

Chapter 13

Scotch Whisky

In This Chapter

- ▶ Noting the regional variations of Scotch
 - ▶ Seeing how Scotch is made
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Scotch whisky (spelled without the *e* in whiskey) has a distinctive smoky flavor that's the result of both the choice of ingredients and the method of distillation.



Scotch whisky must be distilled and matured for at least three years in Scotland — but not necessarily bottled in Scotland. Some Scotch whiskies are distilled and aged in Scotland but bottled in another country.

Types of Scotch Whisky

Two kinds of Scotch whisky are distilled: *malt whisky* (from barley) and *grain whisky* (from cereals). Malt whiskies are divided into four groups according to the geographical location of the distillery in which they're made (see Figure 13-1):

- ✓ **Lowland malt whiskies:** Made south of an imaginary line drawn from Dundee in the east to Greenock in the west.
- ✓ **Highland malt whiskies:** Made north of the aforementioned line.

- ✔ **Speyside malt whiskies:** Made in the valley of the River Spey. Although these whiskies come from within the area of the Highland malt whiskies, the concentration of distilleries and the specific climatic conditions in Speyside produce whiskies of an identifiable character, which is why they're classified separately.
- ✔ **Islay malt whiskies:** Made on the island of Islay.

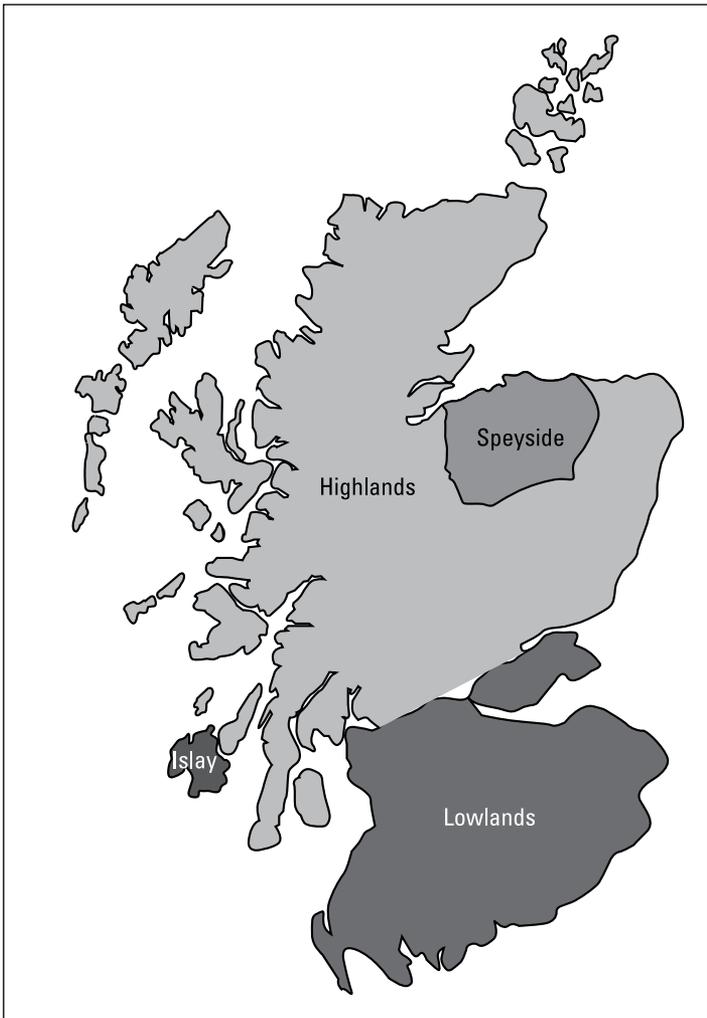


Illustration by Lisa Reed

Figure 13-1: The four main Scotch-producing regions.

Each group has its own clearly defined characteristics, ranging from the gentle, lighter-flavored Lowland whiskies to those distilled on Islay, which are generally regarded as the heaviest malt whiskies.

Grain distilleries are mostly found in the central belt of Scotland, near the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Single-grain whiskies display individual characteristics in the same way as malts, although the geographical influence isn't the same.

Married together, malt whiskies and grain whiskies create *blended* Scotch whisky, which accounts for 95 percent of world sales. A blended whisky can have many (up to 50) different types of malt whiskies blended with grain whisky (from cereals). As you may expect from the name, a *single-malt* Scotch whisky is made from one type of malt, and it's not blended with other malts or grain whiskies.

