



Feints and Foreshots



WELCOME TO

Feints and Foreshots #30

THE PHOTO EDITION

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BOOK REVIEW

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MWSOA 2010 - MEET THE COMMITTEE

The 2010 MWSOA committee has been voted in: find out who's who in the society for 2010. **P.1**

MUSINGS FROM THE CHAIR

The latest musings from MWSOA Chairman Craig Daniels. Always a thought provoking read. **P. 10**

MWSOA 2010 welcomes a new Committee.

The MWSOA AGM was held in December 2009 and from the report prepared by the duly appointed Returning Officer, John Roberts, (thanks JR) the committee for 2009-10 is

- * Chair – Craig Daniels
- * Treasurer – Matthew Rosenberg
- * Secretary – Grant Pigot
- * Vice Chair – Ian Schmidt

Committee

Ben Calcraft
Malcolm O'Farrell
Peter Johnston
Shona McRobert
Nicole Lowrey
Roger Gillard

At our Planning day in early March the committee is going to determine the strategic direction of the Society for the next 12-18 months. If you have any ideas about what the Society might do for members in 2010 and 2011 please send an e-mail to chair@mwsoa.org.au before 3 March 2010.

A heartfelt thanks to all the members who attended the AGM including John Roberts, Graham Jones, David Le Cornu, Peter McWhinnie, Martin Brackman Shaw, Alan MacKinnon and Bob Manouge.



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Book Review

Jim Murray's Whisky Bible 2010 by Craig Daniels

A new edition of the Whisky Bible always creates a buzz and I was hunting for a theme for this review and I'm gratified that there's a worthy admonition early on in Jim Murray's latest tome:

- *"For those of you deciding to take the plunge and head off into the labyrinthine world of Scotch malt whisky, a piece of advice. And that is, be careful who you take your advice from."*

Working my way through the latest Whisky Bible, I find it a perfect encapsulation of the old tale about the curate's egg; bits of stuff I agree with and bits of stuff that I don't. I find myself agreeing with him in his articles in the first part of the book especially when he laments the decision by Diageo to close down the Johnnie Walker bottling plant in Kilmarnock. It certainly seems more satirical rather than merely ironic that they've severed the most prominent link in their historical marketing armoury as Jim says 'for financial expediency'. It's hard not to see pathos in the Striding Man of Kilmarnock striding right out of town.

However I find myself agreeing with his reviews as often as I disagree. I can't help making observations on Jim's notes and scores form a personal perspective and comparing my experience of the malts when I can be 100% sure that I've tasted the exact same malt. This is quite easy when the cask number, the bottling strength and the dates of distillation and bottling are included, such as the Benromach 6yo 2nd edition distilled 2002, bottled 2008 which was our second highest scoring malt in the Whisky Awards and only one of three Gold Medal winners scoring over 90. Jim scores it 92 and I agree wholeheartedly with his summation; .."proof that excellence can be achieved with first class wood selection and fine work in the still house, rather than simply summers spent in the warehouse." Alternatively was the Bruichladdich 16 bourbon/Chateau d'Yquem cask which won Bronze in our Whisky Awards with 83 (my score 85) and which Jim scores 95. All of our judges scored it between 80 and 85 and none thought it worth 90 points.

It's much harder to decide whether I've tasted the same bottling for some of the more generic whiskies which are reviewed especially the large volume sellers and the flagship malts. Often it is impossible to work out whether he's tasted the same whisky and a significant example is Glenfarclas 30. The review in 2010 is identical to 2008 and not retasted. Based on experience across 4 Whisky Awards where Glenfarclas 30 finished in the top ten on all occasions and in the top three on three occasions, winning twice, I just can't accept Jim's score of 83. I also have the same uncertainties around malts such as Aberlour 10 (94) Balvenie Founders Reserve 10 (90) and Glenmorangie 10 (94), although I can swear I've never seen any of those three in any official guise since 2000 that I would've scored more than 85. So who's right? Do you go with consensus across a group tasting whiskies 'blind' where the identity of the whisky is not known or a single person of undeniable acumen secluded away in his office/laboratory working his way through whiskies where the distillery of origin and other relevant details are disclosed?

Of course I think Jim has worthwhile things to say. I wouldn't have four copies of his Bible at home unless I thought him an amusing and often perspicacious guide if sometimes unreliable and overly whimsical. The Whisky Bible *is* the most comprehensive and wide ranging reference currently available for the keen whisky student to add to their library.

