

IN THIS SOCIETY, A RARE OPPORTUNITY
TO SAMPLE SINGULAR SINGLE MALTS

GREAT SCOTCH!



In a private room at the restaurant, members of the Canlis Wine and Whisky Society enjoy rare libations from special glasses.

I WAS INTRODUCED to the Canlis Wine & Whisky Society last fall, when Brian Canlis ushered me into a small, private room in his family's landmark Seattle restaurant. There, before my astonished eyes, was a display of the most unusual single-malt scotches I had ever seen.

These were not just old, not just cask strength, but such unimaginable exotics as whisky aged in Sauternes barrels and rarities such as the Ardbeg 'Provenance.'

It turns out that Brian Canlis and his two brothers, Matt and Mark, had been collecting these bottles for years on family trips to Scotland. Matt Canlis, who lives there, has recently become an ordained minister for the Church of Scotland. As the luck of the non-Irish would have it, his first assignment, as a pastor's assistant some years ago, landed him in the Scottish Highlands.

Matt fell in love with single malts and began collecting fervently, Brian explains. He established personal relationships with many small distilleries, in some instances actually blessing the barrels. And each time the family visited, bottles were acquired for the Collection. When it grew too big for just personal consumption, says Brian, "we all brainstormed on how we could share the whisky with our extended Canlis family, the guests of the restaurant." Thus the society was born.

The Collection now includes 80 different whiskies, all purchased in Scotland. Most are unobtainable in this country, and all are rare even in Scotland. But it's more than rarity that makes these whiskies exceptional. "All

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of the great whiskies taste good,” says Mark. “We want to go and find a bottle that has a story, and meet the people that have a story.” The Canlis brothers recently returned from their annual pilgrimage. A visit to Balblair, a northern Highlands distillery that dates back to 1790, brought forth a bottle of the Balblair 38-year-old, recently named the best whisky in Scotland.

The largest whisky shop in the United Kingdom — Gordon & Macphail’s in the town of Elgin — was a treasure trove of more than 850 different single malts, including some costing more than \$4,000. “To dram the impossible dram . . .” They returned with a G&M Caol Ila ‘Vintage Rum Finish,’ a Longmorn 25 and a Strathisla 1963. “We always try to buy two bottles,” says Brian. “One to drink with family, and one for the society.” The society, say the Canlises, is not just about wine and whisky. “When something special happens,” Mark explains, “you call your brothers.”

A few months ago, jazz master Wynton Marsalis phoned the restaurant, asking if he and his band could come jam in the bar after their Seattle concert. With Marsalis’ permission, society members were notified, and they, along with Canlis staff and a few guests of the band, were treated to a once-in-a-lifetime performance.

The goal is to “find a small and faithful crew so these bottles don’t go to waste,” says Mark. Which is understandable, since once opened, whisky has a shelf life of a few months. Society members may order off a wine and whisky list unavailable to regular guests, but the bar does occasionally offer something special by the glass. Be sure to inquire about the spring water shipped directly from Scotland.

The first society dinner, in the final planning stages as this is written, will feature Ardbeg’s manager, Stuart Thomson. 

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Brothers Mark (left) and Brian Canlis are sharing their family's private collection of rare whiskies and wines with a select number of aficionados willing to pay the freight.

The Canlis brothers' tasting notes

MEMBERSHIP in the Wine & Whisky Society costs \$300 annually. For details go to www.canlis.com/wine/society.aspx or phone 206-283-3313. Meanwhile, here are notes from brothers Mark and Brian Canlis on the society whisky menu:

Ardbeg 'Provenance.' 26-year-old (54.7 percent)

Nose: Seaweed, ocean mist, driftwood, worn leather, fragrant peat, cooked apple.

Palate: Soft and malty, creamy.

Salty toffee, a touch of fruit. Smoky, cocoa, sappy finish. Unbelievable.

Highland Park 'Capella.' (40 percent)

Nose: Quite fragrant, typical HP nose with the addition of heather. A touch of tar and smoke.

Palate: Rum and fruitcake, apricot liqueur with pralines, burnt caramel and vanilla cream. Finish is long, warm and beautifully balanced. Incredibly elegant.

Glenmorangie 'Sauternes Finish.' 21-year-old (46 percent)

Nose: Biscuits and shortbread, creamy maltiness, orange peels, apricots, vanilla and, yes, a touch of Sauternes.

Palate: Buttery walnuts, crushed apples, stewed peaches, ripe oranges and bananas. A medium length, woody vanilla finish. A hint of spice.

Glendullan 'Honey and Wine.' 12-year-old (58.1 percent)

Nose: Vanilla fudge, honey, fleshy white nectarines.

Palate: Simple, sweet and creamy.

After a bit of water; honeycomb, almonds, pears and dry white Burgundy.

Edradour Natural Cask Strength. 13-year-old (58.2 percent)

Nose: Oloroso, dried apricots, a subtle, spicy smokiness.

Palate: Rich in the mouth with roasted barley, almonds, dried fruits, caramel, vanilla hints. Delicious and oily finish with soft spices, clove and oak.

Springbank 'Bourbon Finish.' 12-year-old (58.5 percent)

Nose: Baked apple pie, hard caramel, burning candle wax, fresh oatmeal, hint of peat. Palate: Like licking sweet wood. Cinnamon, nutmeg, clove, anise.

Long, balanced finish.