

Whisky Glossary

This is by no means the Oxford Dictionary of Whisky, but at any rate it is a very thorough layman's whisky glossary.

ABV – Alcohol By Volume (percentage)

ACE – Additional Cask Enhancement. (See Cask Finish).

Age statement – years of maturation Aldehydes – Grassy, leathery aromas

American Oak – White Oak or Quercus Alba. Fast growing wood with high vanillin content commonly used for whisky maturation

Amylase – Enzyme used to convert starch into maltose

Angel's Share – whisky lost to evaporation, normally about 2% per annum

Backset – American: alcohol-free liquid left at the bottom of the still after distillation and is added to mash tun and washback to ward off bacterial contamination.

Balance – Overall composition of a whisky. How well the flavours mesh and complement each other

Barley – Cereal grain used in the production of whisky

Barrel (Cask) – Large oak vessel used to store maturing spirit.

Bere Barley – The oldest variety of barley in the British Isles, mainly to be found on the Isle of Orkney.

Blending – The act of combining one liquid with another. Used extensively to make all whiskies except single casks. Very important in bringing various desirable characteristics to the final product.

Blended Malt – Blend of malt whiskies from more two or more distilleries

Blended whisky – A blend of whiskies. Typically 40% malt 60% grain

Body – Mouth feel of a whisky

Bonded Storage – Storage facilities where liquor is held prior to excise levies

Bourbon – A type of American whiskey made from a minimum of 51% corn, distilled to no more than 80% ABV and matured in new charred American oak barrels at no more than 62.5% ABV.

Bottled in bond – An American term describing quality assurance stipulations laid out in the "Bottled-in-bond Act of 1897". Whiskey Bottled-in-bond must come from one distillation season (January to December), one distiller at one distillery, be stored in a US bonded warehouse for 4 years minimum and bottled at 50% ABV

Brewing – The process of adding yeast to wort and fermenting this into wash

Burr Oak – Species of white oak native to North America used for whisky maturation

Butt – 477.3 liter (105 gallon) Sherry cask – roughly twice that of a hogshead

Cask Strength – whisky bottled at barreling strength, typically between 55 – 70% ABV

Casks – oak barrels used for maturation

Cask finish – The practice, in maturation, of transferring near mature whisky to another cask to capture some of that cask's characteristics. E.g. Port or sherry finish.

Charring – Burning the inside of a barrel to 'activate' the wood. The char acts as a filter and imparts flavours to the liquid.

Chill-filtration – A form of filtration used to "clear" (remove flock) whisky by lowering the temperature of the liquid between -10 and 4 degrees celcius and forcing the liquid through a fine filter. A necessary evil to produce huge volumes, but scorned for stripping whisky of it's viscosity and colour, thereby necessitating the need for spirit-caramel

Column still – type of still used for grain whiskies. Capable of distilling continuously by re-heating of the liquid. Very efficient and can distill to as high as 96% in a single batch, vs a pot still that only does about 25 – 30% at a time.

Condensation – Change of the physical state of matter from gas to liquid

Congeners – Substance produced during fermentation of alcoholic beverages said to provide the majority of taste characteristics present in whisky

Cooper – the man who makes casks for a living

Corn – A grain used in whisk(e)y production. Very popular in America where it forms the basis of Bourbon. Out of all the grains, corn yields the highest level of alcohol.

Distillation – physical process of separating the alcohol and flavours from water in the wash

Dram – Measurement of whisky (glass)

Dramming – Drinking whisky

Dressing – The removal of detritus or 'combings', principally rootlets from the malted grain

Drum Malting – Modern alternative to floor malting of barley. Basically a large, constantly turning drum

Dunnage Warehouse – Traditional style warehouse, with a slate roof, earthen floor and thick stone or brick walls. Expensive to run, but believed to produce a better whisky due to better airflow and a higher humidity.

Enzymes – are large biological molecules responsible for the thousands of metabolic processes that sustain life. Malting increases the incidence of enzymes which convert starch into fermentable sugars.

