Liquid Power: Advanced Orientalism and True Taste in Japanese Whiskies

The Way of Whisky
Dave Broom
London: Hachette, 2017
255 pp. Illustrations. $50.00 (cloth)

Whisky Rising: The Definitive Guide to the Finest Whiskies and Distillers of Japan
Stefan van Eycken
Kennebunkport, ME: Cider Mill Press, 2017
399 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth)

This will not be a conventional book review but rather an excursus into the phenomenon that created these, and several other, books on the topic of Japanese whiskies, a phenomenon that is instructive in tracing threads of taste, influence, and globalization.

I learned to drink scotch in India, and refined my taste for it with Japanese whiskies. Not endowed with very subtle taste buds or much training in aroma and mouthfeel, I only know what I like and it is Japanese. The whiskies now winning international awards, even over Scottish versions, are not just novelties or imitations; they are evidence, if more is needed, that Japanese products have weight and value in the world’s markets and that “culture” doesn’t define the boundaries of identity in beverages—any more than it does in televisions, automobiles, and fashion.

Never much of a drinker myself, as a student I didn’t enjoy what I could afford: watery Old Milwaukee beer, screw-top jugs of generic red wine, or, fancier, rosso in straw-covered fiaschi, flushed our faces and made us ill in college. It wasn’t until my second working trip to India that I learned the joys of scotch. Sitting at twilight on the dry prickly lawn of the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, with paper-wrapped dosas, I went local, which in that rarified, postcolonial society of Western-educated Indians meant sipping this Anglophiliac, imported high-octane stuff.

And now, another seemingly unlikely locale has refined my sipping. As a food anthropologist whose work focuses on Japan, I’ve studied a different brown beverage there—coffee. And learned just how painstaking the technique for making a good pour-over can be, and how Japanese coffee tastes, technologies, and techniques are now influencing the rest of the world’s coffee drinkers. The usual comment I get is, “I thought they drank green tea.” Well, yes, and also beer, wine, and whisky.

Japanese whiskies, subjected to the same passionate dedication, have become top shelf in the West. A young doctor, evaluating a recent hospital procedure I’d undergone, nervously consulted with me: “I really like Hibiki; is that a good one?” Well, yes, definitely, I said, but you might try any of the two dozen or more bottles available at a local liquor store. A good start.

The news that Japanese whiskies can sell, and can influence the world’s scotch drinking, has reached as far as Ireland, where it is demonstrated on a bottle of Glendalough, an Irish single malt whiskey which boasts that its aging was finished in a “mizunara oak puncheon”—mizunara oak is known to give Japanese whiskies their pronounced “Japaneseness”—now exported to Ireland to enhance its own stock. Glendalough emphasizes the exclusivity of their borrowed Japanese “terroir” in great detail:

Extremely rare, and expensive, our virgin Japanese mizunara comes from Hokkaido, the rugged most northern island of Japan. It is coopered to order in Japan’s only independent cooperage, by Japan’s oldest cooper.
—GLENDALOUGH DISTILLERY WEBSITE

This, I would suggest, is evidence of what I would call “advanced orientalism”—beyond the earlier versions of exoticization and essentializing, that Japanese culture and goods are “unique” might have now found a test in Japanese whiskey where connoisseurship is global. Whiskey (spelled with an “e” when it’s from Scotland and without the “e” in Japan), of course traveled the world wherever the British Empire spread, and, strongly associated with the British Isles, its references were masculine and Anglo. “Advanced orientalism” still finds Japanese goods sometimes mysteriously “Japanese” but now encourages a specialized knowledge, an adoring Japanophilia.

There’s a lot of head-scratching as well as a lot of devoted connoisseurship in the current interest in Japanese whiskies.
There are persistent themes of “how did they learn to do it?” and “what about terroir?” as well as some old-fashioned essentializing (“closer to nature,” “spiritual values”) in the discussions of Japanese whisky. But the taste for it in Japan has been around much longer than the current narratives.

Since the Meiji Period (1868–1912) Japanese have appreciated scotch whiskey, and have imbibed it with water and ice, as with other brown liquors, as “mizuwari.” This has been the favored postwar drink of salarymen, white-collar workers whose after-hours social sipping was not about connoisseurship; the cachet given first to Johnny Walker Black Label in the 1970s, then to Chivas Regal in the bubble years of the 1980s, was about price and paying more gave prestige to the sipper. Such bottles were featured in the year-end corporate gift-giving routines and recipients knew exactly what value was attached to their relationship.

