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BLAIR ATHOL



Blair Athol 23-Year-Old (Diageo 2017 Special Releases)

OWNER Diageo plc
FOUNDED 1798
WEBSITE www.malts.com

Like its Perthshire neighbours Aberfeldy and Glentworth, Blair Athol is better known as a distillery than it is as a single malt. Diageo's third-busiest distillery visitor centre, after Talisker and Oban, stands on the outskirts of the bustling tourist centre of Pitlochry, now bypassed by the A9 road between Perth and Inverness. The name is slightly confusing, as the village of Blair Atholl, with an extra 'l', is located some 7 miles north-west of Pitlochry.

Blair Athol is one of Diageo's oldest distilleries, dating from the late 18th century, when it was established by John Stewart and Robert Robertson under the name of Aldour. The Alt Dour burn flows through the distillery grounds from the slopes of Ben Vrackie, and translates from the Gaelic as 'Burn of the Otter', which explains the presence of an otter on the label of the 12-year-old 'Flora & Fauna' expression of Blair Athol single malt. The Blair Athol name was adopted in 1825, when Robert Robertson expanded the distillery.

Just as Aberfeldy is the spiritual home of the Bacardi-owned Dewar's blend, and Glentworth performs the same function in relation to The Famous Grouse for The Edrington Group, so Blair Athol serves as the 'brand home' of Bell's blended Scotch whisky.

Bell's blends

The Blair Athol distillery was purchased by Perth-based Arthur Bell & Sons Ltd in 1933, but due to the prevailing economic climate remained silent until 1949, when it was substantially rebuilt and re-equipped prior to the recommencement of production. The rise of Bell's blend mirrored that of Dewar's and The Famous Grouse during the later decades of the 19th century, with all three subsequently best-selling brands being created by Perth wine and spirits merchants.

Today, Diageo uses Blair Athol distillery to relate the story of the blend, though compared to Dewar's World of Whisky the Blair Athol visitor experience is altogether more traditional in its approach.



Blair Athol Distillery Exclusive Bottling



The central courtyard at the Blair Athol distillery.

Although global sales of Bell's have fallen in recent years, and it tends to play a supporting role to Diageo's Johnnie Walker & J&B brands, it is still the company's sixth best-selling blended Scotch whisky, and number two in the UK after The Famous Grouse brand owned by Matthew Gloag and founded in 1896.

The Bell's blend gained a greater following when an 8-year-old age statement was applied to it in 1993, at a time when distillers had surplus stocks of older whiskies. Those days are long gone, however, and Diageo subsequently removed the age statement, declaring in 2008 that the revamped recipe for 'Bell's Original' was closer to that first formulated by Arthur Bell.

As a company, Bell's retained its independence until taken over by the brewer Guinness in 1985, subsequently being absorbed into what was to become Diageo plc. In 1998 the Bell's brand lost its last connection with its 'home' city of Perth when the Cherrybank sales, marketing, and distribution function was relocated hundreds of miles away to Harlow, Essex, in southern England.

In 2010 six new stainless steel washbacks replaced the existing four wooden and four stainless steel vessels at Blair Athol. Two pairs of stills are in place, the second being added in 1973, and the distillery operates on a seven days per week basis, turning out up to 2.8 million litres of spirit per annum.

WHISKY TALES

The Belts of Blair Athol
Arthur Bell joined T H Sandeman's Perth wine and spirits business in 1840, setting up on his own 11 years later from the same Kirkside premises. Using the expertise he had gained in blending tea, Bell began to blend grain and malt whiskies, using Blair Athol malt and the make of several other distilleries. By the time Arthur Bell died in 1900 and his son Arthur Kinmont 'A.K.' Bell took over the firm, the blend was on sale across the British Empire, with strong markets in Europe too. The story of the blend's slogan 'Afore ye go' is rather mysterious. Some claim it derives from World War I when the men of the distillery were given a free bottle of Bell's whisky as they left for the front. Yet it was only adopted for the centenary in 1925, and the firm itself cites its origins in a 'Gaelic war cry'.

