

HOLD ON TO YOUR AGE-LABEL

Just to ensure we're all on the same label, sorry page, a whisky's age statement signifies the age of the youngest whisky in the bottle. Like any other luxury product, single malt whisky brands also have a range of offerings, with age traditionally used as a means to clearly differentiate their products, and attract the consumer with the appropriate spending power.

From a customer's perspective it's easy for them to compare, a BMW 3 series to an Audi A4, and take a decision. It becomes tougher for them if there is no obvious benchmark for comparison. Here as you can see, the number is a clear signifier that more is better, and more importantly, it also costs more. And the same goes for the world of single malt, it's easy enough for a consumer to compare a Glenlivet 12 year old with a Glenfiddich 12 year old on the basis of the age statement, and what would possibly differentiate the two for him, would then be primarily be the taste. Where it would become more difficult is if a brand did away with the age statement all together on the label, and thus leaving the consumer, and more importantly the trade, with no obvious point of reference to compare and choose.

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Vikram Achanta

Replacing age statements

Of late, the practice of removing the age statement is becoming increasingly common, even by several major whisky companies. There may well be sound reasons for a distillery to withdraw the age statement from an existing range, but the cynical may well ascribe it to a depleting stock of aged whiskies. There are two ways companies are going about it; the first and far more risky in my opinion is: transition from an existing range with age statements, to one without it, like what the Macallan has done.

In 2012, Macallan announced that they were going to replace their famous range of 10, 12 and 15 year old whiskies with a range linked to the colour of the whisky, Gold, Sienna and Ruby, their approach being that the darker the spirit, the greater the value. Macallan claims that a similar experiment carried out in the Travel retail market met very good response, and therefore this move.

The other approach is to launch an entirely new whisky of a high quality and price, but with no age statement to underwrite it, an example being the Dalmore King Alexander 3. Says Richard Paterson, Master Blender for Whyte and Mackay, "The reputation of any whisky company is based on the quality of its products therefore only after it has achieved the highest quality level will he be prepared to release its whisky onto the market. Whether it be aged or non age." Richard goes on to say, that in the absence of the age statement, whisky companies need to ensure luxurious packaging to draw the consumers attention.

On the other hand, companies like Pernod Ricard, secure in their available stocks, have gone the extra mile with their global "age matters" campaign, run across their range of whiskies – The Glenlivet, Chivas Regal, Royal Salute, Ballantine's and Aberlour. Says Shweta Jain, AGM Marketing, Pernod Ricard, "Consumers value age

statements, they use it to ladder the different malts in their minds. A lot appreciate the rarity of higher aged malts and understand the complexity that age can add to a whisky."

As Shweta rightly says, one mustn't also forget that age is not just a number, it refers to the extra time the spirit spends in a cask with the wood, adding taste, character and complexity to the end product.

Argues Richard, "non age" whiskies are here to stay with the motive of stock management being central to this as is the ability of the master blender to produce a style consistently, due to the assurance of a certainty in supplies.

Suggests Keshav Prakash, Director of The Vault Fine Spirits, "Perhaps the Scotch whisky industry can borrow from their neighbours in Cognac, where the classification system of VS, VSOP and XO all relate to an age range!"

It may well be that the worldwide explosion in demand for Scotch whisky over the last few years, has taken the Scotch whisky industry off guard, and therefore the move to diminishing the importance of the age statement. Most major companies have subsequently announced massive investments in building up their capacities.

In my opinion, in an emerging market like India, where the consumer is still evolving and there are no clear opinion makers or influencers when it comes to whisky, for the consumer to accept that a whisky without an age statement might cost more than one with an age statement, is an act of faith, and not which one I feel, a majority of consumers might adopt. So if you're thinking of lopping off the age statement from your label, don't! **S**

(Vikram Achanta is co-founder and CEO of Tulleeho)

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