



Special Regulatory Report: Canadian Whisky, Its History, Taste, Legal Regulation

Gary M. Gillman*

Introduction

What is Canadian whisky? How is it made, how is it consumed? This article sketches the origins of Canadian whisky viewed historically; its main production characteristics; and the typical palate. It also offer comparative comments in relation to bourbon and Scotch whiskies. Finally, some legal commentary is offered.

(a) Whisky and the Family of Spirituous Drinks

Most people, even those who do not drink alcohol or stick to wine or beer, have heard of Canadian whisky. They may even know that it is one of the five or six national styles of whisky.

Whisky's origins are not clear but many researchers believe the drink originated in early Irish monasteries, which would take the history back a thousand years or more. From Ireland, it appears the drink migrated to Scotland and from there to England and beyond. Irish monks had access to distillation knowledge originating in the Middle East and Far East and apparently, they distilled grain mash to make medicine or for alchemy purposes. Soon, the drink spread amongst secular spheres due to its mood-altering properties. It became regarded as a stronger version of the wine or beer which had been traditional in various cultures for millennia. With the onset of spirits taxation, the spread was not always licit.

By dint of British expansion in previous centuries, whisky became a by-word in large parts of the world for an alcoholic drink of quality. Whisky also penetrated certain foreign cultures where British or American cultural influence extended: India and Japan may be cited as examples.

Whisky is a notch in the belt so to speak of hard drinks which traverses Northern Europe. The English have their London Dry Gin; the Dutch and Belgians enjoy "genever" or "jenever" (the original form of gin); France (but also e.g. Italy and Spain) is the land of brandy; the Germans and Scandinavians enjoy respectively their "korns" and "acquavits"; and the Poles and other Eastern peoples cling to their innumerable forms of vodka. All these drinks are related in the broad sense yet whisky seems in the last 100 years pre-eminent in reputation and has established strongholds in all these places.

(b) Appearance and Fortunes of Whisky in Canada

It was, therefore, the Irish and British who brought the taste for whisky to Canada. This is not to say whisky in North America has not been influenced by peoples of other origins. In particular, the use of rye grain in a whisky mash-bill may be of Swiss, Dutch or Germanic origin. The Anglo-Celtic influence on whisky in Canada was probably complemented by that of United Empire Loyalists who came to settle in parts of Canada in the late 1700's and early 1800's. By the mid-1800's, Canada had a couple of hundred distilleries. There were many in Quebec for example, including one founded by the prominent Molson family, better known today for its continued involvement in the Molson-Coors brewery.

In its earliest years, whisky was little aged: out of the still and into the gills (and till), one might say. Before advanced rectification techniques emerged in the later 1800's, Canadian whisky was sold quite new. Sometimes it underwent a rough filtration in large vats of maple charcoal. This was intended to eliminate bad-tasting "congeners" – oily or other off-tasting by-products of grain fermentation which can affect the palate of whisky. This method is still used to refine the flavour of Jack Daniels' famous Tennessee whiskey – but the method was known in Canada and by numerous U.S. distillers in the mid-1800's.

At one time, hard liquor in Ontario and much of the rest of Canada meant, simply, Canadian whisky. True, the Maritimes plumped for rum, and still do. And Scotch whisky had cachet amongst Scottish-Canadians and some other groups. But in general, Canadians drank their own. By the end of the 1800's names such as Seagram, Hiram Walker/Canadian Club, Wiser, Corby, and Gooderham & Worts had national and in some cases international resonance.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whisky in Canada, as of course in America, had to contend with the growing influence of the Prohibition movement. Its object was to ban strong spirits and all forms of potable alcohol if possible. This was in line with an international movement at the time which had complex roots. One root was the turn by physicians against alcohol as having medical value. Another was the influence of various religious figures. For certain periods in some Provinces, liquor consumption was banned across their territory including in Ontario during a part of World War I. Still, whisky production thrived due in part to the huge demand for whisky in Prohibition America (1920-1933). Whisky - legally produced in Canada - one way or another found its way across the Detroit River and other border areas to slake the thirst of dry America.

