



Guardians of quality

Inside the world of master blenders:

BY ANTHONY GLADMAN

The role of a master blender is one of the most critical in the spirits industry. More than a connoisseur of taste, a master blender is a custodian of a brand's identity, safeguarding its character across decades and even centuries. As both scientists and artists, they oversee everything from the initial distillation to the final blend, a process that requires immense precision, experience, and an unwavering commitment to a brand's legacy.

You might picture a blender - the person, not the kitchen appliance - as someone who tastes a lot of spirits. And maybe they do compared to the general populace, but that's nothing compared to the amount they smell. They sniff so much it's like they've condensed themselves down until they're essentially a professional nose.

"Every day I'll be nosing," says Calum Fraser, Master Blender at Suntory Global Spirits. "On a typical day, I'll be nosing probably 200 to 300



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samples. It's the core bread and butter part of my job."

Blenders act as the custodians of quality for their brands. "It's quite far reaching," Fraser says. Fraser works across all sorts of brands like Bowmore, Laphroaig, Auchentoshan, Glen Garioch, and Ardmore. Those are just the single malts. Fraser also works on blended malts for Teacher's and Ardray, which are if anything even more complicated.

There are three broad categories of samples to be nosed. Blenders will

nose new make spirit to make sure it tastes like it did yesterday, and every day before that. They'll nose samples taken from casks of maturing whisky, just to see how they're getting on. And they'll nose samples drawn up from the warehouses with the idea of building a recipe. "You've got the kind of starting point, you've got the progression, and then you've got the fully matured whisky," Fraser says.

Like all blenders, Fraser is generally nosing spirit all day rather than tasting it, not least because he drives to work and needs to be able to return home safely at the end of the day. "Also, quite often what you pick up on the nose will be echoed on the palate," says Fraser - meaning he wouldn't gain much by tasting as well.

It is common practice across the industry to reduce the samples from cask strength to around 20% or 25% ABV by diluting them with water. "It's just tap water," Fraser explains. "We have good water quality here at Springburn. We'll nose it every day before we use it to ensure that it's odour free." Adding water softens the alcohol, which is what can fatigue the nose's olfactory receptors, and opens up the spirit's flavours. "It will showcase hopefully the flavours that you want to see: the fruitiness, the floral characters, the peaty characters, et cetera. But it also highlights if there's any undesirable characters in there, whether it be sourness or a sulphuric character."

Expressions beyond the core

At times a blender will be tasked with creating a new product to sit within an established range of bottlings. In 2024, for example, Fraser reintroduced an 18-year-old single malt to Laphroaig's core range. He has also had to mix up 12, 15, 18 and 21-year-old sherry cask Bowmore whiskies to sit alongside the established core range of 12, 15 and 18-year-old single malts. And he also developed a series of wine cask finishes for Bowmore that were exclusive to global travel retail.

New product development like this, especially when a lot of new expressions are introduced in a short time, is fraught with risk. Whisky brands are not confined to what happens in the distillery; they have limits that extend beyond its direct control. Bowmore is partly an idea in the minds of its drinkers, a shared understanding of its flavour against which each sip is measured. "You could cause it to lose its identity if you're throwing lots of expressions into the mix at one time," says Fraser.



Suntory Global Spirits reintroduced a Laphroaig 18-year-old single malt in 2024 – blended to sit within the established core range

Each of these new whiskies must be both distinctive enough to earn its place - otherwise, why should drinkers part with their money to try it? - yet still retain enough of the shared distillery character to fit in with the rest of the expressions in that range.

"The way I look at it, regardless of what we have written down from a recipe point of view, from a flavour profile point of view, the key to it is always making sure the distillery character is prominent," says Fraser. This means not overloading the whisky during its maturation, not allowing too much character from the casks to mask the spirit's contribution. "We don't want to flood that DNA, that signature character. We always want to make sure that's part of the expressions we share with our consumers," says Fraser.

