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A way with whiskey

Chester County's Riannon Walsh advises distilleries and promotes an ancient art that's turning artisanal.

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by **Art Carey**, Inquirer Staff Writer

In her dreams, the Whiskey Lass of Chester County envisions a world where men savor the aroma and taste of fine whiskey instead of slugging it back like bitter medicine.



A way with whiskey

(http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20080103_A_way_with_whiskey.html#viewGallery=y)

She sees women keeping bottles of whiskey on the kitchen counter and using it to enliven recipes.

She imagines urban hipsters attending whiskey tastings and hedge-fund managers collecting bottles of rare single-malt Scotch because it's such a fabulous investment.

"All good whiskey is worth savoring, exactly the way wine is," says Riannon Walsh.

"Whiskey is more complex than wine in terms of the nose and the layers of aroma and taste. There are so many different whiskeys and so many different flavors in each."

Walsh, 47, is a respected whiskey critic, consultant and writer. Her "nose" is so highly regarded that several independent whiskey bottlers have turned to her for cask selection and blending counsel.

In the manly world of whiskey, Walsh is an anomaly, and relishes it. Through hustle, moxie and - to use a term she frequently applies to whiskey - boldness, she has made a name for herself and earned a place at the bar.

Alberta Straub, an acclaimed San Francisco bartender who hosts the video podcast *Cocktails on the Fly*, says Walsh is "a world whiskey trendsetter" who has opened whiskey to women.

"The world of Scotch is intimidating," Straub says. "It's like an old boys' club where women aren't allowed. Just to order Scotch, just to pronounce it, can be daunting. Riannon trashes that whole idea."

From her 35-acre farm near Chester Springs, Walsh runs Cloonaughill CelticMalts, a business that encompasses several enterprises. She markets and promotes whiskey. She serves as a "brand ambassador" for independently bottled whiskeys. She encourages the production and distribution of so-called craft or artisanal whiskeys, which are often distilled in garages and backyards.

She is the founder and host of the Whiskies of the World Expo, an increasingly popular event that brings together lovers of whiskey for tastings and seminars every March in San Francisco. In October, she launched an autumn counterpart, the Independent Spirits Fest, to herald the remarkable products of limited-quantity craft distillers.

There's more. She designed and patented a spirits glass that is hand-blown in Italy and ideal for appreciating the qualities of high-end whiskey. In March, her single-malt whiskey cookbook will be published, and beginning Jan. 17, she'll share her knowledge about whiskey locally at the first session of the CelticMalts Whisky School at the Inn at St. Peter's Village in Chester County. (For more information, visit www.celticmalts.com (<http://www.celticmalts.com>).

Rick Wasmund, who produces Wasmund's Single Malt Whisky in Sperryville, Va., calls Walsh "a friend to good spirits" who has the gift of an incredibly discerning palate.

Walsh doesn't object to being called a whiskey authority or entrepreneur, but the label she prefers is whiskey educator.

"Education is what sells whiskey," she declares. "The joy for me is teaching people how to really experience whiskey, how to taste it. Whiskey is so organic. It's affected by the water, the peat smoke, the air, the environment where it's aged. Casks breathe, and their surroundings permeate the whiskey."

Walsh enjoys all sorts of whiskey, but the whiskey that most pleases her palate is single-malt whiskey. It is, she says, "the aristocrat of the whiskey world."

Most single-malt whiskey is made in Scotland, where there are more than 90 active distilleries, each producing a distinctive beverage. But Scotland by no means has a monopoly. Increasingly, outstanding single-malt whiskeys are coming from all corners of the globe.

Single-malt is more a matter of process than location, Walsh says. To qualify as a single-malt, all the whiskey in each bottling must be made by the same distillery using one and the same grain - malted barley ("without question, the sweetest, smoothest and most complex of all distilled grains").

After the barley germinates, it's dried over peat fires, which impart a smoky flavor. Then the dried barley malt is ground, fine or coarse depending on the recipe. In a mash tun, it's mixed with water and yeast and allowed to ferment for 24 to 72 hours. The liquid is drained off and run through a still. After distillation, which can take from hours to a couple of days (depending on the recipe and batch), the clear spirit is stored in oak barrels, usually used previously to hold bourbon.

"Single malt is a living product, as is the wood in which it's aged," Walsh says. Increasingly, single malts are being aged in casks that once held cognac, sherry, Madeira and other wines or spirits. The result: "amazing" flavors, Walsh says, that range from subtle to "kick you in the face."

