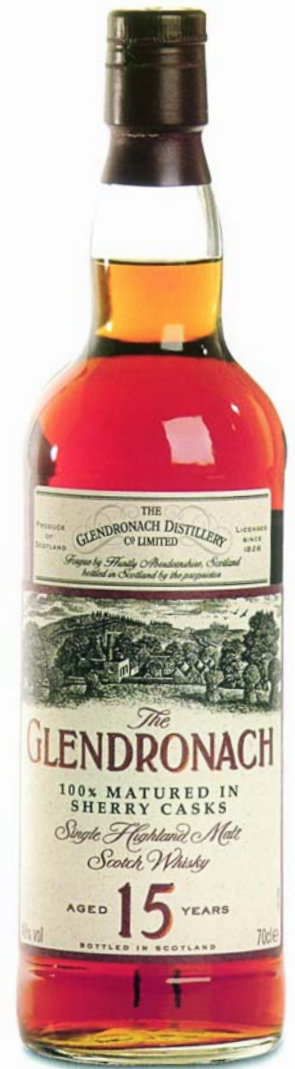


Jim McEwan, one of the best noses in Scotch whisky, part of the four-man tasting panel for the writer's new directory.

The Top Twenty Scotch whiskies in a ranking list



Whisky connoisseur Phillip Hills, founder of the Scotch Malt Whisky Society, has spent three years on a labour of love: to rank 300 branded malts and blends in blind tastings according to their flavour. The result is a wholly independent, objective directory, about to be published. We reveal the top-rankers here, for the first time. Some cost less than £20. Prepare to raise an eyebrow

At its best, Scotch whisky is the finest liquor distilled on this planet (a few brandies might fairly claim equality with Scotch, but not many). A well-made single malt, matured in a first-class cask for just the right length of time, is sublime. It is the sort of stuff which angels would drink if angels drank. There is a catch, though.

While there are plenty of well-made malts, by no means all of them have received the benefit of judicious maturation in a cask of the first water, and so their flavour is not as fine as that of their more privileged contemporaries. Naturally, this does not deter their sellers from getting what they can for them by saying that they are absolutely the very best. Since there are many such sellers, all as it were bawling their wares like street traders in the market, the whisky drinker can find himself somewhat adrift.

There exist numerous guides to Scotch malt whiskies, most of which give a notion of the flavours to be found in the whisky, or some other indicator of quality. The most common course is to append tasting notes, telling the reader what flavours the writer found in each whisky. This approach has several limitations. Inevitably it is open to imputations of subjectivity, since one whisky drinker's meat is another's poison. And the vocabulary of tasting notes is rather limited, for we have precious few words to describe either taste or smell.

One can to some extent remedy this by the use of simile and metaphor, but at a cost in credibility. Furthermore, credibility is an



Among the surprises, an inexpensive Chivas blend, Something Special (left) and Glendronach, a small distillery on Speyside.

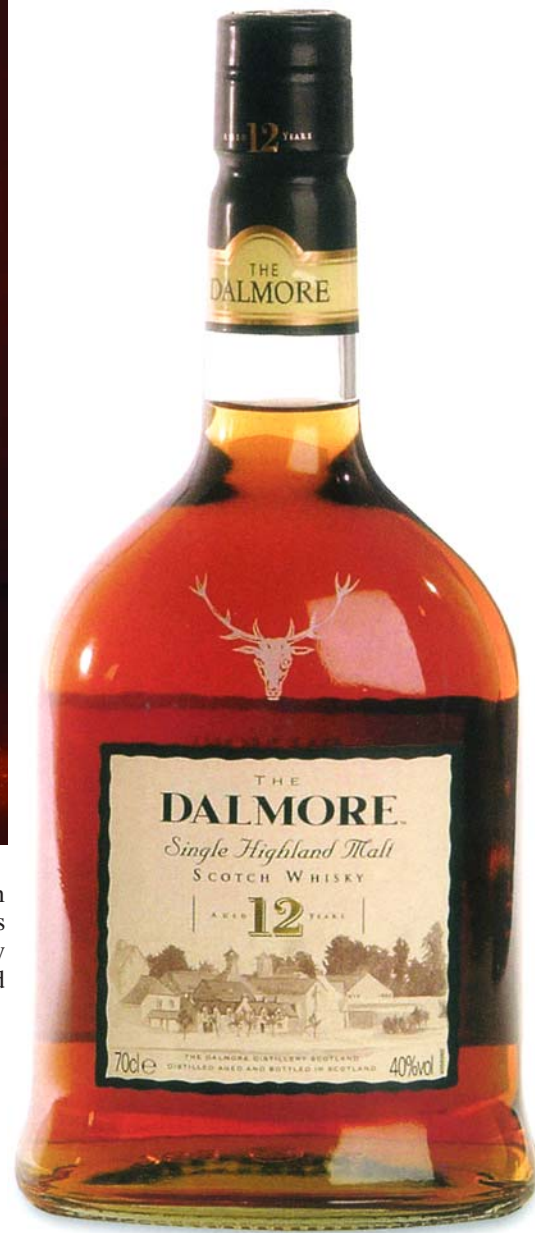


Only three of the five-star whiskies cost more than £50. The Macallan 25-year-old is one of them.

rate each whisky for each of the 15 flavours on a scale of zero to 10. This generated nearly 20,000 pieces of data, which were analysed statistically. The results were presented as a bar chart of flavours ranging from nice flavours, through ambiguous ones, to some rather nasty flavours which are occasionally found in a whisky. They will be published in book form in June by Mainstream Publishing entitled *The Scotch Whisky Directory*. It will, I hope, be an easily comprehensible and wholly objective guide to the flavours of all major whiskies, both malts and blends.

