



BRANDING – CONFUSION OR INNOVATION? WILLIAM GRANT CASE STUDY

Companies play around with brands in a way which often leaves consumers more confused than enlightened. There may be very good reasons for reshaping or re-slanting a particular expression within a brand family or even doing a complete overhaul of the brand itself, but one questions the extent to which the market is really properly informed as to the reasons for such changes.

Grant is a family name almost synonymous with Scotch whisky, as in Glen Grant, J & G Grant of Glenfarclas fame, and William Grant of Glenfiddich and the various blends carrying the William Grant signature. Let us consider the latter.

More or less from the company's inception their brand of blended whisky was known as "**Grant's**



Standfast” (stand fast being the war-cry of the Clan Grant). It was shortened to **“Grant’s”** and then rebranded as **“Grant’s Family Reserve”** in the 1980’s. And so it remained as the company’s flag bearer with a 12 years old deluxe version known as **“Grant’s Royal”**. All nice and straightforward.

Then things started to get more complicated – or interesting – with **“Voyager”** being introduced for the travel retail sector and their **“Distillery Edition”** for sale exclusively at the Glenfiddich Distillery Visitors’ Centre. Along came **“Grant’s Ale Cask Reserve”** and **“Sherry Cask Reserve”** to add further allure to the brand. In 2014 **“Signature”** was added to the range supposedly to appeal to the younger consumer. But no time to rest or consolidate with the announcement in July 2018 that those latter three brands were all consigned to the archives. But not so, as they have all now re-appeared, albeit in slightly different formats – see below.

The core range, as we understand it and for the sake of clarity, is now **“Grant’s Triple Wood”** (formerly **“Grant’s Family Reserve”**), **“Grant’s Triple Wood Smoky”**, **“Grant’s Ale Cask Edition”**, **“Grant’s Rum Cask Edition”**, **“Grant’s 8 Year Old Sherry Cask Edition”**, **“Grant’s 8 Year Old”**, **“Grant’s Rare 18 Year Old”**, **“Grant’s 25 Year Old”**, **“Grant’s Signature”**, **“Grant’s Master Blender’s Edition”**, **“Grant’s Select Reserve”** and **“Grant’s Family Reserve”**. But what has happened to the once much loved and familiar **“Grant’s 12 Year Old”**?

And then in a further twist we now have **“Grant’s Distinction Blended Scotch Whisky”** launched not only exclusively for sale in India but also bottled there. I wonder how long it will be before we see **“Distinction”** popping up elsewhere. And what of its make up? Is it simply bulk blend being shipped for bottling in India, with or without the addition of local water?

If you are into collecting whisky the William Grant label is a fascinating one to follow. Apart from the variations mentioned above, very early brands were “**Best Procurable**”, “**Grant’s Liqueur**” and “**Hare and Hounds**”. These all long pre-date the introduction of the signature triangular bottle (used also originally for the company’s Glenfiddich and Balvenie single malts) which was in favour for several decades.

Through the William Grant private label subsidiary, Quality Spirits International, there are various brands of standard blends, such as “**Fulstrength**”, “**James Alexander**”, “**James King**”, “**John O’Groats**”, “**Scottish Collie**”, “**Highland Bird**”, “**Highland Reserve**”, “**Monarch of the Glen**” and “**Castle Rock**”, although they seem to come and go with no particular rationale – at least for public consumption. “**The Gordon Highlanders**” seems to have moved on and is now back in the William Grant stable proper as a 12 year old for the Columbian market. Another subsidiary, Alexander MacGregor & Co, produces “**Clan MacGregor**”, originally as a bulk blend for the US market where it was bottled locally, but now available in many other markets.

There have also been various blended – or vatted - malts including “**Burnside**”, “**Vintners Choice**” and “**Wardhead**”. These seem to have given way to four distinct malt collections – “**Spey River**” with three aged expressions, “**Creag Isle**” with 4 Islay and Island expressions, “**Grangestone**” with six different malts, and “**Glen Fohdry**” (wherever that is, if it actually exists) with three Speyside malts. However, from which distilleries these actually come, remains unstated.

“**Monkey Shoulder**” gets special treatment now as a core William Grant brand to reflect its remarkable

popularity particularly as a pouring whisky in the cocktail-bar scene.