Esters – Fruity, flowery aromas

European Oak –

Type 1. Quercus Robur also known as Pedunculate Oak. Widely used for brandy and sherry, fast growing and high in tannins

Type 2. Quercus Petraea or Sessile Oak. Slower growing than Quercus Robur, with finer tannins and high vanillin content.

Evaporation – Change of the physical state of matter from liquid to gas.

Excise Duty – Government tax imposed on beverage alcohol.

Feints (Tails or Aftershoots) – Unusable end of the second distillation run. Mainly made up of fusel alcohols and highly unpalatable.

Fermentation – A metabolic process where yeast, a living organism, feeds on sugar creating acids, gases and/or alcohol as by products

Finish – Aftertaste of a whisky, measured in length, the longer the better, provided that it is in fact a nice taste

First fill – A barrel that is being used for the first time for whisky maturation. It would have been used in a different industry to hold another liquid previously, sherry, port or bourbon for example. These casks impart a very strong flavor on the spirit because there is still some of the previous liquid soaked into the wood. The cask's effect on the spirit diminishes every time that it is used as there is less and less of the original liquid present in the wood. Floor malting – The traditional method of malting barley, rarely in use these days.

Foreshots (Heads) – Methanol rich first part of the second distillation run.

Gorda – Large sherry cask

Grain Whisky – whisky made from barely (malting or unmalting), wheat, maize or rye and distilled in a column still

Green Malt – Germinated barley that has yet to be dried

Grist – Course flour produced by finely grinding malted barley to produce wort

Grist Mill – used to make grist

Heart – Highly desirable middle part of second distillation. Contains sweet ethanol, perfect for whisky

Hogshead – 238.7 litre (52.5 gallon) cask IB – Independent bottling

Kiln – Used to dry green malt, thereby halting germination

Low Wines – the produce of the first distillation or “wash run”

Madeira pipe – A 418 litre (92 gallons) cask used to mature madeira.

Malt – germinated barley that has been dried by heat

Malt Whisky – Whisky made from malted barley and water, distilled in a pot still, matured in oak casks.

Malting process – process of inducing and halting germination in barley grain

Malt Kiln – used to halt the germination process with heat

Marrying – consolidation of several casks for further maturation

Mashing – the process of preparing the malt for brewing. Involves milling the malt into grist and steeping the grist to form wort

Mash Bill – Like a Mash Invoice, list of grains and proportions thereof used in American whiskey production. Typically a mix of corn, wheat, rye and barley

Mash Tun – A vessel used to convert the starches in crushed grains (grist) into sugars for fermentation

Maturation – The whisky is left a minimum of three years but usually between 8 and 25 years in wooden barrels to mature

NAS – No Age Statement

New Make – Un matured “new” spirit. Basically unfiltered grain vodka at this point.

Nose – refers to both the smell of a whisk(e)y and the act of smelling a whisk(e)y

OB – Official / owner bottling

Octave – 63 litre sherry cask

Overproof – ABV higher than 46%

Palate – refers to the taste of a whisk(e)y

Peat – An accumulation of partially decayed vegetation formed in wetlands and used traditionally used a fuel. Used in whiskey as part of the kiln drying process in malting to impart smoky characteristics to the malt which later come out in the whisky. Islay is well known for its heavily peated whisky.

Peated Malt – Malted barley that tastes strongly of peat smoke

Phenols – Peaty, smoky aromas also known as carbolic acid. Represent the chemical presence of peat in whisky

Pot still – a traditional type of still used for malt whisky and some American whiskeys. Made of copper and only capable of doing single batches at a time as opposed to a continuous still. Based on the Alembic still, created by Arabian alchemist Jabi ibn Hayyan in the eight century

Proof – American system of measuring ABV

Punchon – 450 litre Sherry cask

Port Pipe – 477.3 litre (105 gallon) cask initially used to mature port

PPM – Parts per million. Used to note the phenolic content of a substance (phenol parts per million).

Pure Malt – Another word for blended or vatted malt whisky.

