

The Macallan

Whisky columnist Rob Gard solves the crucial mystery: what would the latest addition to The Macallan's Fine & Rare collection taste like?

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The Macallan's Whisky Ambassador, Caspar MacRae (right) tastes writers Rob Gard and Richard Carleton Hacker through the exquisite marques of this famous Highlands single malt

Agatha Christie crossed my mind when the heavy wooden doors shut behind me, making sure none of the guests would easily leave the regal dining room at the Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills. We were seated in swimming pool-sized chairs that wrapped around an ornate wooden table. Eight pairs of eyes centered on The Macallan's Brand Ambassador Casper McRae, whose easy English accent drew us in even further.

The only thing missing from the scene was a roaring fireplace and the steady pounding of rain interrupted by the occasional thunderbolt. At any moment I expected McRae to say, "And the murderer is..." We were all there to solve a crucial mystery: what would the latest addition to The Macallan's Fine & Rare collection taste like?

We'd gathered in the Peninsula Hotel's private dining room to sample the range of The Macallan's relatively new Fine Oak series, as well as a 30-year-old single cask offering from one of only 180 bottles in the world.

The Macallan is a name that even casual whisky drinkers recognize; its bottlings are often rated among the best Scotch available; and some of the older rare expressions almost cost as much as a BMW (and they're just as worthwhile an investment).

Sherry sherry sherry is the note repeated most often with The Macallan. The distillery's signature is aging its new make spirit in sherry oak casks handcrafted especially for The Macallan in Jerez, Spain. Why then, would anyone at The Macallan choose to move away from that winning formula? The answer is simple: The Macallan's sherry-centric reputation is actually a relatively new area for the distillery.

Now, when it comes to whisky, time has a different pace from what the rest of the world knows. So when I say aging in sherry oak is new, at The Macallan it actually goes back about 100 years or more. The distillery was already close to 80 years old when it decided to focus on sherry barrels rather than bourbon barrels. Besides, the result was magnificent, so why bother to go back?

According to Casper, Master Whisky Maker Bob Dalgarno had the enviable job of sampling decades worth of old Macallan casks and bottles when the distillery decided to launch the Fine & Rare collection a few years ago. Dalgarno noticed a constant theme throughout his tastings: The Macallan aged in American oak sherry and bourbon barrels seemed to weather the test of time quite well.

Inspired, Bob enthusiastically launched the Fine Oaks series with bottlings comprised of European oak sherry casks, American oak sherry casks, and primarily American bourbon casks. The resulting 10, 15, 17, 21 and 30 year old expressions retain The Macallan sherry undertones, while allowing the fruity high notes prevalent in new make spirit to shine through appreciably more than in the purely sherry barrel expressions.

Our tour through each of the Fine Oak expressions was accented by the perfect cuisine of The Peninsula's Belvedere restaurant.

McRae walked us through the Fine Oak bottlings. Each age has its own subtleties, ranging from the 10-year-old's appetizing apple aroma, to the 17-year-old's spiciness, to the 21-year-old's lingering warm finish that ends with a smile stretching across the face.

The Fine Oak selections priced from \$40 for the 10-year-old to \$250 for the 21-year-old. The price point for the limited 1975 vintage will be between \$800-\$1,200, which means you might want to start saving if you want to give this as a present next Christmas. Or you can just buy a bottle to keep for yourself and revel in the holiday spirit all year-round. (The Macallan is imported by Remy Cointreau USA)