The production of Canadian whisky surged after 1933, assisted by the henceforth legal American market, a parallel relaxation of social attitudes in Canada and the continuing thirst in Canada for the native shot. Canadian whisky tended to sell less well in Quebec, however. Quebecers tended to prefer dry gin and the older Dutch-style gin (Hollands gin, or "*gros gin*" as it was termed in Quebec). Whisky had its ups and downs domestically during the Depression and in the Second World War when alcohol production switched to wartime needs, but after 1945 it was on the march for decades until a slow decline began which affected all "brown goods". That trend continues to this day although bright spots are the single malt, premium bourbon and, increasingly, the craft distiller niche markets. Nonetheless in Canada today Canadian whisky about holds its own with the redoubtable vodka - not so shabby given the latter's seemingly permanent popularity. Canadian whisky also retains a large sale in the U.S. There are signs it is poised for an upswing in line with large sales spikes seen in recent years for malt whisky and premium bourbon.

(c) Consuming Canadian Rye

Canadian whisky can be consumed neat or with ice, in cocktails or in mixed drinks. At one time, few Canadians had not heard of a "rye and ginger" which is simply Canadian whisky mixed with ginger ale and ice. It is perhaps more common today to hear people order a "rye and Coke". The better grades of Canadian whisky can be enjoyed just as they come, but all Canadian whisky makes an excellent Manhattan or Sour, say. The days when waiters swanned around wedding and other receptions carrying trays of rye whisky sours are probably behind us, but a whisky sour is still a good drink.

(d) Brands and Trends

If asked to mention a brand of Canadian, most readers would probably think of Crown Royal, "CC" (Canadian Club), Black Velvet, Lord Calvert or Schenley OFC, amongst others. Due to ongoing industry consolidation the number of currently producing plants is very small. Still, the surviving distilleries, now mostly internationally owned, issue a multitude of brands representing a range of ages and flavours. A recent development, influenced by trends in the bourbon and single malt markets, is small batch bottlings. An example is Wiser's Small Batch which has a fairly pronounced (piney-like and caramel) flavour. Another trend is luxury packages such Cask No. 16, which receives a period of aging

in Cognac barrels. In particular, whiskies aged or “finished” in a barrel which formerly held another alcoholic drink, say sherry, port or brandy, have become specialty items on the shelves of Canadian liquor stores. Canadian Club issues occasionally a whisky aged or finished in sherry wood, and some of artisan producer Forty Creek’s whiskies are finished in ex-sherry or port barrels.

Most Canadian whisky output is from large facilities geared to large-scale production and tends, at least in the typical age and other product bands, to present similarities of flavour.

A recent development is the onset of craft distilling in a number of provinces. These very small producers will issue either whisky (these need a few years in the barrel so their appearance tends to be delayed after start-up), or vodka or gin. White spirits are attractive in that they can be sold virtually upon production and thus can help raise needed operating funds. This sector has good potential in my view in view of the worldwide interest in artisan foods and drinks.

(e) Legal Definition of Canadian Whisky

All Canadian whisky must, like any whisky worthy of the name, be made from grain. Under Canadian law, whisky must be a “potable alcoholic distillate” made from a cereal grain mash - any cereal grain, the use of rye is therefore optional. Our whisky must be aged in wood barrels of a maximum 700 L in size for at least three years, be mashed, distilled and aged in Canada and have at least 40% alcohol by volume (ABV).

Canadian whisky can legally be flavoured with any domestic or foreign “wine” or “spirit”. The term spirit can include any other kind of whisky or even rum or brandy, but the law also states Canadian whisky must “possess the aroma, taste and character generally attributed to Canadian whisky”. This is a control on the extent to which flavourings can affect the traditional palate. Caramel also may be added to Canadian whisky and this is done usually to standardize colour.

Many have heard of the famous Canadian “9.090%” blending rule. I explain further below how it actually works.

