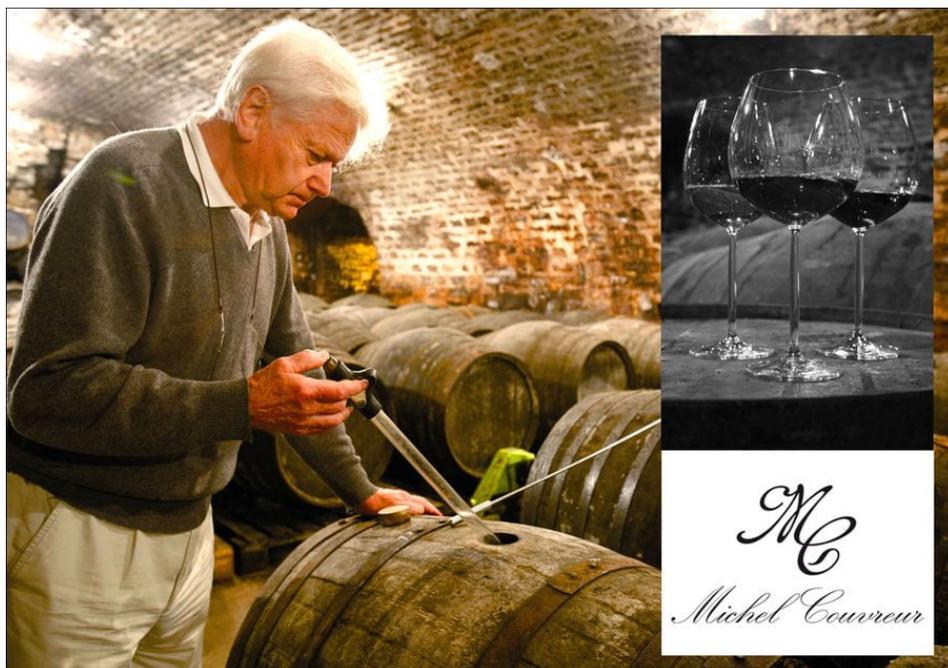


MICHEL COUVREUR (France, Burgundy, Bouze les Beaune)

FROM BELGIUM TO SCOTLAND: Burgundy is a place full of personalities at the high end of the passion scale, especially when it comes to food and drink - perhaps none more so than a Belgian who once decided unprecedentedly maturing Scotch Whisky in the heart of the famous French wine region. The fellow in question was Michel Couvreur, and he was a man on a mission when it comes to Scotch Whisky. Born in 1928, Michel passed away in August 2013 when he was 85 year old.

In the 1950's Michel Couvreur, originally from Belgium, landed in Burgundy and made and marketed wine there. He took frequent trips to England and Scotland where he sold his wine, but was particularly drawn to Scotland for the fabulous fishing and hunting. Entering from the wine trade, his was an increasingly familiar story within the whisky industry. Eventually he moved to England in 1956, then to Scotland in 1964 where he became involved in the production process of whisky - from the selection of the most ancient strains of cereals to employing extremely rare sherry casks.

Michel Couvreur had a revolutionary and disturbing vision of whisky: more than the "terroir" or the craftsmanship, the spirit of barley becomes whisky only by maturing in cask. A genuine "fecundation" to which he has dedicated himself since 1978. When it has become easier to be supplied with American hogsheads or seasoning Sherry casks (casks impregnated with Sherry wine for 6 months until 5 years), Michel Couvreur preferred to buy old, historic Sherry casks only.



BACK TO BEAUNE: In the 70's Michel moved back to live in Bourgogne when some French friends suggested that he add a top quality Scotch to his portfolio. So began Couvreur's renewed interest in the whisky industry from which he developed his ultra-traditionalist perspective on oak. He has always maintained (more radically than others in the industry) that

90% of a whisky's quality comes from the cask, and only 10% of the quality comes from the distillation process. He has always been fascinated by the solera system cask ageing typical of the Jerez wines.

Furthermore in the 1970s, American bourbon casks gradually replaced port and sherry casks for the maturation of Scotch whisky, a great tragedy, according to Couvreur, as it changed the essence of a product that had European barrels at its core.

