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A SINGULAR SUCCESS STORY

Balcones Distilling Is Blazing Trails for American Single Malt **BY LORI MOFFATT**



Balcones Distillery
Manager Tommy
Mote and Head
Distiller Jared
Himstedt.

After a recent tour of Balcones Distilling in Waco, Texas, I stopped for lunch across the street at Milo, a casual chef-driven restaurant that makes generous use of Balcones' vast portfolio in its cocktail program. I struck up a conversation with a stranger-turned-friend at the barstool beside me, and soon we decided to share a pour of one of Balcones' limited-release single malt whiskies—a gorgeous expression called Hechiceros, which finishes in Port barrels and evokes apricots, bread pudding, and juicy cherries. Other Balcones Single Malts are finished in Sherry and rum casks, and some are made with barley that was smoked over peat in Scotland—but they all speak to the distilling team's zeal for leadership in this emerging category.

Still, none of these compelling elixirs would exist were it not for the success of Balcones' flagship product: Texas Single Malt. (Because Balcones pays homage to Scottish tradition, "whisky" is the brand's preferred spelling.) Shortly after its release, it prevailed over such iconic Scottish distilleries as Balvenie and The Macallan in London's 2012 Best in Glass competition—a remarkable upset that some have compared to 1976's legendary "Judgement of Paris," when a California Cabernet and Chardonnay beat European wines in a prestigious blind tasting.

Balcones has been positioning itself as a forerunner in the burgeoning American single malt whisky movement ever since, garnering (among still other honors) not only a double gold medal but the Best Craft Distiller Whiskey award at the 2018 San Francisco World Spirits Competition for its flagship product. What's more, Head Distiller Jared Himstedt is among the founders of the American Single Malt Whisky Commission, which serves to establish and promote the category. "A federal definition could allow us to import and label in countries where we currently can't," says Himstedt by way of explaining the commission's objectives. "But more importantly, if distillers work together, there is a lot more momentum in getting training for bar staff, better placement at the liquor store, [and] education for consumers. Right now, you see whiskey-focused bars that have Scotch, Irish whiskey, Japanese whiskey, and all that. But they don't have an American single malt on the menu."



Balcones' gleaming copper pot stills were made by fourth-generation craftsmen in Scotland.



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That's about to change.

Single malt whisky, whether it's distilled in Scotland, Japan, or Texas, must be made in a single distillery from a mash bill containing only malted barley. With one exception—a limited release containing barley grown in the Texas High Plains—Balcones uses an heirloom Scottish barley known as Golden Promise for all of its single malt expressions. As often as every two weeks, Balcones receives a delivery of 18 metric tons of it that's transferred via compressed air to a looming silo beside the distillery. "Golden Promise was the barley of choice for Scotch production for a long time, but in recent decades it has been passed over for grains with higher yields," says Distillery Manager Tommy Mote. It lends a luxurious silkiness to the Texas Single Malt expression, as well as stunning flavors of honey and orchard fruit; the long finish evokes wood and toasted malt with every sip.

But the use of Old World barley is not the only way that Balcones honors Scottish tradition in the heartland of Texas. "Malt whisky is equipment focused, so we have one production line for our American whisky tradition and another for our Scottish whisky tradition," says Mote. Whereas bourbon and rye are typically made with corn, rye, and wheat crushed

in a hammer mill and fermented on grain in a cereal cooker, single malt whiskies use a roller mill (which yields fine, uniform grist) and a mash tun to separate the grain from liquid before fermentation. Balcones' burnished copper pot stills were made in Scotland by fourth-generation craftsmen at Forsyth's; the team even refurbished a decommissioned 60-year-old mash tun from the 1897 Speyburn Distillery. "It just feels right to have a tie to the other side of the pond and also to decades of whisky making," observes Himstedt.

It's tradition you can literally taste. "The yeast, the grain, and the stills we use are extremely traditional [for] single malt, yet our barrel program has more in common with bourbon and rye production," Mote says. "Almost all Scotch is aged in ex-bourbon barrels, [whereas] we use virgin oak from America, France, and Hungary. For the consumer, there are a lot of familiar flavor profiles in an American single malt."

"As a maker, I feel like we've just begun," Himstedt says. "It's rare to be able to watch a new category of whisky develop. We're excited and curious to see where we can take it. There are a million directions we still want to explore, to learn what single malt looks like and what's possible to make in the United States, especially central Texas." ■■