Pure Pot Still – A variety of Irish whiskey referring to whisky, as that name suggests, that is distilled in a pot still and is not blended. Barely is used, both malted and unmalted.

Refill – This refers to casks that have been used a number of times to mature whisky and no longer imparts any character to the spirit

Reflux – The alcoholic vapour that doesn't make it out of the still because it condenses and falls back into the still before reaching the condenser. Higher reflux produces a lighter, more delicate spirit

Regions – This refers to a geographical area in which whisk(e)y is produced. Each region imparts its unique influences on its whisky

Rye – A grain used in whisk(e)y production. Very popular in America and said to bring spicy characters

Quaich – Traditional drinking cup

Scotch – whisky made in Scotland

Shell and Tube Condenser – The most widely used method of condensing alcoholic vapours. It is a copper tube surrounded by small copper pipes that are fed with cool water.

Single Malt – malt whisky from one single distillery that has not been blended with whisky from another distillery

Skalk – First dram of the morning

Slainte – Health! Gaelic drinking toast

SMSW – Single Malt Scotch Whisky

Solera – A process for aging liquids by fractional blending. Basically the oldest barrel is part emptied for bottling and topped up with liquid from the second oldest barrel. This process continues all the way back to the first barrel which is filled with new spirit. Eventually each barrel becomes a blend of various ages.

Spirit – distilled alcoholic beverage with an ABV above 20%

Spirit Caramel (E150) – tasteless liquid used to colour whisky, giving it an older appearance. Popular with whiskies that have been chill-filtered

Spirit Safe – Locked container through which to view spirit leaving the still. Locked because of excise reasons, so that every drop that comes out of the still is accounted for and taxed. In the UK the key is held by HMRS.

Spirit Still – The second still, used to re-distil the low wines produced by the wash still. Called a spirit still because it distils spirit.

Straight Bourbon – American term referring to bourbon aged for at least two years and distilled to no more than 80% ABV.

Straight Rye – Same as above, but this time it is whiskey made from at least 51% rye, distilled to no more than 80% ABV and aged for at least two years

Straight Wheat – Same as Straight Rye, only wheat this time.

Straight Whiskey – You should be able to guess this by now...American term for Whiskey distilled from no more than 51% of any one grain, aged for at least two years and distilled to no more than 80% abv.

Snifter – Nosing glass

Spirit thief – Also known as a valenche is a large pipette used to draw spirit from a barrel

Tumbler – Not to be used to appreciate whisky unless you are a Philistine

Terroir – A wine term used to describe the combined effect that a region's location (climate, topography, aspect, altitude etc.) has on the wine. The same applies to whisky.

Triple Distillation – Distilling the liquid three times instead of the standard double distillation. The Irish and the Lowlands favour this method and it delivers a smoother, lighter spirit.

Vatting – Blend of different whiskies

Vatted Malt – A blend of single malts from two or more distilleries

Vintage – Year of distillation

Virgin oak – Oak that has not yet been used to mature alcoholic beverage. While it is rarely used for Scotch, all Bourbon has to be matured in virgin oak

Wash – A rudimentary beer brewed from fermenting cereal grains. A liquid can only be distilled if there is alcohol present, thus the production of beer is the first stage in the production of whisk(e)y and this beer is called wash

Wash Receiver – A vessel used to collect the wash prior to distillation in the Wash Still.

Wash Still – The pot still used to distil the wash

Washback – The fermenter in which the wash is brewed

Wheat – A very common cereal grain used to make bread, flour and beer. Used to make grain whisky and American whiskies and adds smooth sweetness to the whisky

White Dog – American word for New Make

Worm Tub – A condenser made of a large tub of water in which a coiled copper tube is submerged. This cools the alcoholic vapour and causes them to condense into liquid

Wort – Fermentable solution containing maltose, made from steeping grist

Yeast – A microorganism from the Fungi kingdom central to alcohol production. Yeast causes fermentation by feeding on sugar and creating carbon dioxide and alcohol as by products

YO – Years Old