It is, however, with its single malts that the company made its true mark, firstly, with "[Glenfiddich](#)" and then "[The Balvenie](#)" but these icons need a totally separate audit of all their different expressions - currently 33 for Glenfiddich and 46 for The Balvenie, with many more now of "historic" standing. Subsequent single malt additions have been "**Ailsa Bay Lowland Single Malt**", "**Kininvie Speyside Single Malt**", and "**Ladyburn Lowland Single Malt**". Expressions from these three are very rare, [Ladyburn](#) having been out of production since 1975.

William Grant have also experimented with single grain expressions from its Girvan distillery, firstly as "**Black Barrel Single Grain Whisky**", introduced in 1985 but subsequently withdrawn, and then as "**Girvan Patent Still Single Grain Whisky**" in 2014 at different age statements.

If you find all that bewildering then just add in the various expressions under the "**Hazelwood**" label, introduced in 2001 as a commemorative blend but also as the label under which the Kininvie single malt was first bottled! And now we have "**Aerstone**" as a 10 year old single malt, but from where? Kininvie under another name?

Anyway, that is the picture as it stands at the moment. The company website is of little help and seems to be as confused as I am. Under "Our Whisky" it shows a line-up of nine "core" whiskies but then in the roll out underneath there is a total of 12 different expressions. And then there are all these different renditions of single and blended malts under different brands from a company that only has five distilleries. What a way to treat consumers at a time when people are really showing an interest in product origin, consistency and the history and

culture of whisky. We frankly need a much better explanation as to what all these products represent, what is behind them and how their different price points work. A company of such distinction as William Grant & Sons owes it to its many followers and, indeed, to itself as the major independent flag bearer of the Scotch whisky industry, although it now has a green tinge having acquired the splendid “**Tullamore DEW**” in Ireland, to say nothing of the “**Drambuie**” Scotch whisky liqueur which recently joined the William Grant stable!

Old Brands in New Guises

It is gratifying to see old brands – usually of blended whisky – reappear after a suitable make-over by a new owner. Such is the case with “**MacNair’s**” which has reappeared as a series of three peated blended malts known as the “**Lum Reek**” collection. MacNair’s, along with the long defunct “**White Heather**” blend, were acquired as part of the purchase of **GlenAllachie distillery** from **Pernod-Ricard** in 2017 by a Billy Walker-led consortium. MacNair’s was the house brand of **Harvey MacNair & Co. Ltd.**, which became a subsidiary of **Hiram Walker & Sons (Scotland) PLC**, then of **Allied Distillers** and eventually of Pernod-Ricard, which did revamp the brand. It will be interesting to see if “**White Heather**” gets an airing after so many years under dust-covers. For us it is still a “Lost Cause” and some old bottles can be found in that segment of the [MyWhiskyJourneys website](#).

Whisky Chinese Style

I am always intrigued by references to whisky in early literature, such as in John Barrow’s “Travels in China” published in 1806. Barrow was comptroller to Lord Macartney’s ill-fated embassy to China which set out in September 1792 to woo the Chinese

into opening up to trade with Britain and to establishing formal diplomatic relations. Barrow noted that the high officials – the Mandarins – ate copiously when away from Court and ended their meals with pastries and fruit and “**cups of a spirituous liquor like whiskey**, which they drank almost boiling hot”. Clearly, Barrow was acquainted with whisky (although there is no evidence that it was part of the tribute to the Emperor brought to China by Lord Macartney) and the Chinese were already concocting something similar.

Too Much Competition

The number of whisky awards is, frankly, becoming preposterous and totally confusing for the consumer. It appears that almost every expression has to have some kind of medal or ribbon pinned to its chest which is clearly undermining the whole concept of recognition. If you look at old bottles of blended Scotch the labels carry the medals of all sorts of international exhibitions going back to the 1900s. Totally meaningless in this day and age and I feel that the same is happening with the specific whisky awards now being made in multifarious categories designed, I fear, to make sure that every entry gets a prize. Are we being taken for suckers? First of all, how much does it cost to enter each competition in terms of entry fee and number of bottles to be sent in for the thirsty judges - whoever they might be - to make those awards? And what does it do for the consumer in terms of guiding him as to quality and character of the individually recognized whisky? And does it mean that distillers simply become trophy hunters in order to get yet another accolade of dubious origin to hang on the website and how does the consumer judge the value of such awards against the whiskies which have never been entered? Time for some rationalization before it all gets totally out of hand.