How Scotch Is Made

Making Scotch whisky from malts dates back to 1494 to Friar John Cor and his fellow friars. Until the mid-1800s, nearly all Scotches were single-malt. Then Andrew Usher came up with the idea of mixing malt whisky and grain whisky to create blended Scotch whisky. Here's how the process works:

1. The barley is *malted*, or soaked and dried for germination. During this period, the starch in the barley converts to fermentable sugar.
2. To stop the germination, the malted barley is smoked, usually over peat fires in open malt kilns, giving Scotch whisky its smoky taste.
3. The barley is mixed with water and yeast. Fermentation takes place, and alcohol is the result. This liquid is then usually pumped into stills and double-distilled until the correct proof is attained. (Chapter 5 has details on proof.)
4. After distillation, the whisky is typically placed in used American oak wine or bourbon barrels (some distillers use sherry casks or wood from other countries); these are then aged by law for a minimum of three years. Most Scotch whiskies age from five to ten years, sometimes much longer. It's said that the longer a whisky ages in the barrel, the smoother it becomes.

After the whisky finishes aging in the barrel, each distiller then completes its own blending, filtering, and bottling. Scotland has more than 100 distilleries that produce more than 2,000 different Scotch whiskies.

Popular Blended Scotch Whiskies

These are the brands of Scotch whisky that you're most likely to find at your local bar or liquor store:

- ✔ **Ballantine's** is available in these varieties: Finest, 12 Year Old, Blended Malt 12 Year Old, 17 Year Old, 21 Year Old, and 30 Year Old.
- ✔ **Bell's** is available in Extra Special and Special Reserve Blended Malt.
- ✔ **Black & White** comes in a black bottle with a simple white label.
- ✔ **Black Bottle Blended Scotch Whisky** uses only malts from Islay.
- ✔ **Chivas Regal** is available in 12, 18, and 25 year old varieties.
- ✔ **Cutty Sark** is available in these varieties: Original; Black; Sark Malt; and 12, 15, 18, and 25 year old.
- ✔ **Dewar's** offers these varieties: White Label, 12 Year Old, 18 Year Old, and Signature. Dewar's now also offers a honey-flavored Scotch.
- ✔ **The Famous Grouse** is available in 10, 12, and 15 year old varieties, along with Scottish Oak Finish, Bourbon Cask Finish, Snow Grouse, Black Snow Grouse, Famous Grouse, and Timorous Beasties Limited Edition.
- ✔ **Grant's** is available in several varieties: Family Reserve Blended; Ale Cask Reserve; Sherry Cask Reserve; Distillery Edition; and 12, 18, and 25 year old.
- ✔ **Johnnie Walker** offers these varieties: Red, Black, Green, Gold, Blue, and Swing.
- ✔ **Justerini & Brooks (J&B)** offers just one product, J&B Rare, which is blended from Speyside malt whiskies.

- ✔ **The Last Drop** uses nearly 70 different malt whiskies and 12 different grain whiskies to create its distinctive blend.
- ✔ **Pinch** is known as the Dimple everywhere in the world except in the United States.
- ✔ **Royal Salute** is available in these varieties: 21 Year Old, 100 Cask Selection, and 38 Year Old Stone of Destiny.
- ✔ **Scottish Leader Blended Scotch Whisky** contains malts from Aberfeldy, Caol Ila, Girvan, and North British grain.
- ✔ **Teacher's Highland Cream** is made with a blend of more than 30 different single malt whiskies.
- ✔ **Vat 69** is available in Finest and Reserve de Luxe varieties.
- ✔ **White Horse** is available in its standard blend and Extra Fine 12 Year Old.

Single-Malt Scotch

Single-malt Scotch whisky is unblended malt whisky from a single distillery. The water and malted barley, the raw materials of Scotch whisky, differ from distillery to distillery and region to region. In addition, the production methods, variations in topography and climate, and size and shape of the pot stills all contribute to the uniqueness of each distillery's single malt.

Scotland has more than 100 single-malt distilleries, so if you're a fan of single-malt Scotch whisky, you're unlikely to run out of whiskies to sample and enjoy. The following is a listing of just a few brands worth trying:

- ✔ **Aberlour**
- ✔ **Balvenie**
- ✔ **Bowmore**
- ✔ **Bunnahabhain**
- ✔ **Cardhu**
- ✔ **Dalmore**
- ✔ **Deanston**
- ✔ **Glenfiddich**
- ✔ **Glenlivet**

- ✓ Glenmorangie
- ✓ Glenrothes
- ✓ Highland Park
- ✓ Isle of Jura
- ✓ Lagavulin
- ✓ Laphroaig
- ✓ Ledaig
- ✓ Macallan
- ✓ Oban
- ✓ Old Stillman's Dram
- ✓ Passport
- ✓ Pig's Nose
- ✓ Scapa
- ✓ Sheep Dip
- ✓ Singleton
- ✓ Speyburn
- ✓ Springbank
- ✓ Talisker
- ✓ Tobermory
- ✓ Whyte & Mackay

Storing and Serving Suggestions

Scotch can be served over ice, straight up, with water or club soda, or in a variety of mixed drinks. Single malts and aged Scotch whisky (over 12 years) can be served straight up or on the rocks with a splash of water. After opening, store a bottle of Scotch whisky in a cool, dry place out of direct light. It should have a shelf life of approximately two years.



Whisky doesn't improve with age after it's bottled.