Most quality whiskeys remain in the cask at least seven years, Walsh says. But older is not necessarily better. After 25 years, many whiskeys begin to "fall off."

On the bright side, once whiskey is bottled, it remains pretty much what it is.

It's safe to assume that very few men, let alone women, have smelled and tasted more whiskey than Walsh. But she's no lush.

"I drink very little," she says. "I've been drunk only once in my life, and that was enough. I hate it when people get drunk."

In Walsh's case, a mere shot might make her tipsy. She stands an inch over 5 feet. Fit, trim and outdoorsy, she runs, performs endless farm chores, and rides.

Born in Wales, Walsh grew up in western Ireland. As a girl, she enjoyed gardening and cooking, especially "taking stuff from the garden and turning it into other things." From her grandmother, she learned about herbs and their essences. A family friend helped develop her nose by setting out several drams of whiskey. Walsh would sniff them and try to detect pairs that came from the same bottle. Infatuated with food and wine, she dreamed of becoming a chef.

When she was 18, she came to the United States to attend Boston University, where she studied psychology and business. To earn money, she and a girlfriend ran a catering business; Walsh, a natural hostess and entertainer, baked cakes and pies for small parties.

Graduate school brought her to Philadelphia, where she met her husband-to-be while running in Fairmount Park. For three years, she lived in West Mount Airy before moving to rural Chester County 20 years ago.

Walsh, who is single now, learned about whiskey by "drinking, reading and studying." For her, that meant several apprenticeships in Scottish distilleries, doing the hands-on work of making whiskey, the essence of her passion.

She's especially excited now about what she calls the "new wave" - the boom in craft or artisanal whiskey.

"It's individual people making individual whiskeys extremely well," Walsh says. "The range of stuff is extraordinary - whiskey aged with applewood chips or in such nontraditional locations as Park City, Utah - and I love the people. They're rebels and characters." Another trend that encourages Walsh: "Lots of women are into whiskey now." No longer is it the exclusive elixir of the kilt-and-haggis crowd. At the first whiskey expo in 1999, women bought only 3 percent of the tickets. Last year, women made up 44 percent of the gate.

"Women are realizing how delicate and refined whiskey can be," Walsh says. "Whiskey is as drinkable as wine, and there are so many varieties that allow whiskey to be paired with food."

A major reason for Walsh's success - and her appeal to women - are her whiskey reviews and descriptions, which are vivid and accessible, says celebrity bartender Straub.

"She's not afraid to say that a certain whiskey tastes like Jujubes. No one else does that," Straub says. "But when you read what she writes, a light goes on in your head. Without her influence, a lot of women never would have tried whiskey. She's a cool, interesting, approachable person who just makes whiskey fun."

Beet, Chevre and Spinach Salad With Sweet Orange Single-Malt Dressing

Makes 1 serving (multiply as needed)

For each salad serving:

1 cup baby spinach leaves

Several leaves butter lettuce, gently torn

2 ounces (about 1/4 cup) julienned fresh roasted or canned beets

2 ounces mild chevre cheese (1/2 of a 4-ounce log), cut into 1/2-inch-thick slices

¼ cup coarsely ground almonds

2 slices fresh orange, cut crosswise, then in half

Chopped fresh mint leaves

Sweet Orange Single Malt Dressing (see recipe below)

1. Toss spinach with butter lettuce and beets.
2. Press cheese slices into almonds to coat.
3. Put salad on plate. Arrange cheese rounds on top.
4. Garnish with orange slices and mint.
5. Whisk the dressing and drizzle lightly over the salad.

Sweet Orange Single Malt Dressing: A day in advance, mix 2 tablespoons fresh orange juice, 1 tablespoon Lowland single-malt whisky (Auchentoshan or unpeated malt or St. George, a California single malt with fruity character), 1 generous tablespoon honey, 2 teaspoons dried thyme leaves, 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil, and a pinch of sea salt. Whisk with 2 to 3 tablespoons aged balsamic vinegar until well-blended. Let stand at room temperature, allowing flavors to meld.

Per serving: 778 calories, 20 grams protein, 30 grams carbohydrates, 19 grams sugar, 67 grams fat, 26 milligrams cholesterol, 405 milligrams sodium, 10 grams dietary fiber.

