

THE SOUND OF WHISKY

The Balvenie 首席桶匠 Ian McDonald 首度來港 細味手工製桶的韻律 體驗專屬橡木桶的誕生



來自蘇格蘭 Speyside 的 The Balvenie 單一純麥威士忌於 3 月 2 日假中環 The French Window 舉行了 THE SOUND OF WHISKY 音樂品酒會。活動當晚更邀請了 The Balvenie 的首席桶匠 Ian McDonald 首度來港，跟香港一眾傳媒朋友及威士忌愛好者見面，分享製作木桶的點滴竅妙，以及對威士忌熟成的關鍵影響。在場賓客品嚐一系列 The Balvenie 特選佳釀的同時，亦可欣賞 Ian 即席示範製桶，過程伴隨樂隊擊鼓伴奏呼應，二者合演了一場別開生面、節拍充沛和舞動人心的 THE SOUND OF WHISKY 奏鳴曲，場面熱鬧。

活動當晚一共有三個音樂主題，分別是 Dance of Liquid Gold，The Cooper's Roar 及 Sláinte to the Harvest，並配合木桶製作及樂隊表演。當中 Dance of Liquid Gold 代表著品嚐威士忌加入水滴及鋪地發芽時工匠手工翻麥發出的聲音，The Cooper's Roar 的韻律是模仿著製作木桶時的聲音，而 Sláinte to the Harvest 就是 Ian 與樂隊合奏的環節，將音樂及威士忌合二為一，為現場嘉賓帶來不一樣的體驗。

舉世聞名的 The Balvenie 「五種獨特手工技藝」包括堅持自家種植的蘇格蘭大麥、使用傳統的地板鋪地發芽工序、僱用自家銅匠負責維護蒸餾儀、僱用自家桶匠製作專屬橡木桶、還有首席調酒大師 David Stewart 匠心調配各式佳釀。作為「五種獨特手工技藝」之一，酒桶的卓越質素能得以保持，全賴品牌自家的駐場工匠。他們經驗豐富，全年無休以巧手慧思不斷進行酒桶的維修、重造、裝桶和封桶。每年品牌都會招募年輕學徒，於 The Balvenie 製桶工藝坊內隨 Ian 及一眾桶匠學習專業知識。在 Ian 及其團隊成員的監督培訓下，學徒通過測試後才可成為傳承了傳統技能的全職桶匠，將技藝和文化薪火相傳。

Ian 表示：「酒桶曾經一度只是被視為一種容器，但現今它對於熟成酒的影響至關重要，人們開始越來越關注木材的品質。」他又解釋：「桶匠的工作絕對讓我們得到很好的鍛煉，我們都致力打造高品質的木桶，因為好的木桶會是美好成果的重要前提。我們製造的木桶至少要用上 12 年來熟成威士忌，希望它們出庫時，酒液能保持在最好的狀態。一個品質不好的酒桶是不能抵抗歲月，用上 12 年、17 年或 30 年後，木桶內會空空如也，因為所有酒精都會給 Angel's Share 揮發掉。這個錯誤是無法挽回，所以木桶的前期籌備努力是十分重要。木材也是高品質熟成的關鍵，對威士忌的口感至關重要。」

根據威士忌的製作法律規定，只有橡木可用於熟成蘇格蘭威士忌。橡木的品種，桶的製成，以及在灌注蘇格蘭威士忌之前在木桶中熟成了什麼都將影響到威士忌的熟成。當然也有連專家都不甚瞭解的神秘元素，但不同的木桶的確會明顯影響到威士忌的顏色和性質。例如，一個曾經盛載過波本威士忌的美國橡木桶將會對新酒液帶來雲尼拿和辛辣的口感和香味，同時讓酒液成為金黃色。相比而言，歐洲雪利橡木桶將使酒液具有更濃郁醇厚的香味和更深的顏色。一旦某個桶已被使用多次，桶匠會對其內部進行炭化或烘烤（取決於橡木桶的類型），為其賦予新生命，使它可以重複使用。

THE SOUND OF WHISKY

The Balvenie's Head Cooper Ian McDonald's First Visit to Hong Kong Feel the Rhythm of Cask Making & Experience the Birth of Oak Barrels



The Balvenie single malt Scotch whisky had successfully held THE SOUND OF WHISKY event at The French Window in a wonderful evening on 2nd March 2017. The event had invited The Balvenie's Head Cooper Ian McDonald to first visit Hong Kong and meet media friends and whisky lovers, who were enthralled to learn his sharing on casks making and its impact on whisky maturation. Apart from tasting The Balvenie selected whiskies, guests had immersed themselves in the creative performance - THE SOUND OF WHISKY sonata - where Ian's demonstration of cask making was splendidly accompanied by live drumming. The extraordinary evening was complimented by blending whisky and music altogether.

There were three musical themes during the event, namely Dance of Liquid Gold, The Cooper's Roar and Sláinte to the Harvest. The performance was put up together with demonstration of cask making and live drumming. Dance of Liquid Gold reminded one of the beautiful dripping sound when adding water into whisky, and the sound made by workers shovelling barley on the malting floor; The Cooper's Roar signified the sound of cask making; last but not least, Sláinte to the Harvest was a splendid symphony of Ian's skillful demonstration of cask making with live drumming. The event captured the marriage between music and whisky, transformed into a remarkable experience for guests.

The renowned The Balvenie "Five Rare Crafts" include growing its own Scottish barley, the use of floor malting, its own coppersmiths to maintain stills, its own coopers to make specific casks, and Malt Master David Stewart who crafts the distinctive malts which have earned countless awards. The highly experienced coopers, as one of the "Five Rare Crafts", have been excelling in preparing and maintaining the outstanding casks all year round with their marvellous skills. Each year The Balvenie recruits young apprentices to learn the professional knowledge of cask making at The Balvenie barrel workshop from Ian and the other coopers. Under the supervision and training of Ian and his team members, an apprentice can only become a full-time cooper after passing a stringent test, which allows him or her to pass the craft and culture on.

"Barrels were once considered to be a mere container, but now they are vital to the maturation of whiskies. People start to pay more attention to the quality of wood," explained Ian, "The work of the cooper is definitely a good exercise. We are committed to making high-quality barrels, since good barrels will be an important prerequisite for good results. The barrels that we make have to be used for at least 12 years for the maturation of whisky. We hope that the whiskies can be kept in the best condition when they are released. A bad barrel cannot resist time - After 12 years, 17 years or 30 years, the barrel will be empty because all the alcohol will evaporate from Angel's Share. This mishap is irreversible, so the preparatory work of barrels is very important. Wood is also a key to high quality maturation, which is extremely vital to the taste of whisky.

According to the Scotch Whisky Regulations, only oak can be used for the maturation of Scotch whisky. The type of oak, the making of the cask, and what the liquid inside the cask prior to filling with whisky all affect the maturation of whisky. Certainly there are mysterious elements that even the experts might not know, but different barrels do obviously affect the whisky color and taste profile. For example, an American oak barrel that once contained bourbon whisky will bring vanilla and spicy flavors to the liquid, making the color golden. In contrast, an European sherry oak barrel will make the liquid have a more complex flavor with deeper color. Once a barrel has been used many times, the cooper will char or bake its interior (depending on the type of oak barrel), giving it a new life for reuse.