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**Alex Mennie meets
the Scottish distilleries going to
the ends of the Earth to find
the perfect wine casks**

With whisky lovers seemingly placing ever greater value on new and unique wine cask finishes,

distilleries are constantly on the hunt for the next exceptional barrel. While brokers offer ready access to the “stock cars” of the cask world, many distillers want first dibs on the “Formula 1” casks that generally require a direct relationship with a winery or speciality cooperage.

That stock car vs Formula 1 analogy actually comes from Gordon Dundas, International Brand Ambassador at Ian MacLeod Distillers. Each year, the group’s Tamdhu distillery receives around seven hundred casks from two cooperages in Jerez, thanks to relationships that date back over twenty years, from before Ian MacLeod had even acquired the brand. For the current owners, these relationships mean the team can be exacting when it comes to the quality and specification of those casks.

Gordon raves about the impact of great wood on the whisky. “We can determine the Sherry that goes in, the age of the Sherry. We can determine the toasting

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time of the wood,” he explains. Since reopening in 2012, Tamdhu has only matured in Oloroso casks, but the brand also specifies air drying rather than oven drying, with Gordon comparing the two to “putting your clothes out on a washing line in the countryside, or putting them in a dryer. You know there’s a difference.” Unlike your laundry, however, the casks benefit from a touch of rain as well as sun as they dry out in southern Spain.

The Isle of Raasay distillery also has a list of demands. “We specify that the casks are used for three vintages before we take them, [and] we only take them in the cooler months,” says co-founder Alasdair Day, explaining that keeping the casks at less than 12°C helps avoid oxidation of the residual wine, which would have a significant impact on the maturing spirit.

Adam Hannett, Head Distiller at Bruichladdich, is another beneficiary of solid groundwork laid before his time. In his case, former CEO Mark Reynier was involved in the wine trade for many years, before he became part of the consortium that reopened the Islay distillery in 2001.

Those wine trade connections were useful in the early days, but, Adam explains, as wine casks became more common in the whisky industry, many wineries were reluctant to allow an

association. As a result, most of the famous chateau names etched on the heads of some of the most interesting casks in his warehouse will never be printed on a bottle of Bruichladdich or Port Charlotte.

As a blender and distiller, Adam is most enthusiastic about the effect that a quality wine cask can have on his maturing spirit. “Our approach, very much, is about getting the best out of each ingredient,” he



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Adam Hannett, Head Distiller
at Bruichladdich Distillery © Bruichladdich Distillery

says. Using casks from great winemakers, allows his whiskies to benefit from the hard work of great winemakers and the quality of the oak they use. “If it’s just being used once or twice, you’ve got a real freshness... [and] quality of wine is always going to give us a good influence,” he says.

Over on the mainland, Stephanie Macleod, master blender for the Dewars portfolio of single malts found a useful source closer to home, even when the

barrels she was after were all the way down in Argentina. It turned out that a friend of hers, based in Aberfeldy, knew the co-owner of the Finca Ambrosia winery in Mendoza. “We’d had great success with the use of wine casks from France, Italy, Spain and the US, but we had never had a named collaboration before,” she says, by way of background.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, having worked with winemaker Daniel Pi to select

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French oak barrels which had previously held Viña Unica Malbec, Macleod has also come to the same conclusions as Bruichladdich's Adam Hannett: “We take a similar approach to our craft and felt a collaboration would bring out the best of both brands,” says Macleod. In this case, the wine casks bring classic Malbec notes to the whisky, without masking the character of Aberfeldy.

Balance is a key element for each producer to explore in their blending room, but with the Port Charlotte cask specials series, Adam gets a unique chance to learn how different casks work with a peated style of spirit. He is the first to admit that the team are learning all the time.

While the latest release in the series—SYC:01 a 2013 vintage matured in Bourbon and Syrah casks—has just been released, a particular favourite for Adam was the OLC:01, a 2010 vintage, released in 2020, which spent time in very special Oloroso Hogsheads.

“We started working with Fernando de Castilla and they were very much the maverick in the Sherry industry,” recalls Adam. “Bruichladdich's history is very much the same. So naturally we find ourselves working together.” From time to time Fernando de Castilla's general director, Jan Peterson will get in touch

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about a cask, with Adam often leaping at the chance. “They’re coming from a Solera system, and when we get those casks, the Sherry quality is incredible,” he says. Fortunately, they also work very well with the Port Charlotte spirit. “Having that relationship has been a fantastic thing...and he [Jan] wants that association. He wants that collaboration because of the approach

of the two companies.”

Another blender grabbing solera casks with both hands is Scott Adamson at Tomatin. The Highland distillery has been working with Juan Pino Toneleria in Córdoba for over a decade.

“Once in a blue moon Juan Pino will contact us to let us know that a bodega is selling off a portion of their solera casks,” explains Scott. One particularly memorable phone call came just after the business had decided to cut back on expenditure at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite that tightening of the corporate purse strings, Adamson and Master Distiller Graham Eunson agreed they had to have it. “These are casks that have held sherry for decades. Although they are not consistent, they can create some wonderful whiskies... but we know that we will likely have to use them for one-off limited editions.”

Whether these special casks go on to age special releases, core range products, or—in the case of Port Charlotte—both, they also help to bring wine and whisky consumers closer together and allow the distilleries to talk proudly about the provenance of their oak.

At Aberfeldy, Stephanie Macleod notes that the modern whisky drinker is often also well-versed in wine, making them especially appreciative of the heritage of



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the casks used to finish their whisky. At Tamdhu, transparency in the sourcing process is also crucial, with Gordon Dundas highlighting that the brand ensures full traceability down to the wood’s origin. “Why do we want that provenance from tree to cask?” he asks

rhetorically. “Because we’re bottling at natural colour, and we’re fully maturing as well... So it’s really important to know.”

This traceability is also key for Alasdair Day at Isle of Raasay distillery: “Wherever possible, we work as directly and closely as we can with our suppliers to ensure

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we have full traceability of all of our raw materials,” he explains. Where possible the distillery make this information available to its customers. But as with Bruichladdich, this doesn’t extend to the names of the exact Bordeaux wineries that provide the wine barrels for their six-cask recipe. Day explains that the wineries aren’t sold on publicising the connection, and he doesn’t want to trade on the reputation of the left bank chateaux he favours.

As with most decisions in whisky making, selecting the best wine cask for your maturation is a little bit of an art—you need to make the right connections, be in the right place at the right time and a little bit of a science—for example, ensuring your casks are air-dried and kept below 12°C if that’s what works for your spirit.

The focus on provenance and transparency has had a big impact on the stories that distilleries tell about their casks. But it is the long-term, collaborative relationships with wineries and cooperages that ensure distilleries like Tomatin and Tamdhu can be confident in the consistency of the Sherry oak that they rely on, while others, such as Bruichladdich and Aberfeldy, can keep finding interesting experiments to delight both whisky and wine connoisseurs.

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