



NEW & MODERN: The Macallan Distillery in the Highlands of Scotland. (Photos: The Macallan)

THE INNOVATIVE roof of the new building blends in with the surrounding hills.



THE ESSENCE OF SCOTLAND



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

For all whisky mavens, The Macallan has a pride of place. This is also true among Jews, for whom Scotch in general and single malts in particular has become the chosen spirit.

Looking back, it is amusing to relate that I have had a personal experience with The Macallan Whisky approximately every 20 years. Though the distillery has changed, grown, and developed, it still maintains its position on a pedestal as one of the very finest single malt whiskies.

I first came to know the distillery in the mid-1980s. I was in the British drinks industry and a whisky lover even then. The Macallan had an image of quality, without being the massive global brand it has become today. It was still family owned, and was still based in the quaint Easter Elchies House.

The Macallan had a few unique features in its favor.

Firstly, it traditionally used unusually small stills for a commercial distiller. They were the smallest stills in Speyside. When it invested in new ones, it followed the same recipe. Secondly, its whiskies became most famous because they were aged in used sherry casks. The sherry nose, flavor, and finish made The Macallan the favorite dram of many, including yours truly. Finally, The Macallan fortuitously had an extensive inventory of old whiskies, which was greatly to its benefit. This was either from luck or foresight, but it set The Macallan apart from its competitors.

In those days, the entry-level whisky was 10- or 12-year-old, depending on the country; then there was the 18-year-old and the 25-year-old, which came in a rather impressive wooden box.

When I was the wine buyer for a major hotel group, we became closer to the distillery, organizing promotions throughout the chain. The regular The Macallan was in the bars, the 18-year-old was in the restaurant bars and on the liqueur and digestif trolleys. As for the

25-year-old, we made a point of using it as an after-dinner drink in banquets instead of cognac, serving it in a brandy snifter rather than a tumbler or thistle glass.

I enjoyed the wonderful experience of visiting the distillery. I felt privileged to be hosted at Easter Elchies House, and I have a picture of myself wearing tartan, holding bagpipes to remember the occasion! What I was trying to do, I don't remember so well – the whisky dulled my memory; but every picture tells a story. What is clear is that we were having a good time.

Anyway, The Macallan in those days was homey and very authentic. I remember the distillery as being unpretentious and modest, as though the fame it received was almost a surprise and an embarrassment. It felt like the essence of Scotland.

Twenty years later, I was by now a full-fledged Israeli, living and breathing the Israeli wine scene. In 2005, I spent a week with my son David touring Speyside. On the trip, we visited many of the top distilleries, but The Macallan was the one we were most looking forward to.



THE ISRAEL team: Tsipi Levin, brand manager for Edrington; and Nir Ben-Laiche, The Macallan ambassador. (Amir Yaacoby)

THE CORE list in Israel – The Macallan Double Cask comes in 12-, 15-, and 18-year-old expressions.

THE LATEST launch, an expression in the Harmony series called Vibrant Oak.



This time, things had already changed. It felt more international. We were received in a plush new visitors center. Everything was more in keeping with the global brand that The Macallan had become. Smooth and slick but maybe with less soul. Not as authentic. That was perhaps an inevitable casualty of success. However, it was the most formal and professional presentation and tasting we experienced during the week. In other words, still crème de la crème, but in a different way.

We tasted through the range but, funnily enough, we both preferred the 12-year-old rather than the older whiskies we were given. The new core list was made up of a new concept, the Fine Oak series, which were whiskies matured in ex-bourbon casks, as well as the traditional sherry casks.

Fast-forward another 20 years, I meet The Macallan again in 2024-25. This time, as wine columnist for *The Jerusalem Post*, I was invited to some rather grand, well-run events in Israel. The most exclusive was the launch of a special expression to celebrate the distillery's 200th year. To mark the anniversary, it launched a rare, expensive special edition whisky called TIME: SPACE. If you want a wee dram, the bottle will cost you a mere NIS 10,000!

As always with The Macallan, the presentation and packaging are creative, totally original, and outstanding; in fact, a work of art in itself. Of course, an expression like this is for the super rich collector.

A HISTORY of 200 years is both impressive and unusual. There is definitely justification for looking back at a

remarkable story.

The distillery was established in 1824 by Alexander Reid at Craigellachie, on the banks of the River Spey. Reid was a barley farmer and teacher. To put this in perspective, Sir Moses and Judith Montefiore made their first visit to the Holy Land and Jerusalem in 1827. Our oldest existing winery, Zion Winery, was founded in 1848. So it was, in the words of singer-songwriter Don Mclean, "a long, long time ago." At the time, most whisky production was underground, to avoid crippling taxes.

The name "Macallan" is made up of the Gaelic word *magh*, meaning "fertile ground," and "Allan," after a local stream. The land included the iconic Easter Elchies House, which was to become the symbol of the distillery. The Reid family remained in charge until 1858, and then there was continuity because their partners carried on. For a time, the distillery was known as Macallan-Glenlivet.