To safeguard this flavour DNA, Fraser and his team reference a standard. This is a spider diagram of all the different flavour points at differing intensities that together make up the unique character of a distillery and its new-make spirit. Fraser and his team compare everything they nose against this standard, which they review regularly, carefully noting down any variance so that it can be investigated. Every charge of new-make is evaluated in this way.

Fraser says he enjoys the variety in his role, safeguarding brands that have been in existence for decades and sometimes centuries. "Bowmore, you know, it's nearly 250 years old. So, you've got that responsibility to look



Bowmore's 12, 15, 18 and 21-year-old sherry cask whiskies were blended to sit alongside the established core range of 12, 15 and 18-year-old single malts

after that and make sure that continues. But you also get that fun part of the job where you can create your own contribution to its legacy by making new expressions.”

A balancing act behind the blend

Blending isn't just for whisky brands; it keeps brandy makers busy, too. Oliver Kitson, Master Distiller at Burnt Faith, says Cognac in particular is more like a blended Scotch than a single malt. Many, if not most, Cognac houses operate like merchants, buying distillate from other producers to blend and bottle as their own. This is the case for Burnt Faith too - out of necessity at least for now, as its own eaux de vie, distilled in London on a Charentais still, are a few years too young to release.

Before the business set up in 2023, founder Simon Wright (former owner of Hawkes cidery) bought stock that ranged from three to ten years old. Among these was a base brandy, to be used much like the grain whisky in a blended Scotch. “It's fairly utilitarian, but needs to be pretty smooth to support the rest you're going to add to it,” Kitson says.

Wright also bought *bonificateur*, which translates loosely as enhancer or improver. This is brandy that has been invigorated and aerated to encourage extra oxidative ageing and develop deep rancio flavours of meat, chocolate and tobacco. It's expensive but, used sparingly, brings a depth of character to

a blend that helps a younger brandy sip more like a venerable XO.

Wright was fortunate as he had good advice while he was getting started. “Having the right people involved at the right time was essential to make sure we weren't buying rubbish,” Kitson says. The flow of advice from established Cognac makers continues to this day. Kitson says Burnt Faith takes pointers on managing conditions in its cellar and when to re-rack certain casks, as well as managing inventory from a forecasting and strategic standpoint.

The blend for the distillery's first release, Batch 1, contained eaux de vie from twenty casks - a number far below that which might contribute to the Johnny Walkers of the world, but which presents its own challenges nonetheless. “If you've only got twenty-odd casks to put into your blend, you've got to pick the right ones,” Kitson points out.

Another challenge for a young distillery like Burnt Faith is to balance casks filled against the number emptied. Getting this right can be a dark art. “What you're trying to do is look into your crystal ball at sales and plan accordingly,” says Kitson. “We've been lucky getting listings with Tesco and Waitrose. We're already exporting and, you know, we're doing well. But it's been a bumpy start as well, in terms of demand. We've had high tides and low tides of blending and bottling and stocking in the bonded store.”

Finding the right balance is hard. Bottling too much means parking cash in a warehouse and forgoing further aging that would increase the spirit's value even after the angels take their share. On the other hand, being overcautious means you're missing out on potential sales at a time when every case counts.

Kitson says it is important to maintain a reserve of stock. This could be needed to fulfil higher than forecasted sales, or to meet demand for limited releases or older expressions. “If [that spirit] is not laid it down, you can't do it,” says Kitson.

When creating his blends Kitson must also keep an eye on his target sales price. “We want to make brandy accessible,” he says. “We still get people through the door who don't know brandy is made out of grapes. We don't want to alienate them by making a product that's too expensive.”

Building up your palate

Every morning in the blending room at Chivas Brothers, Master Blender Kevin Balmforth and his team are met with plastic crates full of 500ml bottles of new make spirit and maturing whisky. These are the samples that have been steadily building up from the previous afternoon. “We get two deliveries a day, first thing in the morning and at two o'clock. First thing in the morning is probably the largest amount of samples. You can have anything up to 70 to set up,” Balmforth says. “Every single scotch whisky that we produce goes through myself and my team”

The room itself is a pleasant place to spend time these days. It was refurbished not too long ago. Gone are the cupboards which sometimes obliged blenders to fish around in deep dark corners for a bottle they couldn't see. Now there are heavy duty drawers filled with the hundreds of reference samples against which Balmforth and his team will nose the day's deliveries. “We're quite a small team, there's nine of us, but we make sure every single person noses all the samples and we sign them all off. We actually put our initials on every single bottle,” says Balmforth.