Provided whisky is made according to the standards mentioned, it can be described (in Canada) by any of the following names: “Canadian whisky”, “rye whisky” and “Canadian rye whisky”. “Rye” in Canada has thus become a legally recognized term to describe whisky made according to a prescribed standard irrespective of whether rye grain enters its composition (which is not to say that whisky marketed in Canada as rye whisky does not contain at least some rye, it probably does). Most bottles of Canadian whisky, even those sold in Canada, are labeled simply “Canadian whisky” although some brands identify themselves as “rye whisky” or “Canadian rye whisky”. Possibly the argument can be made that no Canadian whisky should be called rye whisky unless it incorporates some rye grain, but I incline to the argument that rye whisky has become a “fancy” or distinctive term in Canada, it is the welsch rabbit of the whisky world, one might say. In the U.S., however, Canadian whisky cannot be called rye whisky since this term is reserved for whiskeys which meet the U.S. standards of identity for rye whiskey which differ from the Canadian concept of rye whisky.

(f) Canadian Production Characteristics

The first step in whisky production - any whisky - is to convert the starches in the cereals to fermentable sugar. Unlike for wine whose grape sugar is ready from the get-go to be made into alcohol, cereal starches must first submit to this chemical change.

For Canadian whisky, raw corn or rye grain (and sometimes wheat) are ground, added to hot water and the mix heated so the starches will swell and liquefy. The mash water is often combined with “spent beer” – the boiled residue of a previous distillation consisting of water and various non-ethanol compounds. Adding spent beer is nothing other than “sour mashing” and it surprises some that the process is as Canadian as it is American. Next, malted barley (or sometimes, malted rye) is added

whose diastatic capacity completes the process of converting the starches to fermentable sugars. Sometimes, enzyme is added artificially for this purpose.

The result is a soupy, grainy, sweet, "porridge", to which yeast is then added to effect fermentation. Yeast, a single cell organism, reproduces by feeding on the sugars derived from the cereal starches. The by-products of this feeding are ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide, and also the vital (but sometimes quite dispensable) "secondary constituents" or grain congeners. As for all whisky distilleries, Canadian distillers isolate the most suitable yeasts and keep a culture to be able to maintain its characteristics. Yeast can certainly affect flavour and the kinds of congeners produced. Sometimes, commercially available dried distillers' yeasts are used in the fermenting vessels.

Something very much like beverage beer emerges at this stage. A beer intended for consumption as such will be boiled with hops (a climbing vine) prior to fermentation to impart additional flavour and preservative qualities. In whisky distilling, the gas in the beer is allowed to bleed off and the rough, unhopped cereal beer is dispatched to the still. There, by dint of fractional distillation it is converted into a spirit which after blending and barrel aging – or barrel aging and blending since the order used depends on the distillery - becomes Canadian whisky.

In Scotland, fine malt whiskies are distilled from a "wash" derived from an all-barley malt mash. In Canada, Canadian whisky generally is distilled from a mash containing corn, rye – the Alberta Premium brands are all-rye-derived, for example - or a combination with again barley malt usually added for starch conversion and to add body and additional flavour. The non-barley malt grains generally are added in raw (unmalted) form since the enzymes in the barley malt will do the necessary conversion job. Thus, the Canadian whisky mash bill presents broad similarities with both a U.S. bourbon whisky mash and one for Scots or Irish grain - but not single malt - whiskies. It should be said too that at least one distiller in Canada, in Nova Scotia, makes a high quality whisky from all-barley malt which resembles closely a good, unpeated Scots single malt.

(g) Why "Rye"?

Canadian whisky is called popularly "rye", now with legal sanction, presumably because at one time, most of it was made from rye. Another explanation is that (as will be seen) Canadian whisky often derives its keynote flavour from a true rye whisky albeit most of the grains in it are not from rye. Today, the base grain used is generally corn. Where rye is used together with corn, the rye often will be the minority grain, as in the typical bourbon mash. Yet, the habit persists, with legal sanction again, to call any Canadian whisky "rye".

(h) Some Distillation Specifics and Barrel Aging

Once fermented, the soupy, grainy distiller's beer has relatively low alcohol content, upwards of 10% ABV. To make this into whisky, this alcohol needs to be concentrated and in the process much of the water and other compounds in the beer will be left behind.

