



# A whisky tour in Scotland

Every single malt lover should go on a whisky pilgrimage of Scotland at least once in their lifetime. If you do get to make the journey through the rolling hills of that beautiful country, the conundrum would be about deciding where to go. The vast Scottish countryside is divided into five distinct whisky-producing regions - Highland, Lowland, Speyside, Campbeltown and Islay - which, between them, boast of more than 120 distilleries. Each of these geographies has their share of famous whiskies. For any first-time visitor, the recommendation is that they start the whisky tour in Speyside, a small region in the northwest of the country, for the simple reason that it is home to more than half of all the Scottish distilleries. The area derives its name from the river Spey, which runs through it, and provides water to most of the whiskies made here, which in turn stand out for their gentle sweetness and complex aroma. Here's a first-hand account of a tour through some of Speyside's most famous distilleries, which produce two world-famous single malts, Glenfiddich and The Balvenie, and an equally renowned blended malt whisky, Monkey Shoulder.

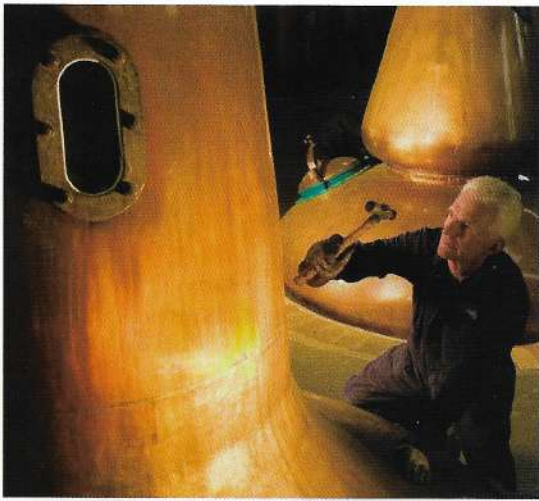
BY VIKRAM ACHANTA

→ **WHEN A SCOTS WOMAN ASKS** you to "release the serpent", don't get too excited. If you want to know what she really means, read on, Macduff.

We're passing through the Scottish Highlands on our 4-hour drive from Edinburgh to Dufftown, set in the heart of Speyside, Scotland's famous whisky producing region. As the adage goes, if Rome was built on seven hills, then Dufftown was built on seven stills. And as we cross the river Spey, on our final lap of a 4-hour journey, we start spotting signs to many of the world

famous distilleries which are part of the Speyside region. Although Speyside is just one of the five whisky-producing regions of Scotland, it's by far the most prolific, with over half of Scotland's single malt distilleries dotting the landscape. We're on our way to the "Valley of the Deer", a literal translation of the word Glenfiddich, from the Gaelic (Glen=Valley and Fiddich=Deer).

The world famous Speyside Cooperage, distinctive by the scores of casks stacked outside, is also en route. Single malt whisky, like the Glenfiddich, is made in batches in a pot still, and when the whisky finally emerges from the still after being distilled twice, it's colourless and much less flavoursome, as compared to the finished product that we see in bottles in our neighbourhood bar. Up to 70 per cent of a whisky's flavour,



and all the colour, comes from the time it spends in the cask. The nature of the wood used, the time spent in the cask and the degree of toasting of the cask all play a vital role in determining a whisky's fate, and it's the cooperage which gives birth to these casks as well as tends to them.

William Grant, the founder of William Grant and Sons (brand owners of Glenfiddich, The Balvenie and Grant's Scotch whisky, amongst others), came from humble roots. He began working at a young age as a cattle boy, moved on to trying his hand as a shoemaker, and then finally got a lucky break in the Mortlach distillery, where he learnt the art of distilling. By dint of his hard work and enthusiasm, he rose to the post of distillery manager there, by which time his family had also rapidly expanded to seven sons and two daughters. The responsibility of maintaining such a large family could have kept him on the straight and narrow as a salaried man, but he was fired up by the dream of creating the "best dram in the valley" (dram is what the Scots call a peg). He identified a suitable spot and, in 1886, with the help of his children and a stonemason, set up the Glenfiddich

distillery, which by now we are chafing at the bit to enter - but these are hallowed grounds, and we must be patient. It was Christmas Day in 1887 when the first drops of whisky emerged from the stills at Glenfiddich. We fortunately don't have to wait that long for our tasting session, but we must first be walked through the craft of whisky making, and explore the different facets of the varied whiskies which emerge from this distillery. For, as we are to discover, although Glenfiddich is a single brand, it produces a wide range of whiskies, each with its own distinct taste profile and back story.