In 1892, the distillery was sold to Roderick Kemp. He made improvements, which included investing in a new distillery. After his death, the Roderick Kemp Trust was set up to preserve the family ownership.

The distillery expanded but with the same small stills and the same investment in sherry casks, which The Macallan used to control from tree to cask and then age Oloroso Sherry in them before shipping them to the maturation warehouse for the precious whiskies.

In 1977 Easter Elchies was restored, and it became a reception center for visitors. At this stage, the distillery was renamed "The" Macallan, just to sharpen

the message.

Its first release of a 60-year-old whisky created enormous interest. The further release of old whiskies, and the burgeoning image in the UK, America, and the Far East, catapulted The Macallan to the forefront of the wish list for whisky lovers. Later, The Macallan Fine & Rare Collection kept the connoisseurs and collectors happy. Until today, the most expensive whiskies ever auctioned are under its name.

In 1986, Suntory acquired 25% of the business. So on my first visit, it was still family owned. Easter Elchies was still the focal point, and The Macallan was benefiting from its investment in quality, old stocks, and a new interest in all things single malt. It was still a family place in atmosphere.

In 1996, Highland Distillers purchased the remaining 75%, and in 1999 Edrington, a private Scottish company, bought out Highland Distillers. In the Edrington stable were Highland Park, in its own right a very characterful malt whisky; and Famous Grouse, the largest-selling whisky in Scotland and one of the largest-selling blended whiskies in Great Britain.

The new visitors center I visited was opened in 2001. In 2004, the Fine Oak label was launched. These were whiskies matured in three casks: sherry-seasoned European and American oak casks and ex-Bourbon American casks. These Fine Oak Malt Whiskies became the core list, and more age statement whiskies were released, so that the range was from 10-year-old to 30-year-old. However, the core list was the 12-, 15- and 18-year-old.

In 2018, a magnificent new distillery and visitors



center were launched with a unique design. It was made with local stone, timber, and a meadow roof, merging into the Speyside scenery. It is a triumph of the imagination in terms of design and has won awards for its originality, but the objective was to emphasize roots and a sense of place. It is a place where past and future meet, a cathedral to excellence.

IN ISRAEL, The Macallan is represented by Akkerman, a family company founded by Menachem Akkerman in 1962 in Haifa. It became the leading spirits importer here, and in 2014 it took on The Macallan.

The distillery also has its own team of two working alongside the distributor.

Nir Ben-Laiche is The Macallan ambassador in Israel. He is a dynamic, smiling presence, enthused with the distillery story. Prior to this job he worked for Tempo, which represents Pernod Ricard's spirits in Israel.

Tsipi Levin is the brand manager for Edrington in Israel. I first met her when she was part of the marketing team at Carmel, responsible for launching Carmel Signature (the quality label of Carmel Winery) and looking after Yatir Winery.

To work with The Macallan is a plum job for both of them. They are a great team – professional, creative, and pleasant. They have brought The Macallan back into my line of vision because of a series of innovative events they have staged. By their activities, they have added value to the brand.

When I worked with Macallan all those decades ago, it was very easy. There was a range, each with its age statement and its own colored box. There was no overlap. Since those early days, as the demand increased, there has been an explosion of new styles, special editions, and unique releases, which have made things far more complicated.

I am very conservative and easily pleased. I prefer the Sherry Oak series. For me, the 12-year-old and the 18-year-old are outstanding.

These are always my first choices, though I have sometimes found them more scarce and difficult to find than the Fine Oak was. I would often go in search of the Sherry Oak edition, only to be told that the Fine Oak was it. I was confused, and so it seems were the retailers. Certainly the plethora of other releases is confusing. The Fine Oak, which later became known

as Triple Cask, and the Double Oak were confusingly similar in price, style, and look.

Now it seems that the Double Cask, made from sherry-seasoned American and European oak, is taking a lead, particularly in the Israeli market. The 12- and the 15-year-old will be available in most bars, and the 18-year will be in the more prestigious restaurant and hotel bars.

The Harmony Collection is a new special edition series reflecting a new message of sustainability, timed to be launched around the 200th anniversary. I tasted the whiskies and liked the Vibrant Oak best. This celebrates the relationship the distillery has with oak.

This whisky is aged in a combination of first fill American oak, and second fill sherry-seasoned oak casks. Furthermore, oak chippings from their own casks were used in the innovative presentation box

THE FUTURISTIC new building has won awards for its innovative design.

THE EASTER Elchies House, the heart of The Macallan.

and labels. The Vibrant Oak was exquisite, which The Macallan sums up in five descriptors: vanilla, lime, sweet oak, apple, and toasted almonds.

It is clear The Macallan still has what it takes. Looking forward to our next encounter in 20 years' time! ■

The writer is a wine trade veteran and winery insider turned wine writer, who has advanced Israeli wines for 38 years. He is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wine. www.adammontefiore.com

