

Scotch

As the name implies, Scotch is whisky that is produced and aged in Scotland. The whisky may be bottled in Scotland, or shipped to this country and bottled here.

There are two basic categories of Scotch whisky: Blended and single malt.

A single malt Scotch is the product of a single distillery. Single malts are grouped according to the geographical area in which they are produced. They are listed below with a brief description of their qualities:

1. **Lowland malts:** These are generally the lightest, both in flavor and in color.
2. **Islay:** These malts are the heaviest, most full-bodied whiskies.
3. **Campbeltown:** These malts are also full-bodied. There are few of these distilleries left.
4. **Highland:** This group is the most numerous by far. Generally, this group is considered to have the most balance in its flavor. It has moderation in its flavor and aroma.

Speyside refers to a premium single malt producing area within the Highlands. Most experts now refer to Speyside as a separate group of malts.

Single malt Scotch production is an expensive process. The grain used in making single malt is specially selected barley. This is soaked in water for sprouting. The sprouted barley is dried in kilns, or ovens, fired by peat and coal. This process gives the whisky a smoky flavor. Like all whiskies, the malted barley is then mixed with warm water to produce a mash. Yeast is added and the mixture is allowed to ferment. The product is then distilled twice in pot stills. The newly distilled product is approximately 60 - 70% alcohol as it is pumped into casks. After aging a minimum of three years in barrels, it is considered whisky.

Blended Scotch whisky accounts for approximately 94% of all Scotch consumed worldwide. Blended Scotch whisky is the combination of a number of different single malt and grain whiskies. The goal is to reach a pleasant combination that softens the harsher characteristics of single malts. The grain whiskies are NOT neutral grain spirits, but rather, grain whiskies that are distilled in continuous stills. Usually, there are 20-25 single malts combined in a blend. In a blended whisky, 20 - 50% of the product is malt. The rest is grain whisky. "Vatted" Scotch is a blend of malts with no grain whisky added.

Out of the still, Scotch (or any distilled spirit) is colorless. Aging the product in a barrel gives the whisky color. By law, Scotch must be aged three years or more. Most brands in the US are aged four years or more. If a Scotch is less than four years old, its label must disclose its age.

Scotch whisky is aged in oak barrels. (Often pre-used bourbon barrels.) They may, however, may be aged in sherry or wine barrels to give the product a distinctive fruity flavor.

When a blended Scotch is labeled as “aged 10 - 12 years,” this refers to the age of the youngest whisky in the blend.