

Title:

Bells Scotch Whisky

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Summary:

Bells

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Article Body:

Bells

Caol Ila is an exception though. Most distilleries are stubborn individuals. 'If we seriously wanted to change Mortlach could we do it?' she asks. 'No, you'd get a corrupted spirit. We always have to keep within the parameters of what the distillery character is'.

It's a polite way of responding to criticisms that the bigger the firm the more likely it is that all their whiskies will taste the same. Ask Turnbull the same question and he visibly twitches. 'People think if you're big you don't care about quality and all the whisky is the same,' he says. 'In reality, our size has allowed us to do the opposite. We're more aware than anybody that we need the character of the 27 distilleries to come through. The Walker, Bell's or J&B character is paramount. We won't kill the goose that laid the golden egg'.

But there's no doubt that the in-depth research done by UDV into new make character, distillery character and wood ageing has made the bean counters in head office question the logic of one firm having 27 malt distilleries and two grain plants (and a 50 per cent share in another). After all, with all this research, isn't it possible to take a more cost-effective option and make all the malts and blends on one site? It's what the rest of the world does.

Turnbull's heard it all before. 'I'm always having to deal with people parachuting into this industry with smart ideas,' he sighs. 'They assume they're dealing with a bunch of numpties who have never had a good idea in their puff for the last 100 years.' So he called their bluff. 'I said, fine, let's build the biggest f-in' distillery in the world. There's just one drawback, you'll

have an oil refinery and I don't see many tourists going to Grangemouth. Whisky sells because of the romance'. Scratch any whisky person and a romantic soul peers out, these people have a passion for their job and their product. The men emptying thousands of casks in the disgorging hall, working in the vast warehouses, the coopers in the noisy, steamy joke-filled cooperage are the unsung heroes of the industry.

As for Christine, ask her about Walker and she becomes positively poetic. 'Walker Red is cheeky and in your face, Black is gorgeous, Blue is positively luxurious. They've all got that Islay thread and a different interplay of lingering flavours. Christ!

I'm sounding like someone from marketing!" The bottom line is that in Johnnie Walker and J&B they have two of the greatest blends in the world. To be able to produce them in such volumes and retain such high quality standards is an incredible feat. But who gives them a second thought? 'We've concentrated on malts for 10 years now,' says Christine. 'Classic Malts helped grow the market and that's great, but now it's time to make that link from them into the blends. We've got to recognize blends for what they're worth. I'm proud of these brands, they're not faceless products'.

BLACK & WHITE James Buchanan was one of blending's greatest characters and the man who, from the 1880s onwards, brought blended Scotch to the attention of the English middle classes - thanks to his creation of a lighter style of blend, which he renamed Black & White, in 1904. Once a major player for DCL, it's now sadly rather lost in UDV's massive portfolio.

TASTING NOTES

Black Sc White A hint of heather on the light nose, with plenty of fresh grain and light smoke. A crunchy almond centre with some mint toffee and a hint of smoke mid-way through. WHITE HORSE Created by Sir Peter Mackie, the despotic, eccentric blender (and owner of Lagavulin), White Horse always wore its Islay heart on its sleeve, until recently. Now repositioned as a 'fighting' blend, it has been toned down slightly to appeal to a new audience.

TASTING NOTES

White Horse

Some ripe apple and a hint of smoke on the nose. The palate has an immediate whack of turf/peat. Dries out in the middle, then broadens and becomes quite sweet. * * (*)

TASTING NOTES

Bell's 8-year-old

Mellow, fragrant nose with good depth of flavour. Some fruit cake, light perfume, leather, cocoa and cereal. Soft and chewy. Take time to rediscover it.

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BELL'S Perth wine merchant Arthur Bell started blending in the 1860s, but it was his son 'AK' who first sold the whisky as Bell's in 1904. Still the UK's largest-selling whisky, its reputation suffered during the 1970s when overproduction brought quality crashing down. Relunched as an 8-year-old in 1994, it is unrecognizable as the bad old whisky it briefly became.