Bourgogne is halfway between Scotland and Andalusia's vineyards: just perfect! In a personal crusade, he dug his own customs bonded cellar in the hillsides of Bouze-les-Beaune (close to the famed town of Beaune).

Some whisky lovers will be aware, since the 1970's, sherry ceased to be shipped to UK in wood. Whisky producers have now to go and select their casks at sherry bodegas, paying a premium on top of transport costs. It's partly for this reason that Michel Couvreur's cellar is located in Burgundy, half-way between Scotland and Andalusia, with straight motorways from Jerez de la Frontera to Beaune. His first year of production dates back to 1978.

WHERE SCOTLAND MEETS JEREZ: Courvreur's "Scotch" (well, officially can't be labeled as a Scotch) starts out in Scotland as bulk a.k.a. "clearach" (a high proof distillate) which is transferred to his humid cellar in Bouze-les-Beaune to be aged in big 500 liters sherry casks that have been impregnated with 25 years (even 50 years) aging via traditional soleras (the varieties are Pedro Ximenez and Palomino).

15 botas aged more than 1 century have been bought last year from Bodega Toro Albala. Filled in 1895 and emptied in 2019, received in MC warehouse, just emptied but still impregnated of the fresh wines' aromas. Unrinsed and unsulfited, these botas are considered an historical heritage with the strong, heavy flavors of old creamy PX. All required dilutions are accomplished with bottled water from Scotland.

On average a used old Sherry cask goes from 700 to 2000 Euros, depending on the age, size (max 700 liters as bigger capacities are not allowed) and technical features.

Now to what makes his whisky expressions so unique: the cellars. They look like a cave which is 15 meters deep with some 150 meters of galleries dug in limestone but giving humidity, silence, calm and depth. A choice of cask and a delicate dance of maturation between dry and damp places, Michel Couvreur whiskies are incredibly flavourful, intense and soft all at the same time, whose style and nobility are acquired following many years of ageing in these wine casks.



Michel passed away in August 2013 (35 years after his first producing year). Since then his long-time employee Jean-Arnaud Frantzen and son-in-law Cyril have continued his tradition (with the invaluable help of Michel's devoted wife Marthe and his daughter Alexandra), and follow to the letter the philosophy and the motto of the house: *Virtute et Opera*.

THE WHISKY RANGE: Currently the total production is about 50,000 bottles or 4,000 cases annually. With such a limited supply, each bottle he made is one of the ultimate treasures you can attain in the whisky world. Couvreur's range is pretty wide and made with many small batch expressions.

A wide range is available: young spirits such as "Clearach" under the cereal spirit denomination, some 12 y.o. blended and single malt whiskies such as our classic Overaged and some rarities such as our 25 y.o. emblematic Very Sherried Single cask.

Experiments continue to be made: special blends, new casks maturations as Vin Jaune from Jura, maturations in clay amphora, study of wine lees influences. Carefully handlings show that every detail is important: maturation control made cask by cask, a slow and meticulous handlings made by gravity only, using any pump.

A beautiful diversity with a dedicate aromatic identity is purposed, based on complexity and good balance flavors.

The export policy is pretty conservative and overall these whiskies are not easily to be spotted here in the US. A small selection of these artisan matured spirits is imported in NY by Steep Hill.

A little tip for whisky folks that may be unfamiliar with the cork closure (usually reserved for wine). Use a real wine key (or a corckscrew) and go in straight through the wax on top. When you pull out the cork, it should snap off the top part of the wax cleanly as the cork comes out. Don't mess trying to remove the wax separately. An extra tip here: Couvreur's whisky should be generally enjoyed neat or by adding some drops of room temperature water. Try to avoid ice!



The Unique: Can we call this expression the entry level in Couvreur's world? Yes, let's do it. This is the classic blended whisky which used to be called "The grain Whisky" because composed by a most part of grain. The Unique is something pretty rare as it combines malted and unmalted cereals in order to produce a rounded flavor that's one of a kind. Average age: 4 years.

