

THIERRY BÉNITAH

# WHISKY

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TOURS AND  
TASTINGS

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Flammarion

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THIERRY BÉNITAH

with

JEAN-MARC BELLIER & EMMANUEL DRON



Flammarion

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Highland landscape, Scotland.

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# PREFACE

Imagine, just for a moment, that you are traveling through Ireland, Scotland, or the United States, looking for all the best whiskies, both trusted favorites and undiscovered new delights. That is the journey you are about to embark on in this book: it takes you on a magical voyage to the heart of the world of whisky.

We describe the situation in each of the three major producing countries—Ireland, Scotland, and the United States—before making a detailed and thorough examination of the qualities and resources of each distillery. In Ireland, there are only three whisky distilleries, and they are widely separated. This is a boon for the whisky lover, a golden opportunity to travel throughout this beautiful country to discover the many and various treasures of the Emerald Isle. Our tour through Scotland follows the route of the principal whisky regions, from the Lowlands in the south to the Orkney Islands off the north coast. Finally, our journey takes us to the heart of

the United States, on the roads of Kentucky, real bourbon country, and Tennessee, home to Jack Daniel's.

Once this whirlwind tour is finished, we return to the subject that fascinates so many whisky lovers—tasting. The author, Thierry Bénitah, and two of his colleagues from the Maison du Whisky in Paris, Jean-Marc Bellier and Emmanuel Dron, have sampled as many different bottles as possible from distilleries in Scotland, Ireland, and the United States. The distilleries kindly agreed to take part, by providing samples of their great classic whiskies and their limited editions. In total, over four hundred whiskies (and whiskeys) were tasted for the book.

To keep the work as topical as possible, we have deliberately chosen to list only the distilleries' own bottlings. These whiskies are easier to obtain, as they are often well known, being advertised by the distillery and widely distributed in stores. Whisky bottled by independent bottlers, although very interesting from a taster's point of view, is harder