In summary, would I beg, borrow or buy and take one of his books into a bottle shop, especially one with a decent array of malts, and where the bottling details are fully disclosed in the Bible? – Yes.

Would I take him seriously about some of his scores? I'd refer you back to Jim's quote above – "be careful who you take your advice from"

Jim Murray's Whisky Bible can be bought from [The Odd Whisky Coy](#)



Feints and Foreshots

MWSOA Whisky Events 2009 - a year in Photos

Talisker Vertical Tasting, Adelaide 17/11/09, Venue - Rob Roy Hotel



John and Bernie busy writing notes



Polishing off the Taliskers



Justin, Greg and Craig
basking in the Talisker
afterglow



The gang's all here and
a stellar array of
Talisker beckons...



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Pleasant Surprises Tasting, Melbourne 12/11/09, Venue – Presse Wine Bar



The line up - pleasant surprises from the Whisky Awards 2009



Foundation members: Stephen Harbour and Michael Mote



Setting up: the appropriate setting for whisky appreciation



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Pleasant Surprises Tasting, Melbourne 12/11/09, Venue – Presse Wine Bar



Working our way through the fabulous five



Engrossed in the Malts



Chairman Craig leading the tasting



Relaxing after the formalities are over



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Whisky Awards 2009



Alex McDowell of Think Spirits receiving the Chairman's Trophy (Best Value Malt) for Isle of Jura Superstition



The MWSOA whisky medals



Dual 2009 Trophy Winner



Head Judge's Trophy Winner - Origne 12



Ian and Roger staffing the sample bar



The awards Malts selection



Ian and Roger enjoying a dram



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Whisky Awards 2009



Peter Godden and Grant Pigot



Luminaries of the Australian Malt Scene
including Cameron Syme and Bill and Lyn Lark



Tony and Vic



Cameron Syme receiving the "Pourer's" Prize for
Limeburners M24 from Ian Schmidt



Ian & Craig, the Whisky Award organizers
displaying the "Cornucopia of Malt"



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2009 Whisky Awards



Master of Ceremonies Craig Daniels



Alistair Hart and Mal O'Farrell



Our 2009 Trophies and Awards
displayed with pride at Glenfarclas
Distillery



Ian Dack



Bill Lark delivering thank you
speech for the Awards and the
organisers



The Young Guns of Whisky



Richard Angove receiving the Best Malt Trophy from
Roger Deves



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FEINTS AND FORESHOTS

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œ MWSOA EVENTS 2010 œ

* Events for 2010 to be announced after March 6th MWSOA planning meeting *



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MUSINGS FROM THE CHAIR

by MWSOA Chairman Craig Daniels

Scoring Malt Whisky; does it really matter?

Towards a robust methodology.

When I was given Jim Murray's latest edition of his Whisky Bible to review it got me thinking and when that happens you know that a "Musings" isn't far away.

Do we take notice of whisky scores? Whose scores are we going to choose to trust? And are there any scoring methodologies that reduce the margin of error?

I am aware of the facile defence that malt whisky appreciation is all and only a matter of taste and yet that also introduces as many problems as it solves. Logically, if there is no objective criteria for codifying malt whisky why should the whisky consumer, especially someone with limited exposure and experience trust anyone's scoring system and rankings? Thus my biggest concern about scoring and rating malts is how to inject the most objectivity into what I acknowledge is largely a subjective arena.

When I first embarked on my continuing journey of malt discovery in 1991, I didn't really have any idea or any system for scoring malts, however, as the Earls of Zetland club finished off the tasting events by scoring each whisky tasted out of 10, I sort of fell into the numbers game from the very beginning of my 'malt career' and didn't know there was any controversy about scoring whiskies. Since then I've become aware that some very learned maltsters are positively phobic when it comes to malts and numbers, but for me giving malts a score was just part of learning and furthering my malt appreciation.

Scoring systems in Australia tend to be different to those used overseas. We traditionally tended to use 10 point scales rather than 100 point scales (except for the MWSOA Whisky Awards) and the benchmarks are different. I've belonged to clubs where the 'tipping point' for a whisky to be considered 'good' is 7.0 to 7.5 and to be honest I found Michael Jackson's Malt Whisky Companion (my first version was the Second Edition from 1991) reinforced the efficacy of the practice and the early edition certainly gave the impression that the "pass" mark was around 75/100 (see scoring system p23.)