An exception in the Michel Couvreur range because it's not aged in fresh sherry casks (the freshness is related whether the emptied cask has been in contact with Sherry wine). The Unique is aged in casks previously already used for the Overaged or other Couvreur's top range products. If the cask is still in good conditions with no leaking, it can be used for the Unique (and other house blended whiskies) and obviously there is a minor Sherry influence here, while the

whisky influence gains ground.

Golden color at sight. Iodine flavors with a touch of almond and vanilla sweetness.

Delicate and subtle, it reminds the white fruit. Nervous on the palate, it appears round after the taste. Finishes more floral than what expected after the first sip. It should be served chilled. Matured in the middle humidity part of the cellar. 44% AbV (the distillation degree is 70% and the cask strength 62%).

The wax presents a greenish color. Good ingredient for cocktails as well.

Overaged: Blended whisky coming from several distilleries and several ages, this is the most famous and consistent product of the MC *maison*: the Overaged. It's technically a NAS, but we actually know that it's a mix of 12 to 20 year-old whiskies from 5 distilleries, two from the Highlands, 2 from the Speyside, and one from Islay. The 5 whiskies were separately matured in *ex-sherry* Oloroso casks before being married for 5 years in an *ex-sherry* Pedro Ximénez cask. The vast majority of these malts have been distilled in 2003. Malted barley only. Vatted in PX butts (middle humidity during the maturation while the last year the barrels are moved to a very humid area in the cellar). 43% AbV (the original strength is 70% Abv).

The cask strength is 53% AbV and there is a small release of this expression on the market as well, which is spicier and bolder but Steep Hill doesn't import it. It should be served partially chilled at 14 - 15° Celsius. The wax here is black. 91 points Wine Enthusiast: Although the various whiskies in this blend were distilled in Scotland, it was then moved to France's



Burgundy region to age—so it's not technically Scotch. The whiskies in the blend are over 12 years old and aged in *ex-Sherry* casks. The end result is a nut-brown hue and rich dried date and caramel scent. The big, rounded palate surprises with smoke, underpinned with hints of Sherry, dried fig, and caramel, with a long baking spice finish. **KARA NEWMAN** DATE PUBLISHED 12/31/2019



Pale Single Single: The elegant expression of the single cask whisky formerly filled with Manzanilla Sherry and bought by La Gitana bodega. The Pale Single Single currently available has been distilled in 2005 with an original fill strength of 70% reduced to 56% and then diluted to a drinking proof of 45% AbV in the bottle. Aged in the cellar zone with medium humidity and then moved for the last three years in the very humid part. Manzanilla casks impart a pale color, a more floral and iodine note expressed in a lighter style of whisky, pretty different than the other MC expressions. Expect a quite fruity and floral in bouquet, but with a lingering note of toasted almonds and savory richness. The palate starts slightly sweet, finishing pleasantly dry and subtly spicy. The texture is introvert in a good way as it needs a bit of time to open and show its oily beauty, the mildly honey lightness and the salty delicate flavors. An

appearance of fragility gives way to a fabulous length. A nice matching with cheeses like the Epoisses.

Candid: Candid is from a single malt distilled in March 2007 and matured in ex-Pedro Ximenez botas (half butt of 250 liters). Four casks were blended. Main characteristics: Peaty and Iodine. Matured in a very dry area of the cellar, then moved for the last two years in a very humid one.



The deep polished copper colour appears slightly turbid in the glass. The aroma is promising with its initially sweet, vanilla and caramel opening. Prickles the nose on the second pass which is redolent of Christmas pudding. Delicately bitter sweet, a flourish of spices covers the tongue; some very attractive, almost juicy fruit cake-like moments here too, sustained into the warm, drying fade. Very good and elegant length. 49% Alc./Vol (the original strength is 70% and the cask strength is 53%). The wax here is red.

93 points Wine Enthusiast: Although the peated whisky was distilled in Scotland, it is not technically Scotch as it was then moved

to France's Burgundy region. After eight years in PX Sherry barrels, the smoky impact has dialed down. On the nose, campfire and juicy stone fruit aromas intertwine. The palate is notably soft, mixing smoke with milk chocolate, dried apricot and golden raisin, finishing long and spiced with ginger, cardamom and clove. **KARA NEWMAN** DATE PUBLISHED 12/31/2019