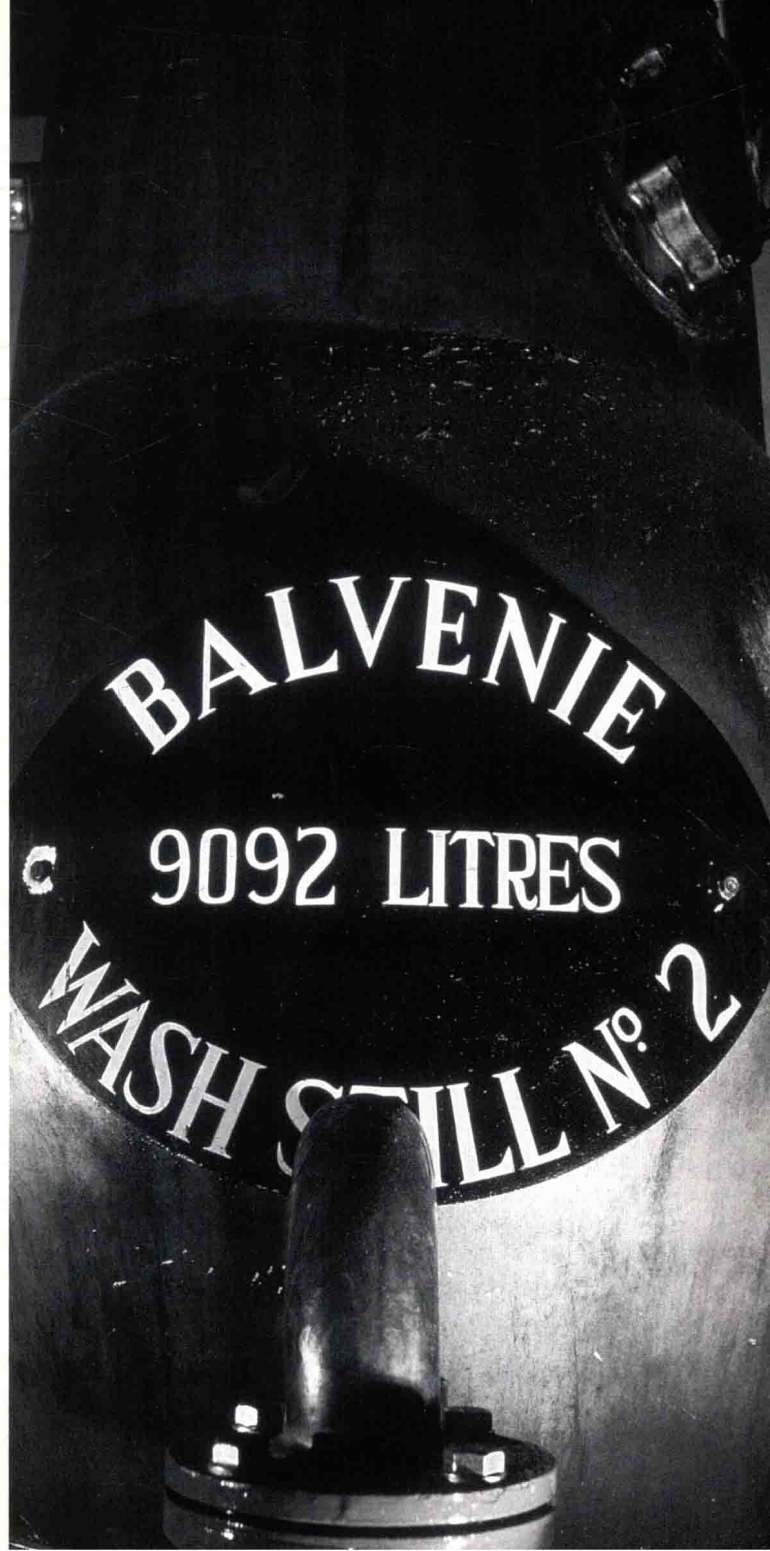


A wash still at the Balvenie distillery, Speyside, Scotland. Balvenie has eight stills, four wash stills and four spirit stills.

to come by. Also, it is often produced in tiny quantities (as few as two hundred bottles), which sell out immediately, making it very difficult to draw up a complete list of production. To include these independent bottlers would have meant choosing amongst them, and would have made the book less objective. However, when their own bottlings were not available for tasting, as was the case for some Scottish distilleries, whiskies from well-known independent bottlers have been included.

Following the rules of tasting as laid down in Chapter Four of Book One, we have attributed a style to each distillery, and given an overall mark to each whisky tasted, based on its nose, palate, and finish. For ease of reference, the conclusions are summarized in a star rating system for an at-a-glance view of each whisky's qualities.

We invite you to join us on a comprehensive tour of the whiskies and whiskeys produced in Ireland, Scotland, and the United States. Take the time to discover the richness of the world of whisky for yourself.



## HOW TO READ THE TASTING NOTES

Three-quarters of this second book consists of tasting notes, whose presentation and system of notation require some explanation. Nearly all the tasting notes follow the same formula, starting with general information about the distillery:

- A NUMBER CORRESPONDING TO THE MAP
- THE NAME OF THE DISTILLERY
- THE REGION
- WHETHER THE SITE IS STILL IN OPERATION OR CLOSED
- ADDRESS AND TELEPHONE NUMBER
- WEBSITE (where applicable)
- VISITS: whether the distillery is open to the public, and how to arrange visits
- DATE OF FOUNDATION
- CURRENT OWNER
- WATER SOURCE
- NUMBER OF STILLs
- FACTS AND FIGURES
- HISTORY OF THE DISTILLERY

For the American distilleries, the mixture of cereals used in the mashbill is also given.

## TASTING

The second part of the notes consists of an analysis of each sample. The distillery's style

is first described, with comments on the principal flavors and aromas discernible in its whisky or whiskies. Each whisky is then marked individually, using the same star rating system for each country.

## MARKING

Each whisky is given three marks, according to its nose, palate, and finish. The grading is as follows:

- 1 STAR (MEDIocre)
- 2 STARS (AVERAGE)
- 3 STARS (GOOD)
- 4 STARS (VERY GOOD)
- 5 STARS (EXCEPTIONAL)

The smaller stars count for half-points, making the marking system more precise. The final mark is simply the average of the three scores.

### • TYPES OF STARS

Two types of stars are used in the scoring system: full-color stars (★) and outlines (☆). The full-color stars indicate a rounded, powerful whisky, while the outlines suggest that the whisky is lighter.

