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73 >

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**If the Americans had a problem
with Bruichladdich, heaven
knows what they'd make of this**

Flying the flag

Sweden has always been serious about its whisky but now it has a distillery of its own that it can be truly proud of. **Dominic Roskrow** visited Mackmyra

It's like something you might see in James Bond films. We travel north of Stockholm on a surreal journey on straight fir tree-lined roads where the light pierces only intermittently.

A combination of tiredness from an early morning flight and the semi-light give the landscape a dreamlike other-worldliness.

We're a long way north and it feels like it. And then we turn off what you could loosely refer to as the main road and take a track towards what looks like a mine-shaft. And that's because it is.

Our track cuts into the side of the hill until we can no longer be seen from the road, and we pull up to a huge metal doorway covering the entranceway to what is, indeed, a mine. Huge enough for large lorries to drive into.

There's a constant backdrop of water flowing through the rock and pumps to take it away. It's damp and cold, the underground artificial lighting giving you the impression of being in some subterranean spy centre or underground lab. If the Americans had a problem with Bruichladdich, heaven knows what they'd make of this. It's awesome.

Welcome to Mackmyra and one of the most unusual maturing warehouses in the world, a stunning example of making the most of resources available. And as we

shall see, it's not the only part of the Mackmyra operation where resourcefulness has contributed to a whisky made the weird and wacky Swedish way.

In actual fact, using the disused mine makes a lot of sense. The cool temperature is constant all the year round, and the many corridors offer plenty of unconventional space to store casks. It's safe and secure, too. And as of this summer it can host visitors and believe me, it's worth visiting.

For the team behind Mackmyra, visiting is important. The company sells lots of small casks to individual customers, and part of the appeal is that they can come and visit on a regular basis.

A disused mine offers a sense of style somehow.

Mind you, if a wet mine isn't to your tasting then don't despair – in Sweden you can store your cask in the south of the country, on its coast or on an island in the centre of Stockholm.

It all started as a whisky-fuelled late night holiday conversation exactly 10 years ago and it has resulted in a great Swedish success story – a multi-million kronor business which is just starting to make waves across the world.

It might be pertinent to throw in some of provisos here. First, comparing Swedish whisky to Scotch is a pointless exercise. Mackmyra

whisky is different and should be appreciated as such. Second, the distillery is still young and so are its whiskies. And thirdly, its output so far has been a hit and miss affair.

But accept that you're metaphorically tasting young olives and not over-ripe grapes and there's plenty to recommend what Mackmyra is doing. More than that, the last two Preludium bottlings from the distillery suggest that it's found its footing, and the new bottling, called First Edition and effectively the first Mackmyra proper, is a cracker. How wonderful to see a distillery quite literally coming of age.

Mackmyra is based in an old industrial town of the same name 90 minutes north of Stockholm. It now employs about 30 people and will this year have a turnover of more than 30 million kronor – not bad for a company formed by eight Swedish engineering friends during a skiing holiday to Salen in March 1998.

"It was a tradition for each person to bring some alcohol for the bar," says the company's managing director and one of the founders, Magnus Dandanell. "That year all eight of us brought malt whisky. So it resulted in us talking about whisky, why there was no Swedish whisky, and what there was to stop us making one."

Many of us have fantasised over a drink or two of changing our lives and pursuing a dream, but how many of us have actually done it? And it wouldn't have been

Main picture: Whisky maturing in the underground caves owned by Mackmyra

Inset top: The stillroom at Mackmyra

Inset bottom: Checking the maturing whisky

elsewhere because it was at the time of the internet boom and all we had was a low tech idea and no evidence to show it would succeed," says Magnus.

"But we had a group of people with a range of skills, so we set out to do it ourselves and saved a lot of money as a result.

"We agreed that if it didn't work we'd make enough whisky for each of us to take a barrel away and so the project would have had some benefit to us."

The group travelled to distilleries in Scotland and Ireland and realised early on that although the overall whisky making process was very similar from place to place, each distillery had its individual quirks. So the decision was taken to make whisky that was as Swedish as possible.