Once ready the beer is piped into a still. Generally in Canada, column stills are used although pot stills are not unknown and may be used to produce a low-proof, flavoursome, or batch, whisky which will be added to the column still product to lend flavour and complexity; however, column stills can be adapted for use towards the same end. In the column still the beer is super-heated by action of steam rising from the base. The steam moves upwards through regularly spaced, perforated metal plates to boil off the alcohol component in the descending wash. Since alcohol's boiling point is lower than that of water, it can be "fractionated" in this way. Most stills include some elements at least made from copper whose contact with the distillate generally improves the quality of the spirit. All pot stills used in Canada generally will be made from copper or mostly so. A recent development is to make grain spirit from a hybrid still which is a column still with a pot still attached to the top (the *vice-versa* has also been seen).

The vaporized alcohol is condensed and, as with any alcoholic distillate regardless of source, clear and colourless. It will usually undergo multiple distillations to reach the required, high degree of ethanol concentration (or "rectification") unless it is intended as a flavouring whisky. The distillate when rectified to the correct strength is transferred to wood barrels holding 700 liters or less - as a rule only new or reused white oak casks (often re-charred ex-bourbon) are used in Canada. It will then be stored or warehoused for at least three years. In Canada, containers larger than 700 L (e.g., butts) are not permitted for maturation.

Wood aging imparts colour and considerable flavour. Tannins and various gums from the wood including lignin enter the whisky and give it a pleasing, sweetish taste redolent of forests and meadows. In addition, residual bourbon in the ex-bourbon barrels may enter the whisky to contribute a hint of its flavour.

In Canadian practice, barrels which used to hold U.S. bourbon whiskey are frequently used to age Canadian whisky. Under U.S. regulations for bourbon whiskey, only new barrels can be used to age the whiskey. Thus, when Canadian distillers get the barrels, a lot of their tannin and other compounds have been leached away by the bourbon previously held. The containers will therefore impart a gentle flavouring action on their new tenant, Canadian whisky, and in time will also lend it a pleasing brown colour. Another effect of barrel aging is a slow oxidation of some elements in the whisky including the aforementioned congeners. Oxidation can lessen a green or harsh quality in whisky and create new chemical compounds including pleasant-smelling and tasting esters.

(i) The Exclusion of Most Congeners and Redesigning the Palate for Canadian Whisky

The flavour of Canadian whisky, when fully aged – any where from three to twelve years or more - is quite mild. It will have a slightly spicy, somewhat woody taste but not (in general) as full a flavour as a malt scotch or bourbon whiskey. The main reason is that the base spirit used is distilled to a very high ABV, in the neighbourhood of 96% before dilution with water and transfer to barrels for aging. Since pure alcohol is largely tasteless, the distillate when new is fairly neutral-tasting (although not completely so, often) and of course the addition of water will not significantly change this. The barrel aging process will add some positive effects but nonetheless it is true to say in general that Canadian whisky starts and ends as a fairly mild drink - in taste. The barrel strength of the matured whisky, which will usually well exceed 50% ABV, will be lowered for bottling by the addition of demineralised water to the legal minimum of 40% ABV. Sometimes, Canadian whiskies are issued at higher proof, e.g., a Canadian Club at 100 proof has been seen, and Wiser's issued its luxury Red Letter whisky last year at 45% ABV, but this is unusual.

The longer whisky (any whisky) is aged, the more wood flavor it will absorb. That older is not necessarily better applies to Canadian whisky as to any other - perhaps more so. Canadian whisky may reach a peak at somewhere between six and twelve years of age but undoubtedly there are fine examples of Canadian whisky at older ages. Wiser offers a particularly good "Very Old" 18 years old whisky and some of the older Canadian Club whiskies are very nice. On the other hand, some well-reputed Canadian whiskies do not carry age statements, Crown Royal is an example. The Special Reserve version of Crown Royal also advertises no age but clearly contains some well-aged whiskies and is soft and rich. Age labeling is therefore optional on the part of the producer and of itself is not necessarily indicative of quality or the absence thereof. Where a producer chooses to state the age, it must in general be that of the youngest whisky in the blend.