Single Malt

As most of the Blair Athol 'make' is earmarked for blending, the single malt is a relatively rare beast, with a 12-year-old 'Flora & Fauna' bottling now being augmented by a distillery-exclusive and 2017 saw the appearance of a 23-year-old expression matured in European oak butts as part of Diageo's Special Releases series.

Blair Athol spirit character lends itself particularly well to sherry cask maturation, and the percentage of sherry cask-matured spirit in Blair Athol 12-year-old is appreciably higher than in many other Diageo single malts.

TASTING NOTES

Blair Athol 12-Year-Old

Single malt, 43% ABV

The nose is moist, mellow and sherried, with brittle toffee, sweet and fragrant. Relatively rich on the smooth palate, with malt, raisins, sultanas, and sherry. The finish is lengthy, elegant, balanced and slowly drying.

Blair Athol Distillery Exclusive Bottling

Single malt, 48% ABV

Orange, caramel, honey and a suggestion of smoke on the nose, while the palate offers fudge, milk chocolate, orange, vanilla and a closing hint of chilli.

Blair Athol 23-Year-Old (Diageo 2017 Special Releases)

Single malt, 58.4% ABV

The nose yields dried fruits, medium sherry, coffee and orange marmalade, while flavours of butterscotch, plums, dark chocolate and earthy sherry appear on the palate.

HIGH COAST

OWNER High Coast Distillery AB
FOUNDED 2010
WEBSITE www.highcoastwhisky.se

High Coast's red brick distillery building was a former power station constructed in 1912. The distillery opened in 2010, though it was originally called Box distillery, named after the days when the building was the AB BOX sawmill that handled the timber that was floated down the Ängerman river to build billets for boxes destined for export. This spectacular part of Sweden is known as the Höga Kusten or High Coast and is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. The Ängerman river is wide yet fast flowing by the distillery, the water passing at a rate of 485,000 litres per second. The ice-cold water is used to cool the vapours in the shell and tube condensers of High Coast's two pairs of stills, making it one of the coldest cooling waters of any distillery. This forms a connection with the natural environment that genuinely helps to shape the character of their distillate.

Local conditions are challenging

High Coast distillery has a capacity of 300,000 litres per annum and makes peated and unpeated single malt whiskies. They source their unpeated malt supplies from Viking Malt in the south of the country and peated malt from Scotland or Belgium. The warehouse conditions are their secret weapon, and the other reason for the distillery's location. The warehouses experience huge temperature fluctuations of up to 60°C over the year, which forces the spirit in and out of the oak. From the heat of high summer when the black warehouse roof radiates the heat inside the warehouse, the temperature can drop to -30°C or lower in the depths of winter. That's so cold, that the warehouse team sometimes have to scrape off the crust of ice and frost that forms on the surface of the casks. They also need to be especially vigilant for leaking casks, both when the pressure drops suddenly in a big freeze and when the spirit expands as the temperature rises again.

Then there's the oak, which is a big deal here. Situated on the 63rd parallel north, the distillery is too far north for local Swedish oak to grow, but they

do source Swedish oak casks using wood from further south. Virgin American, Japanese, French and Hungarian oak casks have also been used. The majority of spirit is matured in bourbon and sherry casks, but across their whole wood programme, they are meticulous about experimenting with four specifications: toasting levels, charring levels, barrel entry proof and small cask sizes, which all help them to deliver their complex recipes.

The releases during the Box distillery years were well received as their early experiments came to fruition, and it helped steer them towards today's core range of internationally exported High Coast whiskies called Älv, Berg, Hav and Timmer. In addition, there are regular drops of distillery exclusives, and new limited editions for the domestic market, some of which make it to their best performing overseas markets.

High Coast has an excellent reputation for being meticulous about the details as their route to make the best whisky, and every detail of their recipes are published on their website. For example, High Coast Cinco II is finished in five different sherry woods, namely Fino, Amontillado, Palo Cortado, Oloroso and Pedro Ximénez, and the whiskies were aged for 8.59–8.91 years. If immersing yourself in the details of making great whisky is your thing, then High Coast distillery is the place for you.

TASTING NOTES

High Coast Hav
Single malt, matured in Hungarian oak, Swedish oak and bourbon casks, 48% ABV
Named after the sea, this core expression is designed to show off its oak spices. Joining the wood spices on the nose is citrus peel, vanilla and a hint of peat smoke. The palate has sweet stone fruits, honey and ginger with a spicy finish.

