



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED MINNICK

TOASTING THE HUNT

# About the Blends

Blended Scotch whiskies are flavorful, and affordable, options.

BY FRED MINNICK

In the realm of American whiskey, the term blend is a dirty word. Americans prefer to use “mingle” when referring to joining one barrel’s whiskey with another’s. Although the anti-blend movement has subsided in recent years, American distillers once fought rectifiers who created undesirable blends (as well as the Canadian and Scotch blended whisky producers) for market share.

The term “blend” remains undesirable, but mainly to those who turn up their noses at anything not labeled “single malt.” The fact is, no category offers more bang for your buck than Scotch whisky blends. The Scotch Whisky Regulations of 2009 formally gave the short definition of blended Scotch whisky as “A blend of one or more Single Malt Scotch Whiskies with one or more Single Grain Scotch Whiskies.” For further clarification, here are abbreviated definitions of Single Malt and Single Grain.

› **SINGLE MALT SCOTCH WHISKY:** “A Scotch Whisky distilled at a single distillery (i) from water and malted barley without the addition of any other cereals, and (ii) by batch distillation in pot stills. From 23 November 2012, Single Malt Scotch Whisky must be bottled in Scotland.”

› **SINGLE GRAIN SCOTCH WHISKY:** “A Scotch Whisky distilled at a single distillery (i) from water and malted barley with or without whole grains of other malted or unmalted cereals, and (ii) which does not comply with the definition of Single Malt Scotch Whisky.”

The blended products, such as Johnnie Walker and Chivas Regal, will contain dozens of whiskies from around Scotland. The blend percentages vary per brand and they don’t always disclose the original malt or grain whiskies. However, as with all things in whisky, a blend’s quality depends upon the quality of the original grains distilled, the peating process, the distillation techniques, and aging. Unlike bourbon, which must be stored in new charred oak, Scotch whiskies may be stored in various casks, with used bourbon barrels and European oak former sherry butts leading the preferred wood.

Making blended Scotch whisky is a true art that cannot be overstated. Johnnie Walker Red Label, one of the more common

products, is a blend of 30 different intense single malts and grain whiskies. Red’s older brother, Johnnie Walker Black Label, consists of more than 40 whiskies roughly 12 years old, while the more exclusive Johnnie Walker Blue Labels use whiskies from distilleries that no longer exist. All Johnnie Walker products taste unique to their price point, but carry the same semblance of balance in each. Granted, Blue Label is more complex than Red Label but the Red Label is a great value for \$25.

My favorite, easy-to-find blended Scotch whisky these days actually comes from an American expatriate. As the story goes, John Glaser started Compass Box Whisky from his London home in 2000. Glaser wanted to make Scotch more approachable and became an edgy lightning rod in the category. One of his methods is to use high volumes of malt. In the Compass Box blend, The Artists Blend, more than 50 percent consists of malt, while the average blend will have about 35 percent malt. He also does not add a coloring agent to the bottled product. (Oh, yeah, I left out that part—a coloring agent is allowed.) Compass Box whiskies are also bottled without chill filtration, which is a big deal for us whisky geeks. Another American, Carin Castillo, started a blend called SIA. It’s a good starter whisky at a low proof and with gentle honey and fruit notes.

With that said, the best blended Scotch whisky on the market is one I’ve already written about for *Covey Rise*, in the August-September 2013 issue. To paraphrase what I wrote: the Classic Cask 40-year-old blended Scotch whisky is a blend of Speyside, Highlands, and Lowlands for a flowery and herbaceous nose with a palate of pear, citrus, cigar box, dried apricot, and enough subtle smoke to leave a lasting impression.

A little easier to find and in the “old” category is the Grangestone 30-year-old blend, which includes malt and grain whiskies that are 30 years or older. At \$99, Grangestone 30-year-old offers affordability for its age and a balanced flavor profile with the richness and complexities of a great blend. It’s velvety with notes similar to bourbon—oak, caramel, and vanilla. But fair warning about blends: Price and age don’t always equal better quality. Sometimes, cheaper and younger taste better. 🍷

Fred Minnick is the author of *Whiskey Women: The Untold Story of How Women Saved Bourbon, Scotch, and Irish Whiskey*.