

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.

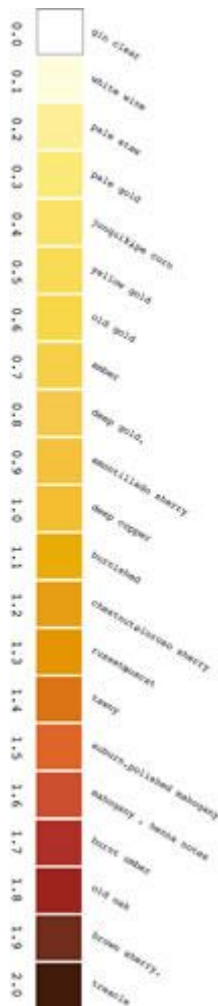
The most obvious figures of speech to use in describing smells are allusive: similes (‘smells like Parma violets/new-mown hay’) and metaphors (‘a barber’s shop’; ‘a beach bonfire’). Communication here relies upon your audience having smelled whatever it is you are alluding to. Hens’ mash is an oft-encountered 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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not precise, and since they cannot be defined by reference to a standard, they are not strictly scientific.



Think of terms like ‘smooth’, ‘clean’, ‘fresh’, ‘coarse’, ‘heavy’, ‘light’, ‘rich’, ‘mellow’ or ‘young’. Some are relative terms smooth compared to other malts, or perhaps other Speyside malts? Heavy for a Lowland malt?). Others have double meanings (soft can mean a suppression of alcohol and pungency, or it can mean gentle mouthfeel; young can mean immature or lithe and well-shaped). Many more are imprecise (rich can imply an intensity of character, or can mean rich as a fruit cake; fresh can mean acidic or vibrant). Such loose descriptors should be used with caution.

The first systematic attempt to define the language of whisky tasting was undertaken in the late 1970s by a group of sensory scientists in Edinburgh, Pentlands Scotch Whisky Research (now The Scotch Whisky Research Institute). They displayed their findings in the form of a wheel. This is now the accepted way of tabulating aromas and flavours, but at the time it was novel.

The Pentlands Wheel was for the use of the whisky industry, not the consumer, and could be applied to new-make spirit as well as mature whisky. With Dr Jim Swan (one of the wheel’s original authors) and Dr Jennifer Newton (his partner at Tatlock & Thompson, Chemical Analysts to the Whisky Industry), and drawing upon a vast lexicon of descriptors gathered from tasting panels over many years, I am currently working on Pentlands’ findings to produce a wheel which will be more useful to the consumer; the wheel you see here is work in progress.

The wheel has eight segments and three tiers. Users can begin from the outside rim, with the kind of vague aroma description which often arises spontaneously during a tasting, and work inwards to the core aromas on the first tier, or vice versa.

The order of the segments broadly reflects the development of aromatics during production (sections 1-6) and maturation (sections 6-8).

Aromas arising during production are:

- 1) **Cereal**: these aromas come from the malted barley, and are usually modified by the later stages of production (fermentation and distillation).
- 2) **Fruity** (the scientific term is ‘estery’): the sweet, fragrant, fruity, solvent- like scents which characterize Speyside malts in particular, arise during fermentation and distillation.
- 3) **Floral** (or ‘aldehydic’): leafy, grassy or hay-like scents, sometimes like Parma violets or gorse bushes, and often found in Lowland malts.
- 4) **Peaty** (also called phenolic) – these scents are abundant in Islay malts and range from wood-smoke to tar, iodine to carbolic. Almost all phenols are imparted to the malt during kilning.

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'.

Denne artikkelen har vi lånt av **Whisky Magazine**, St Faiths House, Mountergate, Norwich, England , NR1 1PY.

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