

THE *GLORY* OF WHISKY



For years, whisky was the spirit of choice in Malta but then fell out of favour and began to be regarded as a little bit old-fashioned. All that is now past, and interest in whisky is growing by the moment. It is now more than the spirit of choice. It is also bang on trend. But it's no longer about a tot of whisky, straight up or with water, mainly blended. Now it's all about knowing your whisky and asking for it by name, trying different ones and learning about single malts or seeking out rare blends and bottles, unusual names from small distilleries. And learning about Japanese whisky, too... We spoke to FRANCO CAMILLERI and ANDREW ABELA at the new in-house whisky boutique at Camilleri Paris Mode in Rabat.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAN CARVILLE



Franco Camilleri (right) and Andrew Abela with some of their whiskies.

Franco Camilleri's fascination with whisky possibly outstrips the passion for design, home decoration and interiors which is his main line of business. But a fascination it is, and it has led to the setting up of an in-house whisky boutique in the multi-level Camilleri Paris Mode interiors shop in Rabat. Amid the beautiful cabinets and decorative crockery, the lamps and lanterns, trays and ornaments, rows of glass bottles glitter and glisten temptingly, their contents like liquid amber, their labels ranging from the familiar to the *non avis*—obscure distilleries in remotest Scotland, big Japanese names, peat and heather, smoky and balmy.

In his enthusiasm to share what he has discovered and learned, Camilleri is only too happy to encourage people to taste different whiskies and see for themselves. Testament to that is the row of half-empty bottles and the glasses in which clients are offered their midday or early evening 'save the day' treat. The timing is right: at a recent party on the premises, many guests eschewed the wine altogether and instead mobbed the whisky counter. Intended only as a tasting-stand, it ended up serving all sorts of different whiskies to people who then stood about in intense concentration, comparing notes (and like Oliver, wanting more).

Camilleri was a relatively late convert to the whisky cause, and his road to Damascus was not in Scotland but, oddly, in Italy. "I was somewhere in northern Italy for business, and walking around before lunch. I went into a bar and just then couldn't think what I wanted as an aperitif, so just asked for a whisky as one tended to do," he says. "The barman wanted to know what sort of whisky and brought down an array of bottles, explaining each one. He knew a lot, and that sparked my interest." He began to read up on the subject and collect bottles, buying in Malta and when travelling, or over the internet. He met other people interested in the subject. "Then one day Lauro Abela, who owns Franks, came round to our house and saw my collection of whisky. He mentioned it to his son, Andrew, who was already quite an aficionado, and things developed from there."

Andrew Abela runs the wines and spirits aspect of Franks boutiques, and when he started there were just two shelves of single malts in their shops. Things have changed a lot since then. The idea for a whisky boutique at Camilleri Paris Mode—just whisky, all kinds of it—came about through their mutual interest and now it's a collaboration

Franco Camilleri and Andrew Abela have a particular affection for rare and unusual whiskies, and enjoy discovering and promoting them.



between the two. The whiskies are acquired directly from the producers if the house is small and does not have a distributor in Malta, or from the distributors here, and this allows them to keep the mix exactly as they want it to be. Distributors are happy with this arrangement because it goes way beyond the 'row of bottles on shelf' approach to mass selling, and allows them to showcase the better names and whiskies directly to the people who are most likely to be interested in them.

Camilleri and Abela began by holding a few whisky tastings by invitation, "just to help buck the wine trend", and also piquing interest by stocking rare whiskies, curious labels, and tastes to which people were unaccustomed, including smoky, peaty Islay whiskies which are Camilleri's particular favourite. The shelves laden with miscellaneous bottles from Ireland, Scotland, Japan and even Taiwan draw the eye. People stop and look; they examine. And then they want to taste. Soon, the range will include bourbon, America's whisky – not the usual suspects, but smaller producers like Maker's Mark and Buffalo Trace. In passing, we learn something curious: the Coopers Union (coopers are the tradesmen who make barrels) is so strong in the United States that bourbon-producers are permitted to use each barrel just the once. Because they

can't be reused – no particular reason; it's apparently just a way of keeping the coopers in business – they are sold on to producers of Scotch whisky across the Atlantic. And that's why Scotch whisky is aged in American oak.

Franco Camilleri has started a Whisky Appreciation Society – whether you know a lot or know nothing at all but want to find out more, you're welcome as long as you have true interest. The first initiative is a whisky tasting course

with meetings once a month for nine months, always on a Wednesday at 8pm at Camilleri Paris Mode in Rahal. This will cover blind tastings from different distilleries, with a total of 45 different whiskies (five at each session). Places on the course are limited so as to have a properly convivial atmosphere rather than a 'lecture' scenario. The price for the course is €360. Reservations and more information on 2010 2030 or email you@camilleriparismode.com with 'Whisky Appreciation Society' in the subject line.



The half-empty bottles are testament to the many tasting sessions at Camilleri Paris Mode's in-house whisky boutique.