

Whiskyexperts – Interview with John Glaser, Compass Box:

- More than 20 years ago you founded Compass box – amongst your goals was to regain the reputation for blended Scotch Whisky it deserves. Yes. Scotch whisky itself has gained a lot of reputation since then, especially because of single malts. Do you think that blended Scotch whisky also has the reputation it deserves now? Or is there more to do here?

The fundamental role of blending in whiskymaking – even for the production of single malts – is increasingly understood and appreciated amongst the world of whisky enthusiasts. However, the world of whisky enthusiasts is a small world, and so there are still lots of people out there whose enjoyment of whisky will grow significantly once they understand the creativity of blending.

- Not everyone in the industry was happy with your openness regarding the contents of your bottles – but this seems to have changed now and many now follow your example. What do you think convinced them?

Common sense. It just makes sense that people have a right to know all the details of the products they consume. However, we're still legally prohibited from disclosing the ages of all the components in a blend; we can only "legally" disclose the age of the youngest component. Eventually, I would like to help create a change in this law, or at least its interpretation by the SWA.

- In that regard: There was a lot of controversial discussions with the Scotch Whisky Association regarding your use of inner staves as an additional cask aging option in 2005 with the Spice Tree or the Scotch Whisky Transparency Petition in 2016. Has everything been clarified in the meantime, or are there still limits that need to be explored?

What is important is the ability of Scotch whisky producers to communicate the age of all the components of a blend – this was the key issue we challenged in 2016. It is simply common sense that producers should be able to communicate this information, because consumers have a right to know.

This is still an open issue and as I've mentioned above, one I intend for us to take up again in the future.

- In your opinion: where are rules necessary, and where do they hinder innovation?

I believe that intelligent rules can help maintain the integrity of products like Scotch whisky. I also believe that the rules need regular discussion and evolution as the world around us – technology, practices, consumer needs – changes.

- In a world where there were no rules for scotch whisky but your own respect for it – what would be your next things what you would like to try?

Maturation in vessels other than oak – other woods, other materials.

- Does it need talent to be a blender? Or can all skills be acquired?

I believe that being a good blender can be learned. I think being a very good blender requires not just skills, but a deep understanding of the products. And keen intuition.

- What would be your advice to someone who tries to make his own blends? Are there some basic rules to follow?

My advice is to keep working. The more you work, the more you understand what is good, what is not-so-good and what is truly compelling. The more you work, the more your intuition develops.

- Are all whiskies “blendable”? Or are there some you would never use in a blend?

Everything is blendable. Whether or not you can create something good or compelling is another thing. It will depend on the components you have to blend.

- From the older Blends from the past, which one would you say impressed you most?

The very early Johnnie Walker Blue Labels from 1989 (when it was labelled “Johnnie Walker Oldest”) and the early 1990s are richly delicious and complex blends with an old-style character.

I believe Hibiki, in all its iterations, is masterful. In particular, some bottlings I tasted from the late 1990s were life-affirming to me.

- In two years Compass Box will be able to celebrate its 25th birthday and we expect a proper celebration. What can we expect, what can we look forward to?

I’m thinking about this now and developing some ideas. Who knows. Maybe we’ll produce something with an age statement! Then we’ll be entitled to fully disclose the age of all the components in the blend!