



A short course whisky tasting in 5 steps

1. Colour



Source: Edinburgh Whisky Academy

The Colour of Whisky

The colour of Whisky ranges from the water-clear to the pitch-black. The appearance can be an interesting criterion to describe a Whisky.

Often Whisky has a wonderful colour. Learn about the chemical background of how the natural colour of Whisky is created. We also go into the matter of artificial colouring Whisky with caramel as a colouring agent, which is common practice at some distilleries.

Colour in Whisky: Natural Colour vs. Caramel Colour

The new make distillate is a water-clear liquid. The colour only appears in the spirit during maturation in oak casks. During this time, various factors affect the distillate and thus influence the colour of the Whisky, for example:

- The length of maturation: the longer the spirit is in contact with the wood of the cask, meaning the longer the maturation period, the more intense the colour.
- The type of cask: Usually, the casks are freshly charred oak casks (USA) or used Bourbon or Sherry casks (Scotland). Each type of cask gives a distinctive colour to the Whisky.
- The number of previous maturations: Casks are usually used more than once for maturation. With each maturation, the distillate extracts colour from the wood. After each maturation, there is consequently less colouring available. This means that after each maturation the next Whisky is less intensively coloured.
- The size of the cask: The smaller the cask, the more intense the contact of the distillate with the wood. It matures faster and absorbs colour more quickly.
- The temperature during maturation: The solubility of the dyes increases with the temperature, which means that the distillate absorbs colour more quickly at higher temperatures.

In some cases, colour is also added to Whisky after maturation, for example with artificial colouring: Some distilleries add tiny amounts of caramel to their products, either to maintain a consistent colour tone or to give their Whisky a more valuable appearance.

The intensity of the colour depends on the concentration of the colourant dissolved in the Whisky. Or in chemical terms: the more colour molecules are dissolved, the more intensive the colour of a Whisky. The colour is created when light hits these colour molecules.

How does the yellow hue come about? Sunlight normally appears white to us. However, it can be broken down into the entire visible colour spectrum from red to blue using suitable equipment (for example a prism - or even in the case of a rainbow). Depending on the energy of the light, a different colour is produced.

Source: Whisky.com

2. NOSE

Nose the whisky.

This is probably the key step, and the one that you'll want to practise lots.

Most whiskies are going to reveal their characteristics to your nose straight away. Experts often say that tasting the whisky should only confirm what you've got from your nose. (No pressure, then.)

To nose it correctly, swill the whisky around the glass – this releases the aromas of the whisky – and then bring the glass to your nose. Gently, take a waft of the aroma. Don't take a huge sniff, just let the smell work its way up your nose and see what you can detect.

You don't have to think about exact notes either. Sometimes, like with a smoky whisky, you'll be able to pick up the smell of peat. With other whiskies, it might remind you of your dad's shed or Christmas time.

From there, you might be able to deduce that the whisky is going to have an oaky taste (if you can smell a shed) or perhaps fruity notes (like a Christmas cake).

Just getting to that stage on your first whisky tasting is impressive – so take a moment for this ritual. You can add a drop of water in the whisky. The flavours will open more and which will release even more aromas.

3. BODY

Has your whisky a light or full body?

As you swirl the whisky in the glass, does it cling to the sides and the “streaks slide down slowly or quickly? Thick, slow-running “streaks” indicate a more dense texture, while fast “streaks” suggest the opposite. Both are good by the way..!

A whisky is described as "full-bodied" when it has a complex flavour profile. Depending on the types of casks and the duration they are aged, whiskies produced can end up having more than one dominant flavour. That is what whisky lovers mean by their drink being full-bodied.

Whiskies that are described as "light" or "light-bodied" tend to have a clearer and fresher taste. Some of these whiskies remind you of dried fruits, while others have a really clean floral smell.

To get a light bodyweight, the whisky will need to be distilled many times. This will also give the whisky its fruity note.

