



The Mash Tun - Whisky Tasting Guide

Whisky is a drink that can split opinions, encourage debate, and open conversations. We are of the opinion that there is a whisky for everyone, even if you think you don't like whisky – if that's possible!!

We created this guide because we love whisky. We also want to encourage people to have their own tastings, challenge their perception of whisky, and introduce them to new drams. In our opinion there is no better way to spend an evening with friends. It also never ceases to amaze us how many people get so many different subtle tastes and smells from the same whisky.

Our tasting guide (and notes sheet) is split into 7 sections, Nose, Palate, Finish, Colour, Texture, Air, and Water. This guide will break these down and explain what we mean by them. The best advice we can give is “say what you smell or taste”. Don't be embarrassed about what ‘other people’ may think. If you think you smell hospital floors and TCP then say it, there's probably a good reason (phenols etc) for it. Trust your nose and use your own experiences and knowledge to describe what you taste and smell. If you read our notes and reviews you will see that we do the same. Whisky is there to be enjoyed and savoured, and everyone is entitled to their opinion.

Many different things can influence the smell, taste, colour, texture, pretty much every aspect of a dram. These can range from cask type (sherry, bourbon, port etc), cask size, water, where it's stored, age, barley etc, etc... We could go on, but we won't! Try to be aware of these but not go into the tasting with a bunch of pre-conceptions regarding a specific whisky region or dram. Enjoy each one for what it is and you'll be amazed by how soon your nose becomes aware of the different tastes and smells.

Before we get onto the tasting notes though we need to talk about a few very important things, whisky glasses, ice in whisky, and water.

Whisky Glasses: Standard whisky “swigging” glasses are not great for tastings, they are more for, well, swigging! We would recommend that nosing or tasting (e.g. Glencairn) glasses are used. Small wine glasses can also be used if you don't have any proper whisky glasses. A nosing glass should have a wider base than the top (almost a tulip shape) to allow the aromas to be appreciated.

Ice: Adding ice to whisky is like chilling a red wine. It releases proteins that change the taste of the dram. In our opinion it doesn't give a true reflection of the whisky the master distiller wanted you to taste. We would advise against it. Having said that, if you don't like a dram, add ice, and then you do like it - who are we to comment?!

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Water: This is one of the most contentious issues you will come across because many people say do and some say don't. Most people that perform tastings will say add water when needed. There are occasions when you will add more (i.e. cask strength whiskies) but all in all add as much or as little as you want. In general terms the less the alcohol content the less water you add, but there are always exceptions to the rule. If you feel it needs water then add it. We also recommend the water isn't chilled. Remember, you can always rescue a "drowned" dram by adding more whisky!

Anyway, onto the tasting notes:

So, now we've talked glasses, ice, and water, onto the best part - the tasting!

Nose

The "nose" of a whisky is, as you would expect, the smell. The nose of a whisky can be as good as and sometimes better than the taste. You can get woody notes, fruitiness, smoke / peat, and a whole multitude of other smells from a dram. It can also help you gauge the alcohol content (i.e. do you get a sting or burn in the nose) but this can be a false positive. We have all experienced drams that have been stunningly smooth on the nose only to find out they were cask strength! Let your nose lead you and trust your senses.

Palate

This is the taste of the whisky. The taste can tell you a lot about a dram, not least how much water it needs! The primary tastes are sweetness (tip of the tongue), acidic / sourness (middle and sides of the tongue), saltiness (side of the tongue), and dryness/bitterness (back of the tongue). When these primary tastes subside, and the whisky is swallowed, this is when the whisky's flavours and texture can really shine through. This is the best part in our opinion as it's when the whisky comes to life and settles. Let your taste buds guide you and discuss / write down the flavours you get. Don't be afraid to put down things it reminds you of. It could remind you of anything from lavender and heather to Black Forest Gateau! Remember, you can only use the words and tastes that you know. You can never be wrong in what you think a whisky tastes like!

Finish

A whisky's finish is its aftertaste, and the amount of time the aftertaste remains in your mouth. You can simply use the comments "long, medium, or short" but we find it better to comment on the actual taste of the aftertaste too, as it usually changes.

Colour

This is an easy one. Whiskies come in all colours, from almost clear vodka like (in colour only!) drams to deep dark brown drams that look like peated water or coffee. The colour can also help you guess the cask type (e.g a rich red amber can be a sign of a sherried whisky) but as with all things whisky there are few hard and fast rules.

Texture

Swirl your whisky in the glass and take note of the legs (drops or “long tears”) as they slide down the glass. The general rule is that the longer the legs (length of legs and amount of time they stay on the glass), the older the dram. Also comment on how it feels in your mouth, is it thick and creamy to drink or is it weak and watery.

Air

This is what happens to the whisky once it’s had time to breathe. Air can open up a whisky and even mellow it. Never underestimate how much 2 or 3 minutes out of the bottle can change whisky. Leave your dram for 2 or 3 minutes and try it again. It can be a chore to let it sit but give it a go. A wise man once said; “always buy a poor whisky to drink while you are waiting for your good one to breathe”.

Water

Whisky usually benefits from a little water. Adding water can open up the flavours, expand and even change the aromas, as well as change the colour and texture. Once you have added the water have another taste and write down the changes (if any) you encounter. Always add a little amount of water at first as it’s only too easy to “drown” your dram. As previously stated though, the only way to rescue a drowned dram is to add more whisky! It’s a hard life this whisky tasting business...

Overall Score

We score every dram out of 100 but advise you not to “shoot too high” in the beginning. Nothing worse than giving something 100 and then tasting something better!! Thus far our highest overall score is 89/100 and that was a 40 year old Glenfarclas!

Every whisky has its own character, tastes, and smells; and we hope you enjoy tasting and discussing them as much as we do.

Slàinte mhath!
The Mash Tun