Now, a persistent and growing knowledge of single malt and specially blended whiskies, accompanying their rising popularity, makes the easy after-work relaxation with this comfortable drink seem “oyaji” or “old dowdy guy”—rather uncool. American viewers of the film Lost in Translation (2003) saw Bill Murray play an American actor hired to advertise “old guy” whiskies—much as, in real life, Orson Welles and other American actors had done for Nikka (1979) and Suntory brands.

Why Japanese whiskies have attracted interest in America has several explanatory lines. Interest in Japanese cultural imports has increased over the past thirty years, first designated, even before the Asian recession put Japan’s economic “hard” power status at risk, as Japan’s “soft power” by Joseph Nye in 1990. The best-known exported goods typifying soft power were youth-oriented manga and anime, then foods such as sushi and ramen. Japanese coffee techniques, equipment, and styles have become global as well. We now see whiskies, from Yamazaki to Chichibu, demonstrating an extension of Japan’s “liquid power,” a rarified—or at least up-market—version of the draw of manga, sushi, and ramen.

Suntory’s Yamazaki whisky first put Japanese single malts on the world stage: Yamazaki 25 was the first non-Scottish “scotch” to win the “best in world” award in 2012. And now that top shelf contains multiple prize-winners, and soon-to-be winners, that vie with the best of Scotland’s. While small Scottish distilleries are being swallowed by the larger ones, in Japan the smaller ones such as Chichibu are increasing in number. There is a Japanese-owned scotch producer, Tomatin, in Scotland itself, on a distillery site dating back to the sixteenth century, which was bought by Takara Shuzo in 1986. After many decades of supplying whiskey for blends in Scotland, under Japanese ownership, the brand is moving to provide reasonably priced single malts under its own label.

Japan’s whiskies now command five percent of the world market in whiskies and growing. It is the global connoisseurship attached to Japanese whiskies that directs especially young cognoscenti to search out the bottle they’ve not yet had, the distillery that has been hiding in the scenic woods of northern Japan. The same drive that takes coffee aficionados “to origin” to meet the farmers in Central America or Brazil, and feel the “terroir” of coffee, takes fans of Japanese whiskies on distillery tours, much as they might do in Scotland.

The reasons for the boom in interest in Japanese whiskies are several: first, the overall rise in consumption of whisky. The market demand is met by both American and Japanese whiskies, which for several reasons are producing more efficiently than Scotch whiskies. The rise of cocktail culture in Japan and elsewhere has led to the rise of whisky-based cocktails, the creation of a new audience for the whiskies, and the fame of ice-ball-carving Japanese bartenders. Finally of course is the fact that Japanese producers are very skillful and attentive to detail. Not only the product of deep research into their Scottish antecedents, these brown beverages are the result of constant innovation by Japanese distilleries. Their whiskies really are good.

One novel approach some distillers take is “No Age” or “No Year” bottles. Aging works in complicated ways and these purveyors prefer to offer customers other means for judging than age. New distilleries, then, hope for an audience sooner than the 12 to 25–year wait commonly associated with bringing top whiskies to market.

