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Welsh and Proud

The first distillery to open in Wales in over a century turns out a smart single malt, indeed. **BY DAVID KILEY**

When it comes to whiskey, especially single-malt, the taste, finish, color, and nose are crucial, just as with wine. But as any Welshman will tell you, a good story behind the

glass doesn't hurt either.

Whiskey flows like poetry out of Scotland and Ireland, but until recently Wales hadn't had a legitimate distillery in over a century. Blame the Methodists, who closed Wales' pubs on Sunday in the 1880s and read out the names of distillery workers from the pulpit until the last copper pots were pounded into scrap.

Those days are over. Welsh Whiskey Co. (some countries use the "e," some don't) began selling Penderyn single-malt whiskey in England in 2004 and in the U.S. last year. It has been well worth the wait.

Scotch whiskey must be distilled twice to be called Scotch, and genuine Irish whiskey must be distilled thrice. Four times seemed like overkill to Penderyn's founders, so they went for just one distillation. But they chose a newly devised method from a design team led by the University of Surrey's David Faraday, a direct descendant of the famous 19th century physicist Michael Faraday. The resulting

distillate has a higher alcohol content—91%, vs. 80% for Scotch—that the firm says retains more barley flavor at the outset than its competitors.

The distillery is located in the village of Penderyn, in the southern reaches of the Brecon Beacons National Park. The water used for the whisky is pumped from a spring under the distillery. The barley-wash mash that gets distilled comes from Brains Brewery in nearby Cardiff.

It's a delightful comeback story, but the whisky still has to be good. And it is. It goes through three to four years of aging in barrels that once stored bourbon and six months of finishing in Madeira casks. Penderyn's taste is cleaner and slightly more mineral than its competitors to the north and west. The undertones, no doubt helped by the Madeira finishing, are closer to toffee, dried fruit, and light wood, with a hint of spice. Its lightness makes it ideal for drinking straight up.

Single-malt sales have been climbing for the past decade, and established distillers of both single-malt and blended whiskies have been creating a dizzying number of versions to justify higher prices and satisfy more demanding palates. Penderyn, available in 16 states for about \$70 per bottle, has an advantage: It's truly one of a kind, complete with a history lesson only a Welshman could properly teach. ■

Penderyn stands up to fine Scotch—and it has a unique story

Premium Batches

Crown Royal XR, \$150
This limited Canadian whisky is blended from the last remaining whiskies from Crown Royal's now-closed Waterloo (Ont.) distillery. It is creamy and full-bodied with hints of vanilla, toffee, and spice. But it also tastes overly wooded and lacks the refinement and character one expects at this price.

Bushmills 21-Year-Old Irish Whiskey, \$115
This single-malt whiskey is aged in three different vessels: American bourbon barrels, Spanish oloroso sherry casks, and Madeira drums. The Madeira leaves hints of raisins, toffee, and almonds. It's now a sought-after sip, with the 2004 release held in high regard. All told, well worth the premium price.

Johnnie Walker Blue Label Magnum, \$500 (1.75 liters)
Blue Label, which now comes in a 1.75-liter bottle, is blended from several small-batch reserve whiskies. It's complex, with myriad tastes: tobacco, allspice, marzipan. Blue Label is an undeniably fine Scotch whisky and is at its best after it has opened up in the glass and without ice.


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