

Peat Around the World

BY JONNY MCCORMICK

Scotland does not hold the monopoly on smoky whiskies. Globally, not all the alternatives even involve burning peat. Penderyn Peated was achieved by simply maturing some of their Welsh spirit in ex-whisky casks previously filled with peated single malt scotch. The majority of Japanese peatlands are located on Hokkaido Prefecture, and although Yoichi distillery demonstrates malting with peat harvested adjacent to the Ishikari River, they import peated barley from Scotland for their main production. Cooley distillery has revived a historical style of

peated Irish whiskey with their Connemara range but the malt is all peated in Scotland as no maltsters use peat in Ireland.

Scottish peat is exported to the Osaka Prefecture for kilning at Yamazaki distillery and to Clear Creek distillery, Portland, Ore. for their McCarthy's single malt whiskey. An English malt maker that delivers to many Scottish distillers also supplies St. George's distillery for their peated Chapter 9 single malt. In Australia, Lark distillery smokes already malted barley using Tasmanian peat, and Mackmyra distillery shapes the uniquely

Swedish character of their spirit with juniper smoke and peat from Karinmossen. The wood-smoking of barley has been taken up by small craft distillers including Corsair (cherrywood, beechwood) and Copper Fox (applewood, cherrywood).

Coming full circle, the configuration yet to be conquered in North America is malting the grains with local peat smoke, a situation being rectified at Hillrock Estate distillery in Ancram, N.Y. Owner Jeff Baker explains how he discovered the existence of peat bogs in the Hudson Valley, "We started out with Scottish peat but quickly explored how we could experiment with some local peats. I was pleasantly surprised to find that all the peat bogs in the U.S. were mapped in the early 1900s. We talked to local people and a few old-timers clued us in to where the peat was. No one else is doing this, so we're in new territory. The conditions and the flora are different here and what we find here will be totally different to Scottish peat."

Hillrock is the first U.S. distillery since before Prohibition to floor malt and hand craft whiskey on site from estate-grown grain, making them one of the world's few "field-to-glass" whiskey producers. "Having a floor malting operation next to our distillery means that we can experiment," Baker notes. "We had some discussions about what the impact of peating could be on rye and other grains. We're also experimenting with other smoke too; the fruitwood, the nut wood."

They plan to be malting with local peat from late fall, under the direction of master distiller Dave Pickerell, who is relishing the potential of the operation. "Right now," he says, "the American consumer is saying, 'Give me something new and interesting. Tickle my palate, tantalize me. Give me something fun.' We were very diligent to put a lot of flexibility into the malt house so that we have the capability to try all kinds of different wood smoke, different peat smoke, different levels of smoke, different times and temperature, load it up or just make a little. The number of variables we're playing with is staggering." Hillrock is a true whiskey maker's distillery, creating impeccable credentials for the *terroir* of their whiskey.

Architect's image of the visitor center now under construction.



Wild Turkey Builds a Visitor Center

BY LEW BRYSON

Wild Turkey was bought by Gruppo Campari in 2009, and since that time the Milan-based drinks company has kept faith with the bourbon maker by investing almost \$100 million in the Lawrenceburg, Ky. facility. At the commission of a new, expanded distillery last year, there were broad hints of a new visitor center. The rumors came true on August 28, when a formal groundbreaking for the center took place just behind the new distillery.

The visitor center will offer the views of the cliffs of the Kentucky River that Wild Turkey has been known for, and occupy 8,500 square feet of displays, gift shop, and

educational experiences—the "University of Bourbon"—plus an extensive outdoor terrace. The center will cost an estimated \$4 million, and is scheduled to open in April 2013.

The center will accommodate the increasing flood of visitors attracted by bourbon; 70,000 a year are expected once it is in full operation. That's a reflection of the brand's 22 percent global growth, and was acknowledged by Governor Steve Beshear. "In 2011, tourism contributed more than \$11.7 billion to Kentucky's economy," he said, noting the additional investment and jobs Campari had created since the purchase of the distillery.



Left: The floor maltings at Hillrock; right: Hillrock's small barrel aging racks. Below: master distiller Dave Pickerell.

Smoke Other Than Peat

BY LEW BRYSON

“Creativity,” Darek Bell told me, “is free.” The brains behind Nashville’s Corsair distillery was talking about how American craft distillers have to make their own difference. “I live in the shadow of Jack,” he said, referring to giant brand Jack Daniel’s.

Old hand Dave Pickerell put it more pointedly, speaking from the stillhouse at Hillrock Estate distillery (Ancram, N.Y.). “You can’t out-Maker’s Mark Maker’s Mark,” he said with more than a bit of authority, as a former Maker’s distiller. “Even if you make it the same, you can’t make it as cheaply. Why even aim at that? You can’t. You gotta be different to win.”

Pickerell and Bell, and a small number of other American craft distillers are doing that by creating a niche product: smoky American whiskey, flavored with wood smoke rather than peat. Bell took his lead from America’s craft brewers, who had decided to make beer that was anything but Budweiser. “There’s no tradition of smoked whiskey in America,” he said, which was inspiration enough for a few new Corsairs. “You can buy some smoked malts and grains, but we’re mostly smoking our own.”

Rick Wasmund smokes the grains for his Wasmund’s spirits (Sperryville, Va.) with a blend of apple and cherry woods. He actually got the idea for wood-smoked whiskey early, back in 1999, after tasting peat at a Johnnie Walker event in Washington, DC.

“I’d been cooking with apple and cherry wood,” he recalled, “and I knew some guys who were smoking trout with applewood.

It wasn’t an overwhelming flavor, it was just there. So when I went to buy a bottle, I asked for a single malt smoked with something different. The staff didn’t know of any. I couldn’t find anyone who was doing anything like that. It was peat or nothing.”

Eventually Wasmund became inspired to do his own malting and smoking, and wound up—not surprisingly—on Islay. He met Jim McEwan, who was at Bowmore at the time,



and McEwan encouraged him. That turned into a six week internship at the distillery. “They let me stay in that little cottage,” Wasmund said, “and I’d talk to the mashmen at night, then go turn the malt in the morning. I talked to everyone who would talk to me.”

When he came home, he started experimenting with fruitwoods, and hit on a 60/40 blend of apple and cherry wood. It’s a light smoke, just enough to add some depth to the young spirit. That’s crucial for small barrel whiskey, Pickerell noted.

“If you just stop young and sell it, you’ve got a one-dimensional product: wood,” he said. “You can tweak front end or back end. If you smoke your malt, you tweak the front. On the back end, you’re finishing with wine barrels or various charred woods.”

A few others have done smoke. Balcones smokes with Texas scrub oak; Ranger Creek uses mesquite, and some other distillers are using beechwood-smoked malt from a German supplier, Weyermann.

But smoking the grains isn’t the only way to go about things. “We’re experimenting with force-injecting smoke directly into the column,” said Bell. Pickerell hinted at a more direct smoking route at another small distillery he’s working with. “We’ve got it,” he said, but didn’t want to divulge details.

There’s more than one way to skin the smoky cat. Peat’s not the only answer, and American distillers are blazing a smoldering trail forward.