This information is given so that readers can choose the style of whisky they prefer, and adapt their choice to the time of day; drinking, say, a lighter whisky in the afternoon and a more powerful one later on.

# • THE COLOR OF THE STARS

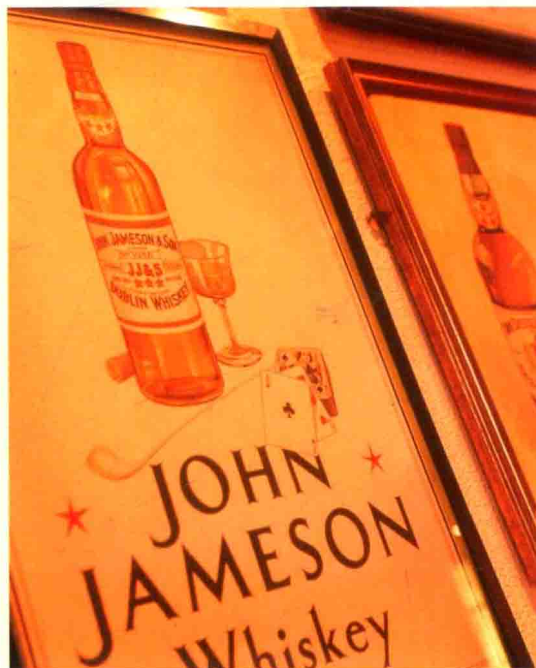
No tasting would be complete without a guide to the principal notes, aromas, and flavors of each whisky sampled; these are indicated by the colors listed below. Please note that the meaning of the color changes from country to country.

	IRELAND	SCOTLAND	UNITED STATES
★ or ☆	grain	malt (beer, yeast)	grain (corn, rye)
★ or ☆	floral	floral/ leafy	floral
★ or ☆	fruit	fruit	fruit
★ or ☆	spicy	rich (spicy, sherry)	spicy
★ or ☆	peaty	peaty, iodine	burnt wood, vanilla (pecan nut)

The tasting notes end with three further listings, of interest to whisky lovers and collectors of miniatures:

- ADDITIONAL DISTILLERY-BOTTLED VARIETIES
- BOTTLINGS BY INDEPENDENTS:  
scarce, limited, or widely available :  
(Scotland only)
- MINIATURES (Ireland and Scotland only).

Most of the whiskies featured come from distilleries that are either still in operation or mothballed (temporarily shut). However, a certain number of whiskies come from the remaining stocks from silent or dismantled



distilleries (those that have closed down permanently, or where the buildings no longer exist). Some of these are only available from independent whisky specialists such as Gordon & Macphail (G&M), Signatory Vintage (S.V.), and William Cadenhead (Cad).

All the tasting notes in this volume apply to distilleries that are either still active or have been non-operational for no more than ten years. At the end of the chapter on Scotland there is a brief description of some twenty Scottish distilleries that have been closed down for over ten years, but whose whiskies are still found occasionally.





Far left: The Giant's Causeway, the most visited natural site in Northern Ireland.

# IRELAND

## THE TOUR

Two names immediately come to mind in connection with Irish whiskey today: Old Bushmills, actually in Northern Ireland, and Midleton, near the city of Cork, in the far south of the Republic of Ireland, or Eire, as it is called in Gaelic. However, until relatively recently, the principal center for Irish whiskey was the country's capital, Dublin. Even if there is no longer a distillery in Dublin, the city's associations with the drink are long and glorious. And so it is here we have chosen to start our tour, in whiskey's first home in Ireland.





## DUBLIN

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It is in Dublin that we find the last traces of the Golden Age of Irish whiskey. Between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, two family-run companies were to revolutionize the whiskey industry. John Jameson, originally from the small Scottish town of Alloa, settled in Dublin in around 1770. In 1780, he bought the Bow Street distillery from a certain John Stein. He ran the distillery until his son, also named John, took over the reins. His quality whiskey only had one serious rival in the form of another Dublin-based family company, located on the opposite bank of the River Liffey: John Power & Son. In 1791, a Mr. James Power had transformed his inn on Thomas Street into a distillery, which was later moved to new premises in John's Lane. James Power certainly did not foresee that a few years later, his son John would be at the head of a whiskey empire. John Power was a visionary, the first distiller to sell his whiskey in bottles rather than casks, and his famous Gold Label was to conquer the world. John Power was knighted for his services to the trade in Dublin, and a few years later became mayor of the city. The John's Lane distillery was the last to function within the city limits, right in the heart of Dublin. It finally closed its doors in 1976, only five years after the closure of the Bow Street distillery, its arch-rival for nearly two centuries.

