

The Spice Tree: The Second Coming The Return of the 'Illegal Whisky'

THE SPICE TREE

by COMPASS BOX

In 2005 we bottled and launched what we believed to be one of the most significant new Scotch malt whiskies of recent times when we launched *The Spice Tree*. In 2006 we were forced to stop making it.

What was special about *The Spice Tree* was the secondary maturation we put the malt whiskies through using new French oak sourced from 195 year-old forests. The oak was the highest quality cooperage oak available—fine grain, two years air dried and heavily toasted to our specifications.

For the secondary maturation process, we borrowed a technique widely used by winemakers over the last 30 years. We inserted the new oak in the form of flat staves into used whisky barrels, effectively rejuvenating what would otherwise for us be a useless barrel.¹



Alas, the Scotch Whisky Association (known affectionately as the SWA) heard about what we were doing and decided they needed to stop us. They suggested that our technique of using high quality oak “inner staves” was not appropriate for making Scotch whisky on the basis it had never been done before. Never mind that the whisky was winning awards, very positive reviews from whisky writers and developing a loyal base of whisky drinkers.

The SWA went so far as to threaten taking us to court to stop us from making *The Spice Tree*. However, in doing so they inadvertently gave birth to what many in the press and trade jokingly referred to as our “illegal whisky”. As a consequence, we received a burst of whisky press attention and word-of-mouth that we could not have dreamed of. Sales of *The Spice Tree* raced ahead and in a matter of a few weeks, our supplies were depleted.²

¹ As you may know, the tradition in the Scotch whisky industry is to reuse barrels, (or casks), as many as four times. The problem with this “traditional” method is that the more times you use a cask, the less flavour it can impart to the whisky and the slower the maturation. In our view, this is the chief reason so many Scotch whiskies are boring. By far, most Scotch whiskies are aged in these “refill” casks. We have a well documented fanaticism for quality oak, and use primarily what is called “first fill” casks. As an extension of our oak fanaticism, we began experimenting years ago with secondary maturation using new, or “virgin” oak, something rarely done in Scotch whisky. This led to the development of *The Spice Tree*.

² For the full story in all its detail, see the PAST WHISKIES section of our web site.

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Nevertheless, our ability to wage a legal battle versus an entity as well-funded as the SWA was negligible, so with the proverbial gun pointing at our head, we suspended production of *The Spice Tree*.

Until now.

In the last three years we have been working on alternative methods for creating a similar flavour profile³ to the original *Spice Tree* bottlings.⁴ Rather than using flat stave inserts in our barrels, we have worked with our oak supplier in France and our coopers in Scotland to develop a method for creating heavy toasted cask heads which impart a flavour profile similar to the flat staves used for the original *Spice Tree* bottlings.⁵ We use oak with three different levels of toasting on the barrel heads, thus allowing us to blend the resultant whiskies to create additional layers of complexity. To achieve the degree of flavours we seek from the oak requires as much as two years in contact with the oak.⁶

So, *The Spice Tree* returns.

As in the past, *The Spice Tree* is a 100% malt whisky from northern Highland distilleries, (notably and primarily malt whisky distilled at the Clynelish distillery). The whiskies are all in the neighbourhood of ten years-old, primarily from first-fill casks, when we re-rack them into our special barrels with the heavily toasted new French oak heads.

The Spice Tree is a very rich malt whisky and therefore we feel it is suitable for the following occasions: after dinner sipping, as an accompaniment to certain cheeses, and especially, in cocktails. We believe *The Spice Tree* has a flavour profile that is much more suited to culinary cocktail making than most any other Scotch whisky, owing to its rich, bold flavours.

One other important difference between the original *Spice Tree* and the new incarnation is the packaging: the new pack design, with its seemingly hallucinogen-inspired tree, will not be mistaken with the original.

JG, August 2009

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³ That flavour profile is as follows: sweet-associated aromas of the spices you find in many ginger bread recipes: clove, ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, along with dark (or "baked") vanillas; the palate is full, round and sweet and the spice and vanilla aromas follow through and complement a core malty-distillery character in the whisky; the finish is very long, and you pick up reminiscences of baked-cherry pie you get in the oak used for some pinot noir wines. This is an unabashedly oaky style (although hardly the degree of oakiness of, say, bourbon) and one we believe is extremely delicious for it.

⁴ Of which there were two.

⁵ This is a similar process to that we developed for our whisky Oak Cross, except that for *Spice Tree* we use more heavily toasted oak and leave the whisky to age on it longer.

⁶ Whereas the whisky for Oak Cross sees six to 18 months on less heavily toasted wood. To fully understand what we've done requires a bit of geeky detail. You may wish to Google "oak toasting levels".