

The language of whisky tasting

Charles MacLean continues his course by reinventing the wheel

The first two pieces in this series have stressed the importance of smell in the evaluation and enjoyment of Scotch whisky – hence the use of the rather ponderous ‘sensory evaluation’ rather than simply ‘whisky tasting’. So when we address ourselves to the question of how to describe whisky, we are talking mainly about putting words to smells. Compared to this, describing taste is simple, and I will say something about it later.

It is notoriously difficult to describe aromas, yet they are the most evocative dimension in our sensory universe. Think how memories of childhood can be awakened by certain scents; think how a place or a time, a holiday or a meal, can be vividly brought to mind by a smell – for good or bad. Remember, while there are only four primary tastes (sweet, sour, salty and bitter) there are 32 primary aromas, and we can detect some of them diluted to one part in a trillion. Every sample of malt whisky presents a bouquet of aromas – in some cases 20 or 30 identifiable scents – and although it is now possible to measure trace quantities of aromatic compounds scientifically, the only means of assessing the overall impact of a whisky is by nosing and tasting.

Professional tastings for the trade set out to be as objective and analytical as possible. The conditions in which tasting takes place are carefully controlled, and members of tasting panels are rigorously trained: if the human instrument is the best available, training is the standardisation and calibration of that instrument, in terms of both the language to be used and the measure of aromas discovered.

This does not concern us, as consumers. We are tasting for pleasure and the language we use to describe what we find in a whisky can be as subjective and as imaginative as we choose.

The most obvious figures of speech to use in describing smells are allusive: similes (‘smells like Parma violets/new-mown hay’) and metaphors (‘a barber’s shop’; ‘a beach bonfire’). Communication here relies upon your audience having smelled whatever it is you are alluding to. Hens’ mash is an oft-encountered descriptor, but it may be meaningless to people who have never fed chickens. Likewise with very personal allusions like ‘the inside of my grandfather’s car’. But the broader your experience of and exposure to different aromatic groups the better: flowers and herbs, cooking and cleaning, babies and hill-walking ... Generally speaking, women are better at coming up with allusive descriptors than men, and some of the best noses in the whisky trade are women.

Many of the words we use to describe sensations are abstract – general concepts, rather than strictly objective descriptors. These are as legitimate as similes and metaphors, but they describe an overall impression – the whisky’s construction (to borrow a wine term), general style, character and quality – rather than specific aromas. As such they are useful. But they are



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5) **Feinty**: this group is the most difficult to describe, yet feints give whisky its essential character. They start coming in halfway through the spirit run, beginning as pleasant biscuity, toasted scents, then build through tobacco-like and honeyed to sweaty. The wise still-man stops collecting spirit at the honeyed stage, for the deterioration can be dramatic thereafter. Feints are mellowed and transformed by maturation in good casks.

6) **Sulphury** (from organosulphur compounds): these arise during both distillation and maturation. Copper plays a crucial role in removing such aromas, which are generally unpleasant. Maturation introduces the last two key aromatic groups:

7) **Woody**: the vanilla-related aromas in this group derive from American white oak. Some woody aromas are directly related to age: malts can become woody when they have been in cask for too long. Oak increases complexity, enhances fragrance and delicacy, creates astringency, lends colour and develops roundness.

8) **Winey** (also called extractives): if the cask has previously been filled with wine (mainly sherry, but sometimes port or others), the wood absorbs wine residues, which are extracted by the spirit and become part of its flavour.

The descriptive language of whisky tasting sets out to be as objective as possible, and to use precisely defined terminology. But the descriptors are a guide only. Use your own words and, if you like, group them under the various primary tier headings. Hold your own whisky tastings; see how colourful and original you can be in describing the whiskies. You will know your descriptions are accurate when the other members of your panel nod enthusiastically and exclaim, 'Yes! Yes! I Know just what you mean – tea-time on a fishing boat stormbound in Mallaig harbour'.

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