As noted, when alcohol is created in the fermentation step, "secondary constituents" in the brew are created. These are the so-called congeners or in other words, aldehydes, acids, esters and higher alcohols. These can affect significantly the body and flavour of the spirit, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. They either will carry over into the distilled liquor or stay behind with the spent beer depending on the type and intensity of the distillation process used and this reflects in turn whether the spirit is intended to form the bland base of the whisky or whether it will be one of the tastier, so-called "flavouring" additions.

Distilling liquors to a relatively low alcohol content, say, 80% ABV or under, tends to make them more congeneric. This is because many congeners have a boiling point above that of alcohol: they come over with the 20% of the mixture that is water, in other words. If the condensate is repeatedly distilled so that, say, it is 96% pure alcohol - it is hard technically to attain 100% - most of its water, and therefore most of the congeners, will have been excluded. To attain however the palate of a classic whisky, brandy or tequila, however, one cannot distill the spirit at too high a proof since vital flavouring elements will be stripped out by the process.

Some undesirable congeners have a boiling point which makes them hard to separate from water, (some of which always comes over with the ethyl alcohol especially when distilled for whisky or brandy production). To get rid of these, Canadian distillers frequently use a step called extractive distillation. This reverses their vaporization temperature so that they can be more easily removed from the still. Canadian distillers also use charcoal, and other, filtration techniques to ensure that the final whisky will have a "smooth" taste. The danger of ensuring too much smoothness, however, is blandness. It must be said some Canadian whiskies cross that line, but doubtless the producers would say that is what their customers want.

(j) Blending - Hallmark of Canadian Whisky

Scotch single malt whiskies are distilled in old-fashioned copper pot stills. So are the oily Irish "pure pot still" whiskies. These stills, no matter how large, and even after two or three runs, tend to produce a condensate with relatively low alcohol content. The spirit both when new and fully aged will therefore contain a relatively high amount of grain congeners: these will impact both for good and "bad" on resultant flavour and body. U.S. bourbon, even though made primarily in the kind of column still Canadian distillers use, is distilled at a low proof such that many of these congeners stay in the spirit. Canadian distillers, in contrast, use their column stills in a way to exclude most congeners from the final distillate although some of the "good ones" are intentionally left in, at least by some producers.

In Canada, the theory has been to start with a fresh, clean spirit and modify it in a planned way using two techniques: first, wood barrel aging; second, by adding a small amount of distilled-at-low-proof, "flavouring" whisky, or more than one kind. Sometimes, other kinds of flavouring are added which means, under Canadian law, any type of foreign or domestic wine or spirit, as noted earlier.

A Canadian flavouring whisky, at whatever stage it is added to the high-proof base, may resemble a Scots malt, an Irish pure pot still whisky, or a U.S.-style bourbon or straight rye whisky, depending on its mash bill and aging method. That is, the flavouring whisky may be made from an all- or mostly barley malt base, a mix of malted and raw barley, or a corn- or rye-based mash, respectively. There are variations on all these basic types of mash.

It is thus apparent that a flavouring whisky is distilled at a lower proof than the high-proof base of the final whisky blend, generally in fact at well under 80% ABV. In fact, when distillers blend a flavouring whiskey with the neutral-tasting base whisky, they might simply import some (U.S.) bourbon or straight rye for this purpose. Since "wine" can be added to Canadian whisky, a fruity port wine, or sometimes sherry, is added to the whisky to help give a pleasing taste and "bind" the other elements.

All these additions round out and deepen the taste of the high-proof base which itself often lacks enough flavour to be sold as Canadian whisky. In contrast, bourbon distillers in the U.S. distill a corn-based mash at under 80% ABV or 160 proof and age it for many years in new charred oak barrels. Whatever unpleasant congeners are in the distillate will stay in it to be modified however by long barrel aging. The Canadian distillers prefer to design the palate of their whiskies in a more methodical way than this and in practice this produces a gentler palate which can however offer subtlety.