The heart of the distillery is the still house, featuring rows of gleaming, lantern-shaped stills. The shape of the stills influences the final flavour profile of the whisky. The stills, with tall necks, don't allow the heavy vapours to rise up, just the lighter, fruitier flavours, and this is very much the distinctive flavour profile of the whiskies from Glenfiddich.

On our way through the still house, we also pass a coppersmith, who's tending to one of the stills. Outsourcing has by no means bypassed the Scotch whisky industry, and many

## THE 18YO IS FRUITIER THAN THE OTHERS, AND COATS THE ENTIRE TONGUE. IT'S MADE IN SMALL BATCHES OF 150 CASKS EACH

**Clockwise from top:**

**The Glenfiddich distillery; the Glenfiddich 12-year old Single Signature malt scotch whisky; the Glenfiddich 15-year old Single Unique Solera Reserve malt scotch whisky and the Glenfiddich 18-year old Single Small Batch Reserve malt scotch whisky; a coppersmith**

distillers have chosen to outsource tasks such as the coppersmith and the cooper, but Glenfiddich sees this as being core to maintaining the integrity of its whisky. This decision is also a by-product, one senses, of William Grant and Sons, being the largest family-owned business in the Scotch whisky industry, with the 5th generation of the family very much at the helm of affairs even now.

Back in the day, many whisky distilleries used to malt their own barley, with pagoda-like structures marking these malting floors, as the smoke used to escape from the chimney at the top. A restaurant now occupies the site of the original malting floor of the Glenfiddich, but they have retained the pagoda design of the top, to give it that touch of ye olde distillery. Part of the upper

levels of this building is a mini museum with memorabilia from the history of the group, including photos from what is probably one of the first trips taken to promote Scotch whisky, when Charles Gordon, the son-in-law of William Grant, underwent a historic journey around the world in 1909, whisky samples in hand. As Rohan Bhardwaj (Grant's whisky ambassador for Asia Pacific, who is accompanying us) tells us, Charles Gordon also visited India at the time to sell Grant's whisky, so Grant's whisky history in India goes all the way back to 1909, when their very first bottle in India was sold.

After this brief trip down memory lane, we're off to our tasting, but first, our attention is caught by a pipeline snaking its way into the distillery with a tap at the end of it. The Glenfiddich



in that there is a focus on the five rare crafts of whisky making, the first two being their home-grown barley on their own 1200-acre farm, and malting a significant percentage of their barley on site. We start our tour on the malting floor, where I'm given a long-handled shovel, and asked to try my hand at turning over the malt, which is strewn all over the floor. Watching the Maltmen toss around the malt nonchalantly lulls me into a false sense of security. It was much harder work than I thought, and it came as no surprise to learn that this practice led to a RSI (repetitive stress injury) in the old days, symptomized by the drooping of the shoulder, akin to a monkey. Thankfully, working conditions have improved vastly, and this condition no longer exists. When it was thus time to name a brand new whisky from William Grant and Sons, this time a blended malt (a combination of three single malts), they chose to name it Monkey Shoulder as a tribute

to the distillery workers of yore.

The final three rare crafts are the on-site cooperage, their immaculately maintained copper stills and the jewel in the crown, David Stewart, their Malt Master, the oldest serving malt master in the industry, with over 50 years of service. From the cooperage, we move on to the Mash house, which smells deliciously of banoffee pie, and then to the still house, where we see the distinctively shaped stills, a shape known as The Balvenie bowl, a shape which you will see mimicked on the Balvenie bottle.

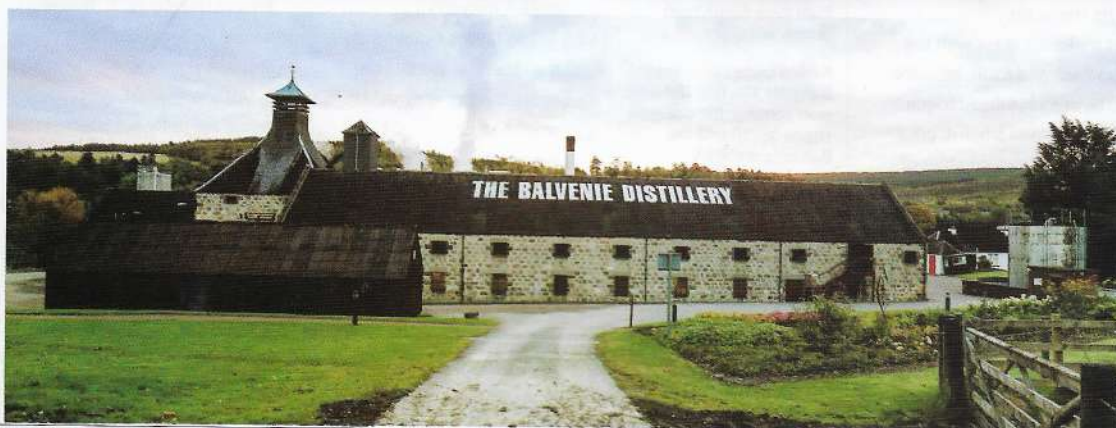
Our tasting then starts, where we go through the 12yo to the 14yo, then to the 17yo and finally to the 21yo. The Balvenie as a range is distinguished by its double wood maturation process, wherein for the 12yo for



