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Canadian whisky: our home and native hooch

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It was once said to be the largest distillery in the world, a sprawling 19th-century complex of limestone buildings and cobblestone lanes on Toronto's waterfront that housed the now-defunct Gooderham & Worts. Today, it is known as the Distillery District, a collection of chic shops, art spaces, bars, even a microbrewery. Yet, to Davin de Kergommeaux, there's irony amid the restored beauty. "You can get Scotch like crazy, but with Canadian whisky, it's the bottom-shelf stuff," he says.

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It's a missed opportunity and a shame, says the author of the new book *Canadian Whisky: The Portable Expert*. Almost from the industry's inception, Canada's signature spirit enjoyed global repute, gaining traction south of the border during the U.S. Civil War as domestic supply chains there fell into disarray. Prohibition was another boon, and Canada never looked back. Until recently, that is. Fashion-conscious drinkers are sipping vodka, high-end Scottish single malts and craft bourbons now. Ottawa-based Mr. de Kergommeaux, a critic who runs the canadianwhisky.org website, believes it's time for a fresh look at our home and native hooch. He spoke with The Globe and Mail by phone before an appearance this Saturday at the Spirit of Toronto whisky festival at Roy Thomson Hall.

You were a Scotch fan before embracing Canadian whisky. Was there a bottle that sparked an epiphany?

I was at an exclusive tasting in Las Vegas with the top single-malt connoisseurs in the United States and they were pouring stuff like Canadian Masterpiece, which I'd never heard of, and Canadian Club Chairman's Reserve, which I'd never heard of, and Bush Pilot's, which I'd never heard of, and Crown Royal XR. They were choosing to drink Canadian whisky. With my Canadian insecurity, maybe I needed validation from outside the country.

But it seems that every other whisky has moved upscale while Canadian is caught in a rye-and-ginger, Mad Men time warp.

The American market is huge. It's the biggest market for Canadian whisky, and that whisky is mainly aimed at mixing. Canadian producers haven't done a particularly good job of letting Canadians know about our finer whiskies. Danfield's 21, honestly, it is as good as any single malt. Century Reserve 21 is as good as any single malt. Look at 10-year-old Alberta Springs. That is a real sipping whisky. I'll put that up against any bourbon.

How do you distinguish Canadian from Scotch or bourbon?

To me, there's an elegance to it. The rye sits on top, sings a little bit. There's a nice grapefruit-pith-type finish, which kind of cleanses your palate. There's some vanilla, some nice spiciness. Bourbon really is more vanilla, a lot of caramel. It's sweet, it's creamy. Scotch has a lot of fruity flavours. We talk about a lot of peat smoke in Scotch, but it's not all like that. And single-malt Scotch is more robust.

A lot of people are shocked to learn there's little or no rye in most Canadian whisky, which is now based mostly on corn. That doesn't scandalize you. Why?

By and large, Canadian whisky used to be made from wheat. Now, we see corn wherever we go and assume it's always been there. A lot of distillers were millers and they were making wheat whisky on the side. Then they got the idea to add a little rye to it. Rye adds a lot of flavour. People started asking for rye whisky and what they meant was whisky that had a little bit of rye in it.

But some today contains no rye at all.

Some of the flavours that you get in rye are also present in oak, particularly used barrels that have had their powerful flavours already washed out of them. So, we now say that what tastes like rye is called rye.

You're a fan of one of my favourites, Wisner's Legacy. It contains a lot of spicy rye.

I was at the World Whisky Awards two years ago and everything was tasted blind. Nobody knew what it was, and the judges were raving about this whisky. It's so good.

You're going to be stranded on an Arctic island. What whisky do you bring?

I had an editor just ask me to write a piece about the best Canadian whisky. Five times, I came up with a different answer. You take Gibson's 18 year old, it cannot be beat. You take Wisner's 18-year-old, it's not as creamy as Gibson's 18, but it cannot be beat. You take Alberta Premium 30-year-old – staggeringly good whisky. Any of the Forty Creek special whiskies are fantastic, but Forty Creek John's Private Cask No. 1, honestly, it blows your mind, so spicy. I'd rather not go to a desert island with just one bottle.

Is John K. Hall at Forty Creek the industry's greatest missionary now?

He's at all the whisky shows. He does tastings. He gets his whiskies out there. They're low-volume and expensive relative to other Canadian whiskies and bourbons, but he sells them out. I think he's showed that what we really need is a little belief in ourselves and some promotion.

And before John Hall?

There were some very important players. J.P. Wisner and the work he did in Prescott. Hiram Walker in Windsor – he really put Canadian whisky on the map in the United States as a quality product. But my personal hero is Sam Bronfman. He sounds like he was a bit of a detestable character, but he was obsessed with quality. He also was embarrassed about the profits he had made during Prohibition, so as soon as Prohibition was over, he started making fantastic whisky. And he wouldn't sell it until it was ready. He'd rather lose money than sell whisky that was anything less than the best.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Canadian Whisky: The Portable Expert, \$24.99, is published by McClelland & Stewart.