



Bowmore Distillery

the angel's share

Not 10 very long ago if you mentioned whisky to any of my close friends you were likely to get the New Year's Eve 1998 story. It involves me and is dredged up now and then to resuscitate floppy dinner parties.

In the whisky is when my mother poured over rich fruit cakes at the absence of brandy. Or the smoky liquid consumed by dad around the fire. The dabbed-on cure for toothache. The sugary, lemony fire-water for shivery tails and that dubious chocolate-coated pleasure sneaked out of the Christmas liquor box.

It's not something I drink.

And yet I'm a regular visitor to one of the most well-known whisky producing areas in Scotland and people often ask about the distilleries there. Have I visited any? Tasted the whisky? Well no, actually, is the reply. I've walked and cycled and watched the sun set on Loch

Of course they're right. The place is peppered with distilleries. On the south east coast are the whitewashed walls of Lagavulin, Laphroaig and Ardbeg. Carlisle and Bunnahabhain stand on the north east coast and to the south west on the shores of Loch Lomond stands the old lady of them all, Bowmore, whose distinctive pagoda rise majestically above the town's streetscape. Across the Sound of Islay to the east is the island of Jura which has its own distillery and forms part of the Islay and Jura Whisky Trail.

Strained into visiting at least one distillery on my next trip, I managed to squeeze in two at very short notice: one blustery weekend in September.

Ardbeg and Bowmore differ vastly not only in location but in whisky production and public image. In size and output they are the little and large of the island's distilleries and public houses have become part of their day-to-day business.

The bigger Bowmore handles large groups all year round in a rather glitzy but frosty turned out Ardbeg, with its shop and new café, gives a rather more intimate excursion to parties and they have no problem catering for those as small as two or three. Both distilleries detail the whisky making process which has gone on for centuries with very little change.

At Bowmore I latched on to a party of enthusiasts who were immersing themselves in whisky for the whole weekend. They were a heavy-eyed lot by Sunday morning but their interest never waned.



Copper stills for distilling



Cask barrels in distillery



After a twenty minute film we were taken right through the building from the malting floors where moist barley is left to germinate, to the peat-fired malt kiln where the 'green malt' is heated and dried out. Then to the Mash Tunn which receive, milled, mashed barley, known as 'grist' and so which water is added. We moved then to the Washbacks where the now starch water or 'wort' is fermented.

by adding yeast. Then to the huge copper stills where distillation takes place and finally to the somewhat eerie vaults where the whisky is left to mature in oak casks.

We learnt the meaning of fore-shots and feints,

low wines and spirit safe and the exquisite sounding 'angel's share' which is simply the natural evaporation from the casks.

At Ardbeg my mother never so touch whisky again after New Year 1998 finally succumbed. There were just two of us on this year, my companion, a young Japanese businessman who was holidaying in Scotland and had a store of whisky at home. After the year we were treated to two whiskies of different maturities. Tasting was, for me at least, a matter of grinning and beaming and I suppose my summing up was horribly naive but I gather quite original.

Experts might talk of nose, palate, aftertaste and bouquet. They might look for peaty overtones, smoky smokiness, burnt sugar sweetness or aromatic notes.

I liked, I sniffed, I tasted and found 'Foliceman's Bottle' an odd enough remedy, indigestion, tooth-ache and crissate, of all things. And I remembered Christmas past with cake and liqueurs and dad sitting around a coal fire. And I forgot all about New Year 1998.

Celia Bryon



Still safe

Indeed, I've watched geese silhouetted against a dusky sky and seals nose around the rocks. I've breathed in history, peat smoke and the tang of sea air. But I've never visited the distilleries. And anyway, I say, whisky doesn't agree with me and the New Year 1998 is evidence that Islay's famous for it they remind me.

FACT FILE:

How Macallan can be put in the top 100 of the world by the Scotch Whisky Association.

The Scotch Whisky Association (SWA) is the industry body for Scotch Whisky. It is a not-for-profit organisation that represents the interests of the Scotch Whisky industry. For more information on the Scotch Whisky Association, visit our website at www.scotchwhisky.com.

Scotch Whisky Export at Glasgow or 0141 801111 or 0141 801111. For further information on the Scotch Whisky Association, visit our website at www.scotchwhisky.com.

Lagavulin Distillery

