

A WEE DRAMATIC

Scotland's venerable Macallan Estate provides multiple opportunities to study single-malt perfection

By Mark Hacking



There are some experiences that money simply can't buy, no matter how disposable one's income. Non-monetary limitations are all around us—the laws of physics, for example, or those governing time travel. In the case of the achingly exclusive *en primeur* program from noted scotch maker Macallan, the limits are much more down to earth: There's just not enough land for the barley required to make the coveted liquid.

The distiller produces more than 9,000 casks of premium single malt per year, made possible through the purchase of barley from neighbouring farms. The sole exception is the *en primeur*, for which all barley comes from the Macal-

lan Estate itself, exactly 90 acres in total. As the math is not apparent, that's enough for only 25 casks per year.

As such, even the most well-heeled of whisky lovers simply cannot gain access. Invitations, explains Public Relations Manager Sheila Kennedy, are extended to people the distiller has identified as "great appreciators of all that The Macallan stands for." You have been warned.

Although DRIVEN's editorial staff falls somewhat short of expenditures in the category of hundreds of thousands of dollars for single-malt scotches, we were nonetheless invited to join a late-summer Macallan *en primeur* tasting session.



This royal treatment was extended during a tour of Speyside, the area of Scotland that's home to the world's premier single-malt producers.

The drive north from Aberdeen airport took us through one of the most pastoral settings known to man, and set the stage impeccably. Of course, money *could* buy a chauffeured ride in a Bentley Continental Flying Spur Speed—but that didn't cheapen it in the least. The rolling hills, the reclining leather seats, the aroma of freshly-harvested crops: This was the way God's country was meant to be experienced.

Upon arrival, our group was sequestered in a cottage on the Macallan estate—again, don't bother with your cheque book—just steps from the distillery, the river Spey and the barley fields that engender

the *en primeur*. In the sitting room, we enjoyed our first tastes of the Macallan wares. Why wait?

The sampling continued at a formal dinner held at Easter Elchies House, an estate-based Jacobean manor built in the 16th century. The “Six Pillars” dinner matched each course to a different single malt. (It bears noting that no matter how much one considers oneself a whisky expert, one's palate will likely be found unrefined in a Six Pillars summit.)

No matter: Our party was joined by whisky maker Bob Dalgarno, who explained each aroma, taste and after-taste in bewildering-yet-inclusive detail. For the record, my favourite of the six was the 15-year-old Fine Oak...but it might have been the smoked salmon talking.

The *en primeur* program is much like buying wine futures. Clients visit the estate, tour the distillery and select the size and type of cask to be used—Spanish or American oak, seasoned with sherry or bourbon. The whisky produced is stored for a minimum of 12 years, then bottled and celebrated one wee dram at a time. The cost of the program? As stated: That's largely irrelevant to the conversation.

The next morning was marked by a brief period of recovery and a leisurely jog around the property. The barley crops had been freshly harvested in anticipation of a new group of clients dropping by to start the *en primeur* process all over again. In an adjacent pasture, a fold of Highland cattle chewed its cud, surely in tacit approval. **D**

