been curating for the Whiskey Society in downtown Los Angeles for seven years. In the last three years, I've been curating for the Rum Society over at Caña Rum Bar, and then, also, the Mezcal Collective at Las Perlas. Las Perlas, Caña, and Seven Grand are three single spirit focused bars. Las Perlas was the first mezcaleria on the West Coast, and Caña is a dedicated rum bar. Seven Grand, of course, is a whiskey bar. And in each of these societies, there are community interest groups in which people can come in and be educated, and get to sample all different kinds of spirits, sometimes with brand ambassadors and other times I do the teachings myself.

That's a bit of my background in terms of booze education. Now I educate our bartenders at all of our bars on how to help the customers find whatever spirits they're looking for. Based on questions we ask and the feedback we get from the guest, we try to steer them in the direction of the exact whiskey, rum, or mezcal that they're looking for.

JT: Do people use the term 'spirit sommelier', or is there an official term for that?

PS: Not really. I prefer cicerone to sommelier, but there's not really an official term. There's a couple independent organizations that are trying to establish themselves as the governing body, so to speak, and they offer spirit sommelier education and programs, but there's nothing that's really big and established at this point. In the United States, you can do sommelier training for wine, and you can do beer cicerone training, but in the whiskey realm there's nothing on a national level that I'm aware of, at this point, that is widely recognized as "the" certification or "the" certifiers.

JT: What is the term you said they use for you?

PS: My title is Spirit Guide. But that's a bit tongue-in-cheek because I teach yoga too, and that was the joke, initially—that I can heal you from the whiskey with the yoga, or heal you from the yoga with the whiskey, just whatever you need today.

JT: Alright, I like that—Spirit Guide. Now let's take a look at your pairing selections. Let's just go in order of how you queued them up on the list you sent me.

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But that's a bit tongue-in-cheek because I teach yoga too, and that was the joke, initially—that I can heal you from the whiskey with the yoga, or heal you from the yoga with the whiskey.*





PAIRING NUMBER ONE

To'ak Vintage 2014 Andean Alder Matured 3 Years
+ *Glenfarclas 12 Year Old Single Malt Scotch Whisky (Speyside, Scotland)*

PS: For Andean Alder, I went with Glenfarclas. It's one of the most underappreciated single malt scotches in the Speyside region. It's not a huge distillery, but they have some of the largest stills in all of Speyside. And so, a big huge copper pot still will give you a really beefy, oily spirit, and it has flavors

like stewed fruit and orange and dark chocolate. It's a beautiful, beautiful whiskey, and I think that the buttery-ness of the chocolate is complemented by those dark fruit notes that you find in the Glenfarclas 12.



To'ak Vintage 2014 Andean Alder Matured 3 Years
Tannic opening, campfire, roasted beef, spice-herbal transition (oregano, rosemary), a fruity sweetness comes in with acidic cranberry and is punctuated with creamy spice at the end. This chocolate is for more experienced palates.





PAIRING NUMBER TWO

To'ak El Niño Harvest 2016
+ *Russell's Reserve 6 Year Old Rye Whiskey (Kentucky, U.S.)*

PS: Your El Niño Harvest chocolate is insane, one of the most interesting chocolates I've ever had in my life. It's just wild, all over the place, all kinds of flavors are going on. It's bitter, it has some green elements to it, it's very earthy, and I thought that the spice in the Russell's Reserve rye kind of cuts through, but at the same time, complements the earthiness of the chocolate. In the pairing, it actually comes off very sweet and rich. Of all the pairings I tried, it's the one in which both elements—chocolate and spirit—brought out better things in each other, which is always special when you do pairings.

JT: I haven't tried them together yet—now I will.

PS: Yeah, that Russell's Reserve 6-year rye is a total homerun hitter. It's not a very well-known whiskey, but for the people who know it, they're dedicated fans. It is an exceptional whiskey.



To'ak El Niño Harvest 2016

Wood and a touch of flowers on the nose, with an earthy play of buttery citrus, red fruits, ripe banana, and a trace of Eucalyptus on the palate. This is a delightfully difficult chocolate to figure out.





PAIRING NUMBER THREE

*To'ak Vintage 2014 Cognac Cask Matured 3 Years
+ Redbreast 12 Year Old Irish Whiskey (Ireland)*

PS: So our first pairing was a single malt scotch, the second was an American, and for this one I chose an Irish whiskey. It's made at the new Cork facility, which is where Jameson is made, but the style of Redbreast is different—they don't use any column-still whiskey in the Redbreast. It's all pure pot-still whiskey. So, again, that leads to a beefier, more oily spirit than, say, a lot of whiskeys that are produced in column stills. So, really, a bright,

brassy, fruity whiskey, but with a strong isopropyl backbone that gives the Cognac-aged chocolate something to wrap itself around in a really interesting way. And the chocolate does an interesting thing with the whiskey, too—it brings out the booziness of the whiskey at first, and then it kind of tames it. It's a beautiful pairing.



To'ak Vintage 2014 Cognac Cask Matured 3 Years

Matured in a fifty-year-old French oak cognac cask. The fragrance of this edition exceeds even our loftiest expectations. On the palette, deep notes of dark fruit (black mission fig, raisins) rise to the fore, with a silky, winey undertone and long sumptuous finish.





PAIRING NUMBER FOUR

*To'ak Vintage 2015 Single Malt Islay Cask Matured 2 Years
+ Hakushu 12 Year Old Single Malt Whisky (Japan)*

PS: When you first described this edition to me and I hadn't even smelled the chocolate or anything, at that point I was like, "I have an idea." Just by the description of what the chocolate was, I immediately thought of the Hakushu 12 Year because the Hakushu is a slightly peated Japanese whiskey, which is highly unusual, but it's very clean and green. It's verdant and very refreshing

with the tiniest hint of smoke, and I thought that the pairing with the peaty chocolate would bring out the smokiness of the whiskey, and it definitely does. They pair so nicely with such a freshness to the whiskey, and then a total richness with the Islay Cask dark chocolate. They just come together beautifully, like a wedding dance.



To'ak Vintage 2015 Single Malt Islay Cask Matured 2 Years

Matured in a Laphroaig Scotch Whisky cask for two years. Delicately infused with the peat and smoke of an Islay single malt, balanced with hints of sea grass and ocean spray. The caramel and fruit notes of the chocolate come through on the other side, imbued with a savory breath of fresh air that is unlike anything we've ever tasted before, anywhere.





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