



In Defense of...

# Whisky Terroir

WHY THE WHERE IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE WHAT

by Amanda Victoria, Communications Director at The Scotch Malt Whisky Society



As I sit here in my at-home whisky collection . . . err “office,” in rainy San Francisco, I am reminded of where Scottish barley began. In what has become a lifetime of study about spirits and wine, the major concepts I have learned to focus on in evaluation are terroir, raw material and traditions found in the production process.

The influence of geography, where the spirit started *agriculturally* speaking, and the people who have made it over the decades (and their specific styles and traditions) will have us arriving at the core of studying wine, spirits and, yes, our wonderful Scotch whisky.

For Scotch whisky, this can be broken down as flavor notes that are indicative of Scotland’s vast geographical landscape, the trickery of mastering our beloved barley (malting, fermentation and distillation) and the casks it then takes rest in. That being said, there are a few glaring elephants in the room: terroir, aging and even (gasp!) blends.

The notion of terroir can be often argued about in Scotch whisky (and beyond). I rest my case quickly with Speyside peat and Islay peat, two profiles we adore and which we see over and over again coming from these specific regions. However, it must be noted that when dealing with single casks, as I do in my day job at the Scotch Malt Whisky Society, terroir becomes a bit more complicated.

While single casks have started their lives at certain distilleries in certain regions, they often have been moved about. Even if only from one side of the warehouse to the other, this still has an impact on the whisky inside, mostly in terms of temperature and overall climate.

The young whisky is influenced both by the reincarnated cask and, perhaps even moreso, by the time it spends in it; where the cask started its life has great influence on the liquid inside. As single casks will not end up blended, the wood is the only mother it ever knows! For wood and whisky, their time together is a most special time that can yield numerous results of various quality and style. This can have significant influence on the final whisky, sometimes despite the geography (terroir) where this special dance is taking place.

Whatever your perspective on terroir and whisky, it’s important to be transported through your glass while sipping. Through the never-ending learning process in my studies of spirits, I always make sure to reflect upon where the whisky came from and by whom it was made. I give cheers to barley and how we have been able to harness all its beauty! ■■

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