Relatively little flavouring whisky is blended into Canadian whisky: it's somewhere around 10% but can be less. Without meaning to sound pejorative, one might regard the flavouring whiskies as the "real" whisky in the blend. Still, even this small percentage often gives a defining taste.

The main reason Canadian whisky is a blended product is precisely that it is a combination of low-distilled and high-distilled spirits. Some distillers, including the makers of Canadian Club, prefer to "blend at birth". This means they add the low-proof flavouring whiskies when unaged to an equally unaged whisky distilled at a high proof (often around 196 proof). The two whiskies will marry and age together in the barrel. Other distillers prefer to blend the low- and high-proof whiskies after both are separately matured; this is the classic method too for the blending of Scotch whisky. A variation is adding an oak-aged, flavouring whisky to new high proof spirit with the blend being aged together for at least three years (since all Canadian whisky must be aged a minimum of three years). However, under the regulations, if a flavouring includes a "spirit", the spirit can be aged for at least two years. This may have been intended to allow "straight bourbon", which qualifies for that status at two years of age in the U.S., to be used as a flavouring whisky for some Canadian whisky.

Canadian whisky is also "blended" in another sense, in that sometimes it contains additions of caramel and, as stated above, wines such as sherry or port. The wine can simply be poured in and sometimes is imparted indirectly by storing the whisky for a time in a barrel that used to hold sherry or port. Also, Canadian whisky is usually a combination of different ages so as to result in a pleasing and consistent taste.

(k) The 9.090% Rule

Many people in whisky circles speak, often derisively, of this rule. But what in fact does it say?

Actually, there are two references to 9.090% in Canadian whisky regulations. Under changes to the law that took effect from July 1, 2009, both references are now contained in a single regulation passed under the *Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Act*, a law under the aegis of the Minister of Agriculture. First, I will explain the position before July 1, 2009.

Before that date, for any whisky sold in Canada, if more than 9.090% of the absolute alcohol derived from "flavouring", i.e., from any added domestic or foreign spirit or wine, the whisky was deemed to have the age of the youngest element in the blend, but if the mentioned percentage threshold was not exceeded, the whiskey could be stated at the age of the whisky to which the flavouring was added. Say 10% or more of the alcohol (the ethyl alcohol itself) in a bottle of Canadian whisky was derived from bourbon 8 years old, and it was added to Canadian whisky that was 10 years old. The resultant blend had to be labeled 8 years old. If the same bourbon was added but with the result that only 9% of the alcohol came from that source, the blend could be identified as 10 years old. *The rule, therefore, was age expression-related, it did not prohibit as such adding more than 9.090% flavouring to Canadian whisky whether by the measure of absolute alcohol or otherwise.* (But we must recall the rule I mentioned earlier, that Canadian whisky must have the taste, aroma and character generally attributed to Canadian whisky. Setting aside for a moment the potential difficulty of what that means in practice, this was and is a control on adding too much flavouring).

The other reference to 9.090% in the Canadian whisky regulations stated that not more than that percentage of "imported spirits" (here referring to the original drink, water and all) could be included in Canadian whisky exported from Canada in bond unless Canadian excise authorities, i) stated that percentage in a certificate, and ii) did not refer to the product as Canadian whisky, rye whisky or Canadian rye whisky in the certificate. Where an importer outside Canada wanted the certificate, and perhaps in any case for various reasons, one can see that distillers of Canadian whisky would have ensured that the whisky in the bottle was not comprised of more than 9.090% imported bourbon or straight rye, say.

Basically, after July 1, 2009, the position is as mentioned above except both 9.090% rules mentioned now apply only to exported Canadian whisky. The age-related 9.090% rule no longer applies, therefore, to Canadian whisky sold in Canada. Thus, only whisky exported – and only where a certificate is requested as to age and origin - benefits and is subject, respectively, to these two rules. Whisky sold in Canada for local consumption does not benefit nor is burdened by these restrictions but in regard to the latter one, again we must remember the rule that Canadian whisky must not be altered by flavouring in

a way that would take away its character as Canadian whisky. (Still, the vagueness of that formula offers flexibility to producers in practice and probably is definable only in its extremes).