4. The Whisky Palate

How to Develop Your Whisky Palate

Like many things in life, there's no right or wrong way to enjoy whisky, and the key to developing your whisky palate is simple – Try a lot of whiskies. By creating a reference point for what you do and don't like, you'll better understand how to articulate your preferences and slowly over time, you'll identify flavour profiles. But aside from simply diving into dram after dram, there are a few terms every whisky drinker should be aware of.

Rich vs Light

Perhaps the most straightforward of tasting notes, rich and light refer to the depth of flavour in a whisky. Specifically, rich whiskies tend to evoke a strong flavour characterised by the wood it has been aged in. These whiskies will have deep flavour notes, such as spice and vanilla, where light whiskies will be very much the opposite. The lighter the whisky, the more likely you are to taste fruits and fresh flavours, from the outset and throughout.

Delicate vs Bold

It's often hard to understand how one could refer to a 40% Scotch as delicate, but it's not so much about strength and flavours. Delicate whiskies tend to exhibit more grounded tastes such as barley, whereas bold flavours might refer to peat, smoke and robustness. It can take some time to get your head around these terms, but knowing the difference between them can safeguard you from buying a dud dram.

5. FINISH

What is a finish whisky?

Take note of the length of time you can taste these flavours for. If they're fleeting, that's called a short finish. If the flavours cling on for some time, then that's a long finish. If it's somewhere in the middle, that's a medium finish

APPENDIX

Tasting Notes

If you've bought a bottle of whisky, you would have no doubt stumbled across the funny descriptions written on the back. These tasting notes refer to the stages of the flavour profile and can be extremely helpful in determining a whisky's taste. These include:

The Nose – The flavour profile distinguished by a whisky's scent or aroma. To properly 'nose' a whisky, swill your glass to release the aromas, gently take a waft by holding the glass about 20cm from your nose and breathe in through both your nose and mouth.

The Palate – The initial taste flavours. Now, the tongue is divided into four main areas: the tip for sweet, either side for sour or salty, and the middle for bitter. Let the whisky linger in your mouth for a while, hitting all points of reference. Try to wade past the burn and unearth the more complex flavours.

The Finish – Once you taste the whisky, the finish is the lasting imprint it leaves on your mouth. A short finish refers to a flavour that quickly dissipates after swallowing, whereas a long finish can sit in your mouth well after the dram is done.

Smoky

When someone describes a whisky as "smoky", they most probably mean that it tastes a little 'burned'. Whisky gets its smokiness from peat, which is what the distilleries use to heat the barley at the final stage of the malting process. Naturally, the smoke will rise and cover the barley, giving it a nice smoky flavour.

Whiskies distilled in the Highlands, Islands, and Islay regions are known for its peaty and smoky flavours. Peat is the main fuel source in these regions, especially in Islay, as it can be found almost everywhere.

Fruitiness

This is a very delicate flavour and is usually more noticeable in lighter whiskies. Take a sip of it and roll the whisky around your mouth. Try to connect what you're tasting to some flavours you're familiar with. If you can taste flavours that remind you of berries, oranges, or even apples, you could describe the whisky as "fruity".

If fruity whiskies are your thing, then you should look out for single malt Scotch produced in the Speyside and Highland regions.

Floral

You usually detect this smell before tasting the whisky. Does it smell like a bouquet of flowers, a garden, or even grass? That's what your drinks expert friend refers to as the "floral notes". Light and delicate whiskies have a more prominent floral note, which is common in whiskies produced in the Lowlands region.

In short, the flavour profiles:

Floral – lavender, honey, citrus blossom and herbaceous flavours.

Fruity – such as peach, apple or pineapple.

Sherried – classic sweet Oloroso and PX flavours like raisins, orange peel, nuts and dates.

Smoky – peated whiskies with all the different flavours you get here like bonfire, coal smoke

Sweet – think butterscotch, toffee, vanilla and caramel, lots of American oak character.

The Whisky Flavour Wheel



We hope that you have found this short course of whisky tasting interesting and joyful. Slainte Mhath...! (Cheers...)



Please contact me for organising a Whisky Masterclass and Tasting.

Richard van Nieuwenhoven Helbach, Tel.& App: +31-653 860 561

E: richard@thespiritofamsterdam.com