High Coast Älv
Single malt, matured in first-fill bourbon casks, 46% ABV
Named for the River Älv, this is an easy sipper with an attractive nose of bright florals, vanilla and lemon mousse, and a creamy texture of honey, tablet, orange peel and fruit notes, with lashings of vanilla on the finish.

High Coast Berg
Single malt, finished in Pedro Ximénez casks, 50% ABV
A rich sherry flavour full of red and black fruits, enlivened by plenty of spice. The flavours dance on the tongue, with cherries and red berries, toffee and peppery spice.



High Coast Hav



Spirit of Hven Tycho's Star

SPIRIT OF HVEN

OWNER Spirit of Hven Backafallsbyn AB
FOUNDED 2008
WEBSITE www.hven.com

Between Denmark and Sweden, there's a little distillery on an island in the strait of Öresund that's an enterprise unlike any other distillery. Founders Anja and Henric Molin commenced distilling in 2008, and they now make a wide range of whisky, gin, vodka and aquavit. The whisky comes in a distinctive flask-shaped bottle, like something lifted from a school chemistry lab, with the closures dipped in wax. In 2023, Spirit of Hven announced that they had agreed to cut off the drips of wax rolling down the neck of the bottles to avoid the prospect of any confusion between their bottles and a more famous whiskey dipped in wax. Their bottles are usually dipped in gold wax, but in the past, they have dipped some in green wax, some in blue wax, and for one product, they used red wax.

Spirit of Hven has a hotel, restaurant and whisky bar on site for visitors, and over the years, they have added a laboratory, column stills to make grain whisky and a wooden Coffey still to the distillery.

Henric Molin trained as a chemist, which explains the brand's bottle shape, and he runs a consultancy business using the lab to help other distillers improve the quality of their products. As an island distillery, the team are obliged to bring in raw materials by boat, so they now source organic grains and their gin botanicals on the island for some of their production. As master distiller, Molin has a track record of innovation and using his skills to make fine adjustments to his whisky-making process to explore how this affects the final flavour. He is always looking for the next big idea in whisky.

Hven is associated with Tycho Brahe, the 16th-century Renaissance astronomer, who was granted an estate on the island. Spirit of Hven produced their Seven Stars series of whiskies in honour of this connection, and they have subsequently embarked on a new series entitled Seven Angels. Their whiskies are exported to more than 40 countries, and in addition, they produce a core range of single malts, their Hvenus Rye whisky made from 78 per cent rye, and their Mercurius Corn whisky made from 88 per cent Swedish corn. Unlike some 21st-century distillers, Molin's vision is not to grow and grow to try to compete with the world's leading drinks brands, rather he wants to stay curious, and focus on making the most interesting and unique spirits he can in the most sustainable way possible, sharing them with people who appreciate them when they call to the little island in the strait of Öresund.



Spirit of Hven's warehouse contains casks maturing single malt, rye and corn whiskies.

TASTING NOTES

Spirit of Hven Tycho's Star
Single malt, matured in chinkapin oak, sessile oak and European oak casks, 41.8% ABV
Molin combines heavily peated malt with pale ale malt and chocolate malt, and matures it in air-dried casks of heavily charred Quercus muehlenbergii, heavily toasted Q. petraea, and a medium toasted Q. robur. The nose has a sweet composition of chocolate, candyliss and toffee apple, with flavours of dried banana, ginger and citrus peel leading to a delicious finish of chocolate and cocoa.

Spirit of Hven Hvenus Rye
Rye, matured in American white oak casks, 45.6% ABV
Matured for around six years, the nose has caramel, vanilla cream, rye spices and After Eight mints, with a palate of peppery rye spices, mint, toffee and cinnamon, and a distinctly dry finish.

Spirit of Hven Mercurius Corn
Corn whisky, matured in new American oak casks, 45.6% ABV
Aromas of ice cream wafers, salted caramel and oak spice. The mouthfeel is glossy and smooth, with citrus peel, caramel, vanilla and a little spice on the finish.