

## Single Malt Scotch vs. Blended Scotch Whiskies

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To be classified as a Single Malt Scotch, a whisky must fulfill all three requirements of the name:

1. **Single-** Indicates that the whisky was made in only one distillery and has not been blended with any whisky made elsewhere
2. **Malt-** Indicates that the raw material from which the whisky is made must be Barley Malt and no other grain or fermentable material may be used
3. **Scotch-** Place of origin. The whisky must be distilled and matured for at least 3 years in Scotland

**Blended Scotch Whiskies** are made by mixing up to 40 different Single Malts to create a blended Scotch. Sometimes grain whiskies made with corn, wheat or non-malted barley is added to the blend. An example of a blended Scotch would be J&B. J&B (Justerini and Brooks) buys single malts from other distillers and blends them together, perhaps with small amounts of grain whiskies, into their proprietary J&B blend. Other blending houses are Dewar's, Chivas, and Johnnie Walker.

## Benefits of Single Malt Scotches

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Single Malt Scotches display much more depth and complexity of flavor due to their increased aging and unique characteristics. Additionally, Single Malts offer much more variety in flavor and aroma. Each of the over 100 distillers produces a unique flavor profile due to the differences in water and climate at each distillery. The aging casks "breathe"; they inhale the local atmosphere leading to local influences on flavor. Some single malts, especially those from rocky coasts, have a distinctly briny or seaweedy character.

In his book, "Michael Jackson's Complete Guide to Single Malt Scotch", Jackson writes:

"The single malts are the most natural of spirits, formed more than any other by their environment. For the same reason, they are the most individualistic. One arouses the appetite before dinner, another soothes the digestion; one likes to follow a round of golf, another prefers a book at bedtime. No other spirit offers such diversity of character."

## **The Process of Making Scotch Whisky**

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- **Malting:** Barley is partially germinated to release its fermentable sugar. It is soaked in water until it begins to sprout. The germination is stopped by drying the grains over heat. This process is called "malting". The Scots have traditionally dried their malt over a peat fire which gives Scotch its unique smokiness.
- **Mashing:** To complete the conversion of starch into fermentable sugars, the malt is mixed with warm water in a vessel called a "mashtun". The liquid which is then drained off is known as "wort".
- **Fermenting:** Yeast is added to the liquid wort which converts the sugars to alcohol.
- **Distilling:** The fermented wort is boiled in a pot still. Because alcohol boils more rapidly than water, the spirit is separated as a vapor and collected as it condenses back to alcohol. The now colorless liquid picks up its color from the barrel during aging.
- **Maturing:** All malts are matured in oak barrels for a legal minimum of 3 years. The popular standard aging period is now 12 years.

## **The Influence of Location on Taste**

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Scotch whiskies vary greatly in flavor, depending on where they were made. The influence of the local water supply, the soil, the micro-climate and the air all combine to create unique tastes which vary from distiller to distiller. Probably the most influential of these is water. Generally, single malts are made from water which is untreated, and each distillery's natural supply has its own character.

Traditionally, single malts are grouped into 4 broad categories based on geography. While these categories may be used as a guide for grouping taste similarities, keep in mind that some brands may not conform to their geographical profiles. Location of origin is often signified on the bottle label.

## **4 Broad Geographic Groupings of Single Malts**

### **Islay (pronounced Eye-Luh)**

heavy, fully peated, pungent  
almost medicinal in style  
heaviest of all single malts  
iodine-like taste

### **Campbeltown**

briny character  
medium to heavy peat  
subtle aroma

### **Lowland**

light, fairly neutral whiskies  
lack distinctive aroma or taste

### **Highland (3 subdivisions- River Speyside, Northern, Livet Valley)**

smoothest, most palatable of all malts  
fruity, somewhat sweet taste  
some peatness  
great character; rich and full bodied

# Single Barrel and Small Batch Bourbons

## What is “Bourbon”

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To be classified a “bourbon”, a spirit must be made from at least 51% corn (most bourbons contain considerably more than 51% corn) and must be aged at least two years in charred new oak casks. No coloring or flavoring may be added to straight bourbon whiskey, and it must be bottled at a minimum of 80 proof.

Bourbon does not have to be made in Bourbon County, Kentucky, to be classified as bourbon, as is widely thought. In fact, today no bourbons are made in Bourbon County although almost all bourbons are made elsewhere in Kentucky.

## Single Barrel and Small Batch Bourbons

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Bourbons bottled as “single-barrel bourbons” are the product of just one barrel of whiskey, details of which are often hand-written on the bottle’s label. Usually, these whiskies have undergone some special treatment during aging, such as being transferred to specific warehouses or kept in a portion of the warehouse where the master distiller knows his whiskey ages well.

Small-batch bourbons are rare and exceptional bourbons married from a few select barrels pulled from a cross section of barrels in the rackhouse.