The results of the work are fascinating. The directory allows us to compare whiskies in an organised way. Its flavour profiles give a graphic form to taste sensations, so that we can see at a glance how one whisky differs from another. They also—and I expect this is what most people want—allow us to see which whiskies suit our taste and which do not.

On the basis of whiskies we know and love, we can form judgments as to how others will appeal to us. This applies equally to blended whiskies. By allowing us to make direct



Right: At less than £20, the lovely Dalmore 12-year-old is one of the great finds of this unbiased blind tasting.

issue because the subjectivity of flavour sensations allows an outright liar to misrepresent his product without fear of challenge.

It has long been apparent that there is a need for an objective, reliable guide to the flavour of Scotch whiskies. Not only malt whiskies, either, though malts get all the attention and little mention is made of blended whiskies, which still make up more than nine out every 10 whiskies sold worldwide. Three years ago, I decided to remedy this.

I discussed the matter of flavour with my scientist friends in the industry, who know

more about the flavours of whiskies than anybody else. They came up with 15 classes of flavour by means of which virtually any Scotch could be classified. I then recruited (unpaid) four of the best professional noses in the Scotch whisky industry, and asked them to taste samples of 300 whiskies. All of the tastings were done blind, and in different random orders to ensure objectivity.

The tasters were asked to

comparisons between malts and blends, it redresses the historical balance somewhat, and shows that some quite cheap blended whiskies are as good as some expensive malts.

The directory has a star-rating system. While no claims are made for exactitude in this, it does tell us which whiskies have the highest levels of the most desirable flavours. Only 20 out of the whiskies examined by the directory rate five stars. Some—and this includes some widely-advertised single malts—rate only one star. I will not, for decency's sake, tell you here which are the one-stars (though you can find that out for yourself by buying the directory). But I am more than happy to reveal the five-star whiskies, not least because most of them cost less than the whiskies you see in swanky whisky shops at daft prices. And, I am happy to say, the

Right: In the rarefied class, The Glenlivet 12-year-old and (far right) the Royal Lochnagar.



top-raters are not all single malts. Of the top 20, five are blended whiskies.

I was unable to ascertain prices for all of the five-star whiskies, so what follows is approximate. It was a pleasure to find that five of the top whiskies could be bought for less than £25. Indeed one of them, the lovely Dalmore 12-year-old, is selling for less than £20. It was no surprise that the Royal Lochnagar should make it into the top bracket; what was surprising was that Loch Fyne Whiskies was retailing it at less than £25. Ditto the Tomatin 12-year-old, a much underrated whisky.

Glenlivet comes into this most rarefied class, too, with its 12-year-old malt, matured in a French oak cask. And one blended whisky, from Chivas Brothers, rates five stars. Not, as you might imagine, Chivas Regal, but the humbler Chivas Brothers' Something Special. It is not easy to find in the UK, but if ever you can find it, buy it—or buy a dozen. You will not regret it.



Jim McEwan: he and fellow panelists tasted 300 whiskies; the full task took three years.

Only 20 of the 300 rate five stars, five are blends

Of the rest of the five-star whiskies, only three cost more than £50. They are the Bownmore 21-year-old and two Macallans: the 25-year-old and the Gran Reserva. I have tasted all three and they are absolutely superb and worth the money. But it is gratifying that most five-star whiskies cost between £25 and £50, so in real terms (remember, this is the best distilled liquor in the world) they are not expensive. Space does not allow me to eulogise each as I would wish, so I will content myself with listing the next 12. They are:

- Bruichladdich 17yo
- Glendronach 15yo
- Glen Garioch 21yo
- Glenquoyn 21yo
- Glenlivet 1976
- Signatory bottling Glenmorangie 15yo
- Johnnie Walker Gold
- King of Scots 25yo
- Ledaig 20yo
- Linkwood 17yo, Adelphi bottling
- Robbie Dhu 12yo
- William Grant's 21yo

If you are looking for the best in whiskies, this is not a bad list to carry with you to the off-licence. Or, better still, take a copy of the directory with you. Then you can make a nuisance of yourself by asking awkward questions of condescending assistants—alas, only until they get a copy as well. □

¶ Phillip Hills is founder of the Scotch Malt Whisky Society. His new book, 'The Scotch Whisky Directory' (£16) can be bought on the website www.scotchwhiskydirectory.com.