It is possible, and in fact likely, that most Canadian exported whisky complies with the 9.090% imported spirits limitation mentioned, *i.e.*, whether a certificate of origin and age is requested or not. It would seem unlikely that different runs of the same brand would be made with greater or less than 9.090% imported spirits. So it may well be that all exported Canadian whisky is made to the strictest standard, even extending to the Canadian domestic market, since otherwise again different runs would be needed for the same brands. Still, one can envision that a distiller in Canada might want, say, to make a Canadian whisky with 15% imported bourbon content. I see no problem with that provided the whisky is sold in Canada or exported to a person who does not request the certificate mentioned above.

(l) Why is Canadian whisky not sold “straight”?

It is noteworthy that, in general, Canadian distillers do not sell their flavouring whiskies uncut. They used to at one time, but the practice died away in the early 1950's. The concept in other words is that a whisky strongly redolent of rye, corn or other grain congeners should confer character to a blend *but not constitute the main taste*. Also, despite the fact that some Canadian whiskies – or some elements of them - are aged in new charred barrels, the influence of those barrels, at least as compared to what they exhibit in U.S. straight whiskey, is relatively restrained. One reason for this is probably that high barrel entry proofs are allowed in Canada – the maximum 125 proof barrel entry rule for bourbon does not exist in Canada. When spirit is entered in cask at a high ABV, its subsequent dilution for bottling purposes will diminish the barrel's effect.

(m) Comparison With Bourbon and Straight Rye: Is Canadian “Not As Good”?

Under U.S. law, “bourbon” must not be distilled over 160 proof, must be made from a cereals mash of at least 51% corn, be entered in the barrel for aging at not over 125 proof, and must be aged for a time in new charred oak barrels. To be called “straight” bourbon, it must be so aged for at least two years. Rye and straight rye in the U.S. are the same thing except the mash must contain at least 51% rye. The palate of bourbon and straight rye will be much heavier and “grainier” than the typical Canadian whisky. This is so for two reasons: first, bourbon and U.S. rye have the rich, smoky, vanillin palate imparted by aging in new charred barrels, and second, the 160 proof distillation limit for these liquors ensures maximum retention of flavour- and body-imparting congeners.

Yet, Canadian whisky is not inferior, it is different. Certainly it is a subtler drinking experience. For those who will never come to terms with the untrammelled flavour of a straight whisky, or who like the single whiskies but want a change of pace, Canadian whisky offers a good alternative. In contrast, bourbon and malt whiskies have a more restricted appeal in Canada.

While the big Canadian producers have in recent years issued products with more character than the typical Canadian whisky of the 1970's, say, it is likely Canada's craft producers will be the ones to open the ramparts to a more flavourful Canadian whisky, one which compares for palate impact with a good single malt or bourbon, say. The likely way they will do this is to produce spirit distilled at a low proof (say 130-150 proof) and age it in barrels of various kinds for some years.

Conclusion

The British and likely too the United Empire Loyalists brought the taste for whisky to Canada. Refinements in its production were worked out in the 1800's by Hiram Walker, who founded the Canadian Club distillery in Windsor, Ontario, and by others. Canadian whisky is today and has been for generations an industrially evolved whisky which relies for its typical palate on methodical barrel aging and the addition of small amounts of flavoursome, low-proof whiskies. Canadian whisky, in its way, is analogous to a blended Scotch whisky but resembles rather less a Scots, or Japanese, say, single malt whisky or a bourbon or Tennessee whiskey. These latter are made by an older, less efficient distillation method which nonetheless imparts a good deal of distinctive character to these products.

**Gary M. Gillman of Gillman Professional Corporation, Barristers & Solicitors, Toronto, Ontario, is a lawyer in private practice with a longstanding interest in the multi-faceted subject of distilled spirits. This article was first written in 2008 and was updated to account for changes in regulations in mid-2009.*

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