Balmforth says we're all pretty good at discerning flavours, from our childhood onwards. “It's kind of built in, you know” He also believes we can all get better with practice. Still, taste can be a delicate sense, prone to external influences which can be either physical or psychological. Sometimes the sampling must be arranged to mitigate this.

Balmforth says no one comments on a sample until everyone is done nosing it, for instance. When his team noses whisky brought in from another distillery, destined for a blended malt, they will nose it in blue glasses so as not to be influenced by its colour or clarity. There will often be a hidden control sample added to the mix too. "It's exactly the same as the as the reference control, but you don't know which sample it is," Balmforth explains, "If the hidden control is not easily identifiable it means all the samples are the same, they're perfect."

Balmforth's responsibility extends beyond the noses of his immediate blending team. Chivas Brothers employs about 250 people in quality roles throughout the business, all of whom Balmforth must train and assess regularly.

"We put a lot of work into our sensory tests," he says. Workers will be tested on real samples rather than chemically recreated flavours. If someone works at Strathclyde, for example, they get tested against samples of new make from its stills and not those of The Glenlivet. If (or rather, given the maths involved, when) one of the approximately six million casks in his purview goes musty or sulphurous, samples are made and so people can be trained to recognise the faults.

Balmforth and his team deploy nine different tests for people at different stages of operations, but the blenders must sit and pass them all every 12 to 18 months. These may include triangle tests, picking the odd one out of three samples, or being required to identify defects among an array of samples.

An important milestone in a blender's training is when they are approved to sign off on a product. This can take anything from two to five years. "At the end it's really my decision," Balmforth says. "Once they've reached that level they have the approval to pass multi-million pound vats of whiskey so it is a big moment, and it take does take a while."

No wonder this can leave newly approved blenders feeling a little apprehensive. "Especially if you're in the sample room or you go down to do a nosing operation for the first time on your own," says Balmforth, reminiscing. "Before then you would have always had someone with you. The first time you go down to sign off a Glenlivet 18 or something like that, yeah it's a big moment."

From first noses to final sign-offs

There is no university qualification in blending spirits. Some elements of

Fraser's scientific studies, a post-doctorate in synthetic organic chemistry, translate well to the role. These include exposure to different aromas, working in lab conditions, and developing problem-solving skills. But ultimately, blending is a job that must be learned by doing. "It's really through experience, particularly on the sensory front, being exposed to different styles of spirit, different types of maturation. You build up your sensory library, your sensory memory over a sustained period of time," Fraser says.

Fraser says he has been fortunate to learn from some of the best: Dr Jim Beveridge at Johnny Walker and Emma Walker who succeeded him, Sandy Hislop at Chivas Brothers, Gordon Motion at Highland Park, Laura Rampling at The Glenrothes, and Kirsteen Campbell at The Macallan.

"They all approach it in different ways depending on the styles of spirit that they work with, or their cask policy. So, you know, when did I become comfortable? I can't really remember the time, but, you know, I've certainly been helped through working alongside all of those individuals and others throughout the last 14 years."

Fraser says that for him the joy of working within blending is that he gets to look after brands that have been around for a long time and have built up a substantial legacy. "You get the ability to create new things, and you're representing something from Scotland which is internationally loved. I've been in Asia, I've been in North America, I've been in South America, and I've been in the



Burnt Faith Bourbon-finished brandy – made with four different grapes; Trebbiano, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Muscat Blanc – was matured in barrels from Kentucky's Heaven Hill distillery for three years before blending

Middle East, all these parts of the world. I adore what we produce here on this very small island. For me, within blending, you're right in the centre of all that, because people from marketing, people from the brand, consumers, they all are interested in what you do as a job."



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