example, after the whisky spends 12 years maturing in ex-bourbon casks, it's transferred to an ex-sherry cask for a period of 6 months. In the 14yo, the ex-sherry cask is replaced by a cask which has aged rum before, and the 17yo mimics the 12, except of course that the whisky has spent 17 years in ex-bourbon casks before being transferred to the ex-sherry casks. The 21yo is our last whisky of what has been an incredible trip, a sumptuous whisky, where it has spent 20 years maturing in ex-bourbon casks, and then the final

year in casks which have previously been used to mature port, and which are known as Port pipes.

Back in the day, before health and safety became a priority, and when drinking at work was not frowned on, distillery workers were entitled to up to three tots of whisky a day, which they could often take straight from the casks, filling up what are called Copper Dogs, a cylindrical hip flask, which resembles a long whistle; the practice was known as "taking the dog for a walk". The Balvenie has preserved many of its old practices, but I'm sure (much to everyone's benefit) this is not one of them. Seeing samples of the Copper dog in the distillery shop takes me, for a moment, on a time trip. I'm snapped out of my spell with a call to hop on our bus to the airport, wishing as I head home that "I could take the dog for a walk".



## THE BEST OF BALVENIE



12 year old Balvenie single malt scotch whisky



14 year old Balvenie single malt scotch whisky

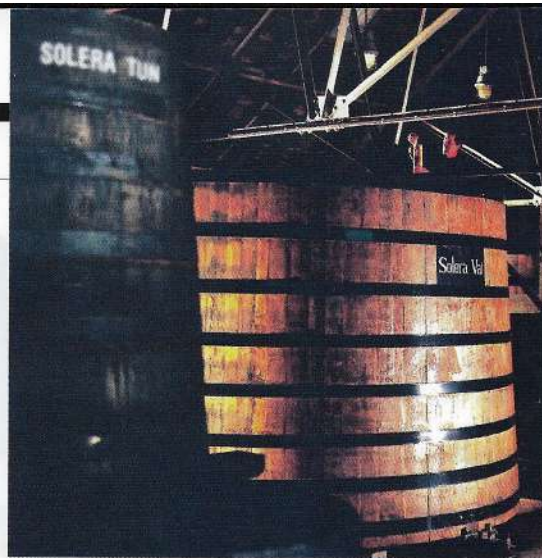
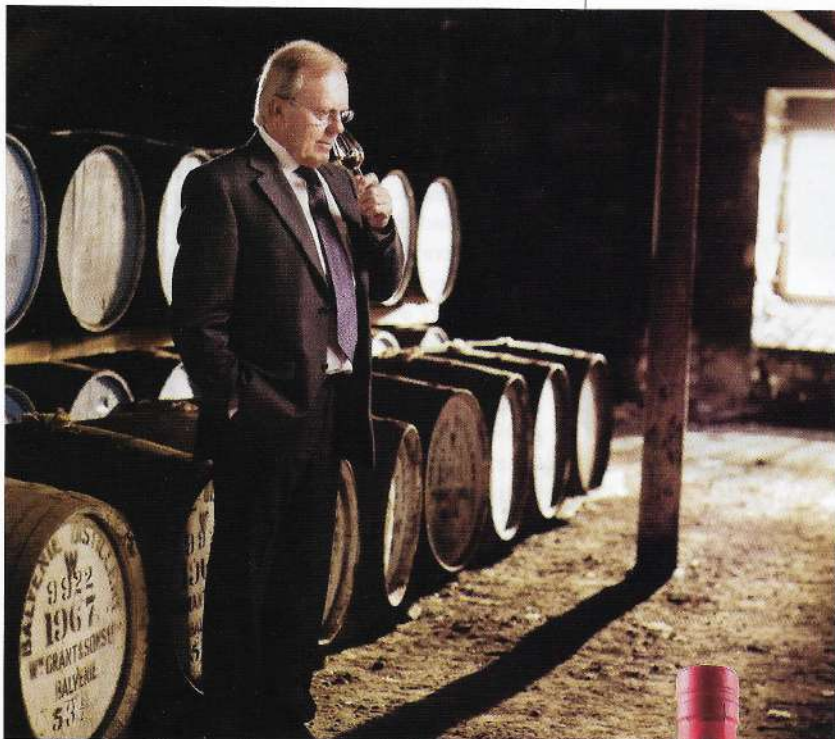