I confess that I used MJ's book to search out his high scoring malts and incidentally got to trust my own palate when I disagreed with him, which wasn't all that often. In later editions that pass mark appears to have been inflated (there are far less malts scoring under 77 than before) and even though MJ and Jim Murray are supposedly using a 100 point scale, JM's pass mark upon close inspection is closer to 87 than 75. Jim's scoring system seems to have 'excellent' at 94 and above. Most clubs and societies in Australia would have their 'excellent mark' set at 8.5 or 9.0. I'd love a statistician to analyse JM's scores to work out the median. There are other scoring systems such as the common 5 star rating system and more esoteric and personal systems used by some tasters and yet it's that score out of 100 that seems to resonate most with the whisky consumer.

Both Michael Jackson (vare) and Jim Murray knew what they were drinking when they wrote their notes and scores. There isn't anything intrinsically negative or sinister about this and Jim defends his methodology in Whisky Bible 2010, yet because I grew up in a club culture where we got to score and attempt to identify whiskies presented blind, it was easy to see the occasions where malts were



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MUSINGS FROM THE CHAIR *continued*

overrated and underrated when blind as compared to when disclosed, so that I saw the 'label effect' in operation.

I don't doubt Jim's professionalism and his expert status, but my contention is that you can't divorce yourself from prior knowledge, impressions, biases etc when you *know* what you're drinking. In effect and Jim acknowledges it obliquely, he really has a 100 point scale for every *different* distillery or brand. He knows he's drinking Ardbeg or Laphroaig or Linkwood or Littlemill, so he's really rating each sample on whether it's an inferior or superior example from that distillery not whether it's an inferior or superior whisky per se.

It's not really realistic to suggest that Jim taste everything (or anything, for that matter, blind) as he has 850-950 odd whiskies to get through to update each edition of the Whisky Bible and it would be a logistical nightmare to expect someone to line up all the proffered samples blind. Jim uses the information provided with the samples to update his database as he assesses each sample, so it would be impossibly onerous to expect him to change.

Which I don't expect and yet is there an alternative that might produce a more 'objective' and possibly more reliable methodology? Of course there is and it starts with tasting the samples blind and it also involves more than one palate to come to a consensus score. Both our Whisky Awards and the Malt Maniac Awards <http://www.maltmaniacs.org/2009-whisky-awards.html> are set up to eliminate the 'drinking the label effect' by tasting the samples blind and insisting that the organisers receive unopened bottles from extant production runs so that issues like cask samples and potential substitution or contamination of the samples are avoided.

Of course, no system is perfect – blind tastings by committees throw up their own problems; they are the consensus view of a group of people on one day or over a short period of time. There tends to be a flattening effect caused by averaging and dealing with whiskies where the scores are radically bi-nodal (grouped tightly around two scores 8 to 10 points apart) are always vexed; as when a whisky where 40% of scores are clustered around 81 and 60% are clustered around 88 will end up with an average of approximately 85.2. Because the logistics of getting samples to 12 judges or assembling 9 judges in one place at one time are significant, blind panels will always review less than the lone judge working alone over an extended period of time and the latter's reviews are likely to be more up to date as he can sample up to his own imposed cut-off date. A panel will secure samples by a certain date and then arrange the judging over the next month to three months depending on the number of judges and the number of whiskies to review.

So in summary, the lone expert approach, especially in the form of the annually updated Whisky Bible, is going to cover many more whiskies with greater currency than any panel, whereas the blind panel approach removes any individual biases and/or style preferences, but in doing so tends to flatten out the scores.

In our Whisky Awards the highest score (out of 52 judged) awarded was 92 and in the Malt Maniac Awards in 2009 the highest score (out of 200 judged) was 91. In the respective exercises only 5.8% and 3% of entries scored gold. Does a score of 97.5 from Jim Murray carry more weight than a score of 92 or 91 from the MWSOA or the Malt Maniacs?

Does it matter to you? Do you use reference works such as Jim Murray's Whisky Bible or Michael Jackson's Malt Whisky Companion to search out whisky or do you use them to compare your own experience to theirs? Who do you trust? Please send any comments to chair@mwsOA.org.au