Pork Medallions With Fruit

Makes 4 servings

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 tablespoons olive oil

2 medium yellow onions, thinly sliced

2 or 3 cloves garlic, minced

12 ounces pork tenderloin, sliced about ½-inch-thick

4 to 6 tablespoons whisky (Tullibardine for a slight sweetness or Ben Nevis for a malty taste), divided use

½ teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper or to taste

4 large tart green apples, cored, peeled, each cut crosswise into 16 slices

½ cup apple juice or cider

¼ cup whole cranberry jelly (or use plain cranberry jelly and add dried cranberries)

1 teaspoon ground coriander (optional)

¼ cup heavy cream (optional)

1. In a medium saute pan, melt the butter with oil.

2. On low heat, cook the onion and garlic until softened, about 5 minutes, stirring to prevent sticking

3. Turn heat to medium-high. Saute the pork to just rare, turning often and pressing with a spatula to brown slightly and sear in juices. Add 2 tablespoons of the whisky, salt and pepper, to taste. Transfer to a platter; cover with foil.

4. Turn heat medium-low. Add the apples, cider, jelly and remaining 2 to 4 tablespoons whisky. Cover. Cook, checking and stirring often, until apples are soft and sauce, golden. Taste and add more whisky and pepper if desired.

5. Return pork to pan with any juices in plate. Cook to desired doneness, about 3 minutes for medium. Stir often to keep pork coated with sauce, which will thicken.

6. Taste. For a sweeter sauce, add 1 to 2 tablespoons honey. For true decadence, pour ¼ cup heavy cream into a bowl, whisk in a bit of the hot sauce (this keeps the cream from separating), and add the warm, blended mixture back into the saute pan. Serve with mashed red-skin potatoes, seasoned with herbs or horseradish.

Walsh's Note: Experiment with fruits and whiskies, but keep apples and cranberries as a baseline. Adding prunes, dried apricots or raisins will make it sweeter. Keep mini-bottles of various single-malts on hand for cooking.

Per serving: 465 calories, 20 grams protein, 36 grams carbohydrates, 24 grams sugar, 24 grams fat, 71 milligrams cholesterol, 344 milligrams sodium, 4 grams dietary fiber.

Glazed Chocolate-Apricot-Whiskey Torte

Makes 8 to 10 servings

For the cake:

1 cup plus 4 tablespoons semisweet chocolate chips (or 7.5 ounces good bar chocolate, chopped)

5 tablespoons milk

7 ounces unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 cup granulated sugar

¾ cup sifted cake flour

5 large eggs, separated, at room temperature

1/3 to 1/2 cup sherry-finished single malt (Macallan or Glenmorangie)

½ cup apricot preserves

For the Chocolate Glaze:

1 cup semisweet chocolate chips (or 6 ounces good bar chocolate, chopped)

4 ounces unsalted butter

Dried or canned apricots, for garnish

1. For the cake: Heat oven to 350 degrees. Line with waxed paper the bottoms of two round (8- or 9-inch) cake pans. Brush vegetable oil on pan sides and covered bottom; dust lightly with flour. (Or use baking spray.)

2. In a saucepan on low heat, melt the chocolate with the milk, stirring constantly. Stir in the butter to melt. Stir in the sugar. Remove from heat. Sift in the flour, whisking to blend. Whisk in the egg yolks, blending well. Set aside.

3. Beat the separated egg whites in a large bowl until stiff peaks form. Whisk the chocolate batter a few times to lighten it, then gently fold the batter into the whites. Turn batter evenly into prepared pans. Bake mid-oven until cake pulls slightly from pan and only a crumb or two sticks to a straw tester, 25 to 30 minutes. Cool in pan 10 minutes. Turn out on rack to cool completely.

4. Put one cake layer on serving plate; brush top and sides with half the whisky, wetting thoroughly. Spread the preserves evenly over top of cake. Put the second layer on top and brush that, top and sides, with remaining whisky.

5. For the glaze: Melt chocolate with butter on low heat, stirring constantly. Let cool to spreadable consistency (15 to 20 minutes chilled; longer at room temperature). Frost top and sides of torte smoothly. Chocolate will harden on the cake. Decorate cake with chopped dried (or sliced canned) apricots.

Walsh's Note: If you love chocolate but prefer less cloying sweets, this is a good choice. Use a whisky with a strong sherry influence or sweetish quality. This calls for drenching the torte, so you may want to 'thin' whatever single malt you use with a 'better' blend such