17 year old Balvenie single malt scotch whisky



30 year old Balvenie single malt scotch whisky





distillery is situated in a valley surrounded by the Conval Hills, and when the snow on these hills melts, it feeds the Robbie Dhu spring, and it's the water from this spring which the Glenfiddich is fortunate enough to have access to, and they use it for all parts of the whisky-making process. We all drink our fill of this cool, clear water, filling a couple of bottles to go with our sundowners.

Our table is set with four whiskies poured out and ready for tasting - the Glenfiddich 12, 15, 18 and 21. We start with the 12, a quintessential Speyside malt, fruity, effervescent and light. If I close my eyes, I can imagine being in a park, maybe one in the tropics, as I receive hints of pineapple and spice. Our host describes the 12yo as the Martini of Malts, a whisky that can fit in anywhere. David Stewart, the previous Malt Master of the Glenfiddich, took inspiration from practices followed in Spain's sherry industry to create the next whisky we taste, the 15yo,

which is sub-titled the Solera Reserve. What distinguishes the 15yo from the others is a process wherein malt whiskies, which have been maturing independently in three different types of casks (ex-bourbon, ex-sherry and virgin oak) are brought together in a defined ratio in a giant vat known as the Solera vat, which holds up to 38,000 litres of single malt whisky. What happens next is the crucial step. The whisky from the Solera vat is emptied into a marrying tun, to help the whiskies spend some more time in contact with each other, but half the whisky is left behind in the vat, to ensure optimum preservation of its character.

I shake the glass with the 15yo back and forth, let some of the precious liquid touch my fingers and smell it, prior to tasting. There's no hint of spirit on the nose, the whisky has been aged just right, as the nose is not jarring in any way. On the palate, it has a slightly longer finish than the 12yo, and keeping and rolling the whisky around the middle



**From top:** Glenfiddich distillery Solera vat; The Balvenie malt master David Stewart at the warehouse; Whisky trail signs; and the Glenfiddich 21-year old Single Reserve Rum Cask Finish malt scotch whisky

**Facing page (from top):** Balvenie kiln fire; Balvenie malt turning; the Balvenie coppersmith and the Balvenie distillery

of my tongue brings hints of sugar, apples and cinnamon (a liquid apple pie, if you must). If I were to compare the two, the 12yo rushes out like a young ingénue, while the 15yo is more relaxed and languid, the belle of the ball, a whisky to spend a lazy evening with.

As our host says, trying to get a Scottish man to add some water to his whisky is akin to taking his manhood away. With each whisky, however, she encourages us to add a few drops of water, which will help "release the serpent", a term referring to unlocking the flavor molecules from within the spirit (why, what else did you think it meant?)

The 18yo is fruitier than the others, and coats the entire tongue. It's made in small batches of 150 casks each, with the numbering of each batch hand-written on the bottle. Our last whisky is the 21yo, which spends an extra 6 months maturing in Caribbean rum casks. It sings and dances as it comes out of the casks, to a calypso beat

no doubt - a sublime whisky, and the perfect one to end our tasting with.

Our stay that night is at Torrin House, owned by the Grant's family, a breathtaking structure of stone, wood and metal, which looks out on to the Balvenie distillery. The next morning dawns lovely and clear, the perfect weather for a run, and I run out, through the picturesque town of Dufftown, and up behind it, where a judicious right turn takes me past the church, and through a landscape of rolling farmland, where I startle the odd cow, and stop periodically to doff my hat to the various distilleries which I pass, including an extra-long bow at the Mortlach distillery, where William Grant first worked.

After breakfast, we pack, as we are to fly out later that day, but first we visit the Balvenie distillery, which William Grant set up in 1892, a mere five years after Glenfiddich. The Balvenie is a miniature masterpiece, with a strong focus on craft. It's a rarity in the whisky industry,