

Sidebar

Drinks · Whisky Cheat Sheet

Legal definitions, Scotch's own five categories and six regions, label terms, cask types, and how to actually taste it — spelled "whisky" throughout, the Scottish way.

WHISKY STYLES BY COUNTRY

Scotch Scotland, min. 3yrs in oak, min. 40% ABV

Bourbon USA, min. 51% corn, new charred oak, no minimum age

Rye (US) USA, min. 51% rye grain — a real, enforced requirement

Rye (Canadian) Canada, min. 3yrs — "rye" carries no actual rye-grain requirement

Irish Ireland, min. 3yrs in wood, min. 40% ABV, often triple-distilled

Japanese Voluntary industry standard only since 2021 — see tip below

SCOTCH'S FIVE LEGAL CATEGORIES

Single Malt Malted barley only, one distillery, pot stills

Single Grain One distillery, but other cereals + continuous stills allowed

Blended Malt A blend of single malts from more than one distillery

Blended Grain A blend of single grains from more than one distillery

Blended Scotch Malt + grain whiskies — over 95% of all Scotch sold worldwide

SCOTCH WHISKY REGIONS

Speyside Sweet, fruity — the largest concentration of distilleries

Highland Large, varied — light and floral to rich and full-bodied

Lowland Light, gentle, grassy — often triple-distilled

Islay Intensely peaty, smoky, medicinal (Laphroaig, Ardbeg)

Campbeltown Small region, briny and slightly oily

Islands Maritime, often peaty — Skye, Orkney, Jura, and more

READING A LABEL

Age Statement The age of the *youngest* whisky in the bottle, not the average

NAS "No Age Statement" — not automatically lower quality

Cask Strength Bottled undiluted from the cask, often 55–65% ABV

Single Cask From one specific barrel — genuine bottle-to-bottle variation

Non-Chill-Filtered Keeps more flavor compounds; may turn cloudy when cold

CASK TYPES & FINISHING

Ex-Bourbon Cask Vanilla, coconut, light oak — the most common Scotch cask

Sherry Cask Dried fruit, spice, deeper color — a real "sherry bomb" style

Finishing A brief second maturation in a different cask before bottling

TASTING TERMS

Nose The aroma, assessed before tasting

Palate The flavor while it's actually in your mouth

Finish How long the flavor lingers after swallowing

Peaty / Smoky From malt dried over peat smoke — an Islay signature

Proof vs. ABV US proof = 2 × ABV (80 proof = 40% ABV); the UK now uses ABV only

HOW TO ACTUALLY DRINK IT

Neat No ice, no water — best for a first honest read of a whisky

A Few Drops of Water Lowers ABV slightly, genuinely opens up aroma and flavor

On the Rocks Chills and dilutes over time — mutes some aromatics as it does

Glassware A tulip-shaped glass (Glencairn) concentrates aroma far better than a tumbler

"JAPANESE WHISKY" HAD NO LEGAL DEFINITION AT ALL UNTIL 2021

Unlike Scotch, Bourbon, or Irish whiskey, Japan had no law defining what "Japanese whisky" actually meant — a bottle could legally contain whisky imported and blended from Scotland or Canada, with little or no whisky actually distilled in Japan, and still be labeled "Japanese." The Japan Spirits & Liqueurs Makers Association introduced voluntary standards in April 2021 requiring genuine Japanese fermentation, distillation, maturation, and water — but it's an industry standard, not a matter of Japanese law, and producers had until March 2024 to bring existing bottles into compliance.