With little money the group had to improvise. They approached the owner of a disused dairy and iron-works in a region that Magnus holidayed in as a child, and Mackmyra – mosquito swamp – was born.

The first stroke of genius came when the group decided to use the internet to see if anyone else wanted to pay a small amount of money to become 'members' of the project. The response was phenomenal and gave the budding entrepreneurs a considerable cash flow. And the membership idea was to have another benefit down the line, too – it built a huge loyalty among Swedish drinkers, guaranteeing that future whisky releases would be snapped up.

Originally they built their first pot still themselves – a small copper still which could produce a modest 30 litres of spirit in each run, a fraction of the amount needed to fill a 250 litre or 300 litre cask.

And so they built mini 30 litre oak casks specially for their whisky – another decision which would have spin off benefits, firstly because whisky matures quicker in smaller casks and secondly, because now the company sells hundreds of 30 litre casks to individuals who simply couldn't have afforded the investment for a bigger cask.

So great was the interest in the initial spirit run that the decision to invest properly in the project was taken early on, in 2001.

Expansion from then was rapid. By 2002 it was necessary to issue shares to raise a further 35 million kronor and bring in bigger stills from Scotland.

"Half the shares were bought by small investors including only a tiny fraction from the bank," says Magnus. "Half came from the Farmers' Association who saw the benefits through the use of Swedish barley."

The farmers' link is particularly paying off now. While many distillers struggle through a world-wide shortage of the grain and a doubling of price, Mackmyra is secure in its supply through its local contacts.

The Swedish link permeates all through the Mackmyra brand. Swedish oak is used in the barrels, peat to dry the barley is sourced from regions of Sweden that were once covered by the Baltic Sea, giving the fuel a uniquely salty flavour, and some barley is dried over juniper branches in the traditional Swedish manner.

The resulting whisky, which only started appearing in earnest in 2006, is an acquired taste but one that is going from strength to strength with each new bottling and which is starting to make the world take notice.

It will be fascinating to see whether the new Swedish distillery will make malt with a similar taste profile, suggesting a Swedish style, or whether Mackmyra's whiskies are unique.

When a Mackmyra whisky is released through Sweden's state-controlled liquor outlets it's a big event. Sweden hasn't seen queues like it since Abba last toured, and each bottling sells out on the day it is released.

With five visitor centres spread across the country and whisky enjoying a boom worldwide, the future's looking very bright for this Swedish company.

Not bad for a bunch of engineers who had a vision over a drink or two 10 years ago.



Above: The picturesque setting of Sweden's brightest distillery
Below left: The all important barrel number one
Below right: Magnus with the one that started it all off for the Swedish friends



MACKMYRA TASTING NOTES

Privus 5

Nose: Lemon. Buttercups, mild disinfectant, honey
Palate: Sharp salt and pepper hit, then pine needles and a late slither of plum towards the end. Dry
Finish: Long, spicy and piney. Best part of the whisky by far

Privus 6

Nose: Softer than Privus 5, with dandelion flowers and roses, traces of smoke and perfume
Palate: Lots of tannin and bitter wood notes. It takes some getting used to, but there are some spices, dates and nutty notes in there too
Finish: Medicinal and very dry

Preludium 4

Nose: Shy but worth getting to know – citrus fruits, some orange and woodshavings are all in the mix. A bit like a carpenter's workshop
Palate: Soft yellow fruit first then an oily smoky centre and some pepper
Finish: Prickly, rich with some smoke and spice

Preludium 5

Nose: Pine needles, fresh and clean barley, hints of flowers and polish
Palate: Softer and peatier than previous samples, then pine needles, sour apples and an earthy finale
Finish: Peat and earth, salt and spice

First Edition

Nose: Rich orange liqueur, Drambuie, sweet ginger
Palate: Distinctive Swedish oil and peat, then cinnamon, orange and a children's sweet cough medicine note, then tangerine, peat and spice
Finish: Light, fruity and peaty. Delightful and the best Mackmyra so far