Killarney National Park,  
County Kerry, Republic of  
Ireland.

Even if whiskey is no longer produced in Dublin itself, the city, with its population of over one million, is home to the headquarters of one of the biggest whisky-producing companies in the world, Irish Distillers. Its current premises are only a short walk from the Irish Whiskey Corner, inaugurated in 1997, a visitor center exploring the heritage of the old Jameson distillery on Bow Street, built on the actual site of the former distillery. At the entrance to this charming museum is a still from the Power's distillery. A visit to this museum is an excellent way to begin an exploration of Irish whiskey.

Dublin has far more to offer than a glass of whiskey or Guinness in one of its six hundred pubs. It has an important architectural heritage, notably a number of fine eighteenth-century Georgian buildings. Its cultural past is equally rich: the city pays homage to its famous sons, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Oscar Wilde.

## FROM KILBEGGAN TO TULLAMORE

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Once you leave Dublin behind, nature shows some of her most beautiful aspects. To the west are the green plains of County Kildare, famous for its horses and numerous medieval towns. Further north, the hills of County Louth bring you to Dundalk, home to the Cooley distillery since 1989. The town itself is not of much interest, but the town where Cooley whiskey is aged, Kilbeggan, is much





more charming. Kilbeggan is further west, less than an hour's drive from Dublin. Here, you can see the old John Locke's distillery, founded in the mid-eighteenth century and closed forever in the 1950s. Today, its renovated warehouses are used to mature some of the whiskey produced by Cooley in Dundalk.

Leaving Kilbeggan behind, there is another former distillery seven miles or so to the south that is well worth visiting, in the town of Tullamore. Founded in 1829, the distillery of the same name is still famous today for Irish Mist, a whiskey liqueur made with honey and heather, and its Tullamore Dew whiskey ("Give every man his Dew"). Tullamore Dew is now produced in Midleton. The buildings of the Tullamore distillery are no longer standing, but three magnificent pot stills remain. These were bought by Cooley and transferred to Kilbeggan, where they may yet be used to make whiskey again one day.

### BUSHMILLS, THE LAND OF GIANTS

To the north of Belfast, right in the heart of Northern Ireland, lies County Antrim. This region is famed for one of the most remarkable natural sites in the British Isles, the legendary Giant's Causeway. It is in fact a series of volcanic basalt rocks, sculpted into "steps" by the erosion of the wind and waves. The site is the most-visited tourist attraction in Ireland.

Its name comes from Irish folklore, which tells many tales of giants, like Finn MacCool. The other big attraction for tourists in the region is the Old Bushmills distillery. Old Bushmills claims to be the oldest licensed distillery in the world, but actually only began producing whiskey in 1784, a hundred and seventy six years after its license was granted. It has two distinctive pagoda-shaped kilns, and today makes a triple-distilled single malt low in peat. One of the old warehouses for aging the casks was recently renovated to increase the size of the very interesting visitor center. Although Old Bushmills is fascinating both historically and in terms of its buildings, it is on the extreme southern tip of Ireland, in the county of Cork, that the true Mecca of Irish whiskey lies.

### MIDLETON, THE SOUL OF IRELAND

The road from Dublin to Midleton takes you over the mountains of County Wicklow, then past the charming fishing ports of County Wexford. Further south, County Cork is scattered with little villages with brightly colored cottages. Midleton lies to the east of Cork, Ireland's second city. The current distillery, founded in July 1975, was built a few hundred yards from the old Midleton distillery. This huge and impressive distillery is the greatest monument to the glory of *uisge beatha*, bettering anything even Scotland has to offer.

Facing page:

Brightly painted cottages in Kinsale, typical of so many charming Irish villages.