Taste or Tosh

Some whisky tasting circles are going beyond the poetic to the realms of quite silly verbosity. Whisky is a drink of much character and a reasonably wide range of aromas and flavours but now tasters and writers are becoming quite ridiculous in terms of how they describe each whisky which they behold. There are certainly some bad whiskies – I had one the other day in the form of a 16-year-old Ord from The Manager’s Dram series which was simply undrinkable – but most are perfectly palatable, and some are really outstanding. However, it is all a matter of taste and that is a highly subjective experience and so lumbering unsuspecting consumers with over imaginative prose and meaningless epithets which simply bear no relation to the actual product is doing no one any favours. Enjoy your whisky in whatever form best suits you and forget about trying to outdo the Robbie Burns standing next to you because all you are creating is confusion and irritation.

Where we think it appropriate, we quote the official tasting notes for certain expressions on the MyWhiskyJourneys website and we may quote assessments of individual whiskies from reliable sources. However, we do not ourselves indulge in providing loquacious descriptions of featured expressions for fear of being labelled otiose.

Tartan Trouble

The Scots are fuming over a decision in Singapore of all places to rob them of the right to use this quintessentially Scottish word exclusively for products - and in particular whisky – emanating from the home of the brave! A Japanese retailer has won the case to sell its products – although not including whisky – under its own trademarked

name in association with the term “Tartan”. The Scotch Whisky Association argued not unreasonably that Tartan and Scotland are synonymous in the same way one would suppose that Haggis and Scotland are synonymous. Their case was that tartan is an “iconic symbol of Scotland” and can function as a geographical indication (GI) for Scotch whisky. The Intellectual Property Office of Singapore was unimpressed, acceding to the Japanese application. This all seems rather unfair when one considers that there is actually a Scotch Whisky Tartan, reflecting the colours of the various elements associated with Scotch whisky and there is currently a **Black Tartan** blended malt. There was a **Tartan Pride** blend from the **William Whiteley & Company** stable and even the **Tartan Scotch Whisky Company**, as recorded in [The Schweppes Guide to Scotch](#). Incidentally, the range of forgotten brands of Scotch is enormous and some of the better ones can be found under Lost Causes on the [MyWhiskyJourneys website](#).

However, let me not be diverted from my immediate lament, the unconscionable behavior of bureaucrats in Singapore, a place which supposedly prides itself as a beacon in Asia of fair-trading practices, in setting this most unfortunate of precedents.

Tasmanian Whisky Week

Another successful TWW has just completed and the organisers are to be congratulated on their innovation and efficiency. Our Week started on the Sunday at an unofficial but well-attended event at the Bluestone Bar & Kitchen in Launceston. A well-chosen location with great shared plates on long tables and fine Tasmanian whiskies from Adams, Launceston, Fannys Bay and Corra Linn distilleries to accompany what was truly quite a feast.

Tours, distillery visits in the north, south and middle of the island – followed in quick succession to create

a very solid picture of a healthy industry full of promise and innovation. In terms of the latter, a very successful rare whisky auction produced some pleasing results with all but one lot being snapped up by eager bidders. The Spirits Showcase on the closing Saturday went beyond whisky to embrace distillers of other spirits in two back-to-back sessions at the RACT Hotel in Hobart. The lay-out was simple but effective with master classes, including one on whisky and food matching, adding a professional touch to the proceedings.

A suggestion for the future, based on common sense, is that every event involving the consumption of alcohol should include the provision of food of some kind, as there was at the Showcase and the Auction. At two of the events attended, however, there was nothing, not even a peanut, and the impact on the participants was neither pleasing nor beneficial. In some countries it would have been a serious offence against health and safety regulations. Just add \$10 to the ticket price and provide at least some pretzels and potato crisps, if nothing else. Otherwise, a great Tasmanian Whisky Week, a credit to the organisers and well received by the many interstate and international visitors.

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