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BUSINESS LIFE



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8 NOVEMBER 1998

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From the French docks to Eternity

Parisian with a passion for Scotland wins top whisky prize

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WHO makes the best Scotch whisky? In my travels round Scotland this year, which have taken me from Orkney to Islay, Speyside to the Highlands, I have met some of Caledonia's great characters managing distilleries the length and breadth of the country.

Their passion is making single malts, the purist's art, and they produce some fabulous drink. But most of us drink blended Scotch whisky, made by combining a range of single malts to produce a whisky which is generally accepted to be more palatable to the average consumer.

While making blended Scotch is an art in itself, it is far more commercial than single malts. Brands of blended whisky such as Bell's, Famous Grouse, Johnnie Walker and Teacher's domi-

nate not only whisky drinking, but the spirits business in general. So the competition to produce the best blended whisky is understandably keen.

The august International Wine and Spirits Competition (IWSC) holds an annual awards ceremony. This year amid the grandeur of the Guildhall in the City of London, Bell's, Famous Grouse, Johnnie Walker and Teacher's were nowhere to be seen. The winner of the William Grant Independence Trophy for the best blended Scotch whisky went to the Eternity Scotch Whisky Company based in George Street, Edinburgh.

Nothing too surprising in this. A Scottish whisky company winning an award for the best Blended Scotch, what could be more natural?

What is really surprising is the man behind Eternity; Denis Charpentier. A former Bordeaux dockworker, he lives in the centre of Paris and was a wine and cognac

maker first and foremost before deciding to turn his hand to whisky. His company also produces champagne and brandy.

However, his love of all things Scottish means that two and a half years ago he fulfilled part of a dream by starting a Scotch blending business just outside Edinburgh and last year won his first award from the IWSC.

The rest of his dream is yet to be fulfilled. "I love the Scottish people. I think Scotland is one of the most beautiful places in the world. My dream is to buy a castle with a loch." He would then spend most of the rest of his time shooting and fishing. He is a particularly good shot when it comes to wild duck as well as the famously difficult woodcock and is normally to be found blasting away north of the border in November and December. He is also learning to fish for salmon.

Charpentier's history is certainly colourful. At 18 he joined the French paratroop regiment

and after a taste of duty worked as a pot washer and chief potato peeler in a restaurant in Sweden and as a barman in Paris.

After becoming top salesman and then managing director of the import/export company in Bordeaux where he started as a doctor, he began his own wine company in 1963, becoming a broker in 1965, and in 1987 started exporting to the Far East. After the Japanese market crashed in 1989 he eventually turned to cognac, which he started producing in 1993. "My idea was to create a pool of the best spirit brands in the world," says Charpentier.

For his Eternity brand he blends more than 40 single malts. He produces a range which includes a standard version, made using malts aged for five years, a special old reserve called D (which stands for Diamond) which uses eight to 10-year-old malts, a 16-year-old, which won the title this year, and a 21-year-old special



Whisky a go-go: Denis Charpentier blends more than 40 single Speyside malts for his Eternity range, and has plans for a single malt version

reserve. He uses only malts from Scotland's Speyside Valley, which gives his whisky its characteristic smoothness. Speyside malts are known for their sweet, mellow nature and, blended together, make a very acceptable whisky.

In the 16-year-old, for instance, he uses 80% single malts with the rest made up of grain whiskies. The presence of the Speyside malts makes whiskies such as

Eternity particular good for people not sure about Scotch who want to try something a little more gentle.

Organisation for the IWSC awards is carried out by a full-time secretary, with entries subject to both tastings by IWSC's judging panels and laboratory analysis before winners are confirmed.

IWSC's president this year is

Tony Greener, chairman of Diageo, owner of the world's biggest spirits company UDW. The 1998 awards attracted entries from 43 countries.

The best single malt over 12 years old was Highland Park Single Malt 25-year-old, the best single edition malt was Laphroaig 30-year-old. Other awards in the Scotch categories were picked up by Sainsbury's Finest Old

Matured, Famous Grouse Gold Reserve, Isle of Skye 21-year-old and Barberry's Premium Blended five-year-old.

Until now Eternity has concentrated sales in the Far Eastern markets, but it is available duty free. Charpentier's next development will be to produce a single malt version of his Eternity blends but he is keeping details of his new plan close to his chest.