Both single barrel and small-batch bourbons rely on the expertise of the master distiller. He must locate and identify his most superlative barrels of whiskey from among thousands. From these special barrels come the company’s super-premium bottlings.

## “Sour Mash”

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The process for making American whiskey (described below) includes an interesting step similar to the making of sour dough bread. A portion of the mash used to distill a previous batch of whiskey is added back into the next batch. Using this “sour mash” mixture in a new batch of whiskey is one of the ways in which distillers keep their products consistent, allowing the identity and qualities of the “mother mash” to be reborn in the new batch.

## **The Process of Making Bourbon**

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- **Mashing:** Grains (at least 51% corn) and water are cooked together until they form a soft mash.
- **Fermenting:** Yeast is added along with a portion of the sourmash (also called “backset”) from a previous batch. Fermentation then begins, producing alcohol by breaking down the sugars from the grains.
- **Distilling:** The mixture is heated with steam until the alcohol vaporizes and separates from the water and solids. The vapors are collected and condensed and then distilled a second time to purify the alcohol further and increase its strength. At this stage, the liquid is colorless. It picks up color, flavor and complexity during the maturing process.
- **Maturing:** All whiskies are matured in new, charred oak barrels for at least two years, but usually longer.

## **Tennessee Whiskey**

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Jack Daniels is a popular example of a “Tennessee Whiskey”, a product very similar to bourbon. In fact, when Tennessee whiskies finish the distilling process, they can still be classified as a bourbon.

The “charcoal mellowing” process the whiskey goes through before going into barrel changes its classification from bourbon to that of Tennessee whiskey. Bourbons can’t be charcoal mellowed and charcoal mellowed whiskies can’t be bourbons.

In charcoal mellowing, the whiskey passes drop-by-drop through a 10 foot vat of finely-ground sugar maple charcoal. The procedure takes up to 10 days for the liquid to pass through the charcoal, filtering out some of the aroma and taste characteristic of bourbon.

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Thanks to “The Book of Bourbon and Other Fine American Whiskies” by Gary Regan and Mardee Haidin Regan

# Cognac

## What is Cognac?

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Cognac is a brandy made exclusively from grapes grown in the Cognac region of France. All Cognac is Brandy, but not all Brandy is Cognac. Only Brandies exclusively:

- made from the grapes of Cognac
- distilled in Cognac
- aged and blended in Cognac

have the right to be called Cognac.

The Cognac region of France is blessed with superior growing conditions for producing the flavorful, juicy grapes which produce the best brandy. Cognac has high humidity, gentle breezes, moderate temperatures, and, most importantly, chalky soil.

## The Birth of Cognac - A Fortuitous Accident

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Cognac was discovered quite by accident. In the early 1600's, grape growers in and around the city of Cognac produced delicious white wines. Unfortunately, because of their delicate nature, these wines did not travel long distances well. Exporters discovered that by distilling the wine they could create spirits that regained the flavor of wine once water was added. They called this distilled elixir "eaux de vie", or water of life.

During the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, wine growers in the city of Cognac could no longer export their product. They were forced to stockpile their supplies of "eaux de vie" in oak casks which they hid in cellars. Years later, when the casks were uncorked, out flowed an amber liquid with a breathtaking aroma and rich, delicious taste all its own. The brandy known as "cognac" was born.

## Cognac's Growing Regions

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The soil directly surrounding Cognac has been divided into six growing areas, according to the quality of the grape each produces. The two finest are the Grande and Petite Champagne regions. In order to be called a "Fine (pronounced *feen*) Champagne Cognac", a brandy must be from at least 50% Grande Champagne grapes, and the rest must be Petite Champagne grapes. The best Cognacs carry the Fine Champagne designation.

## **The Making of Cognac**

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Grapes are harvested in late September or early October, pressed into grape juice, and fermented into wine. The wine is then double distilled, producing a fiery, 140 proof, unaged brandy or “eaux de vie”.

It is then stored and aged in oak barrels wherein it slowly evolves to develop its color, texture, flavor and aroma.

## **V.S.O.P., etc.....The Taste of Time**

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The French government has established aging parameters for Cognacs. These are designated by those mysterious abbreviations “VS”, “VSOP”, etc. Aging is extremely important in Cognac as Cognacs develop and become much more complex and appealing over time.

<b>Designation</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Age Requirement</b>
VS	Very Superior	Minimum 2 years
VSOP	Very Superior Old Pale	Minimum 4 years
XO & Above	Extra Old	Minimum 6 years

In fact, most Cognacs are blends of vintages which have various ages. The final blended product is said to have a “tasting age” which is a term used to describe the “average” age when older reserves are blended with younger ones.

## **A Word About Armagnac**

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Like Cognacs, Armagnacs are brandies produced from a designated French growing region. The smaller Armagnac region produces 1/6th as much brandy as does the Cognac region. Unlike Cognacs which are a blend of vintages, Armagnacs are vintage-dated.