That there are now five—and counting—books published in English over the past three years dedicated to the stories of Japanese scotches speaks to the popularity of and interest in these bottles. The two under review here, Broom’s The Way of Whisky and van Eycken’s Whisky Rising, attempt to provide context for this interest and guidance for the intrigued. Broom’s work is a lyrical journey to the sites where whisky is distilled, evoking mood and a multisensory experience—a good...
that verge on the spiritual and aesthetic, stories of personal en-
armchair read, reminiscent of the accounts of travels in Japan
than a way to experience Japan and its drinks vicariously.
Van Eycken’s work caters to the data-seeker, for whom
knowledge of taxation changes, technical aspects of distilla-
tion, and cask production and blending will be important
acquisitions. He draws portraits of dedicated distillers, blen-
ders, and cask coopers and tracks each producer’s history in
detail. Both parlay history into taste, and describe the paths
Japanese whiskies have taken.
Both texts tell the story, now legendary in Japan and among
foreign aficionados, of Taketsuru Masataka, who in 1918 went to
Scotland to learn distillation. He entered Glasgow University
and there met and married a Scotswoman, Jessie Cowan, later
known as Rita Taketsuru. They moved to Yoichi, Hokkaido,
where Nikka established a distillery in 1934. The story of their
marriage, unusual in the day, and the founding of Nikka, be-
came a television drama series in 2015–16 called Massan—
Rita’s nickname for her husband. Taketsuru is now a top-selling
Nikka single malt whisky.
Both—Broom more than van Eycken—wax soulful about
Japan in a way I’ve come to call “advanced orientalism.” The
orientalisms of the nineteenth century, which exoticized and
distanced even as they might covet the products of art and
craft from Japan (see The Great Wave by Christopher
Benfey or the works of Lafcadio Hearn) produced fine collec-
tions of art and goods in the West, but the more common
images of Japanese goods and décor were reductionist.
Some of this attitude remains: a museum official recently
demanded of a curator of a culinary exhibition,”If it’s about
Japan, we must have samurai swords and kimono.” Reducing
Japan to such images is fairly common but we have a broader
range now, and somewhat more depth as more people com-
plicate their views of Japan by specialized travel and more en-
gage Japan in more particular ways, with interests in textiles,
ariculture, fashion, and constitutional change. “Advanced
orientalism,” however, can be seen even in the experienced
and specialized student of Japan. And it is often encouraged
by Japanese interlocutors themselves, as in the statement in
Broom’s book by one Japanese whisky producer, “we say it
smells of temples.”
In these works on whisky, for example, we find connections
between the attention to detail in production and the often es-
sentializing term, “kodawari,” seemingly untranslateable, for a
“very Japanese” persistence, precision, and dedication. We
also see a lyrical evocation of Japanese “closeness to nature”
in describing sites and facilities involved in whisky-making.
Concern for the quality of wood and water, for example,
is said to make Japanese whiskies what they are. But isn’t
that true of Scottish whiskies? And isn’t that a reason
some doubt the “authenticity” of Japanese whiskies, for not
coming from the literal turf of Scotland? There is an
honest essentialization of Japanese artisanship here, focused
on fastidious and uncompromising care with good cause:
these whiskies are, as one American expert said, just plain
excellent.

A Short List of Japanese Whiskies for Tasting
For the beginner, a flight of whiskies would demonstrate some
qualities and range:

- (Suntory) Yamazaki 12: captures many flavors
- (Suntory) Hibiki Harmony: a new blend, floral, rich, and not too
  expensive
- Mars 3 from Mars Shinshu Distillery: vanilla, honey, oak

But for further palatal travels:

- (Suntory) Hakushu 12 before the production ends: this is an Islay-
type smoky, peaty drink with pine and pear tones; a description
by one taster finds “green tea”
- (Suntory) Toki: inexpensive, spicy, silky, peach, apple, oak; pro-
moted for use in mizuwari, or “highballs”
- Nikka Taketsuru, the bellwether whisky, named for the Japanese
distiller who first traveled to Scotland to learn his trade and came
back to Japan to work with Nikka to create the Yoichi Distillery:
  floral, caramel, spicy, vanilla and oak
- Nikka Pure Malt: “Pure Malt” is a blend but exhibiting the tal-
  ents of blenders—the whole is better than the sum of its parts:
  sherry casked, rich, and spiced
- Nikka Coffey Malt: a grain whisky, not distilled in a pot still, and
  possessing fruity, spicy tones
- (Chichibu) Ichiro’s Malt: a blend of Japanese and Scottish
  malts, tasting orange, vanilla, toffee, and plum, a coveted bottle
- Ohishi: rice based, sherry or bourbon casked. Taster notes range
  wildly from “sherry mixed with raisins and more sugar” to “tastes
  like a nori-wrapped sembei”
- (Suntory) Yamazaki 18: very expensive and very good like the best
  Highland scotches
- (Suntory) Chita: a newer medium-priced offering, single grain,
  with coconut, citrus, and cereal tasting highlights
- Tomatin, probably the least expensive Japanese whisky you’ll find,
distilled in Scotland, a very nice dram after work for settling in,
Greenfield style
FIGURES 1 AND 2: Some relevant bottles for further research into Japanese scotch whiskies.

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— Merry White, Boston University