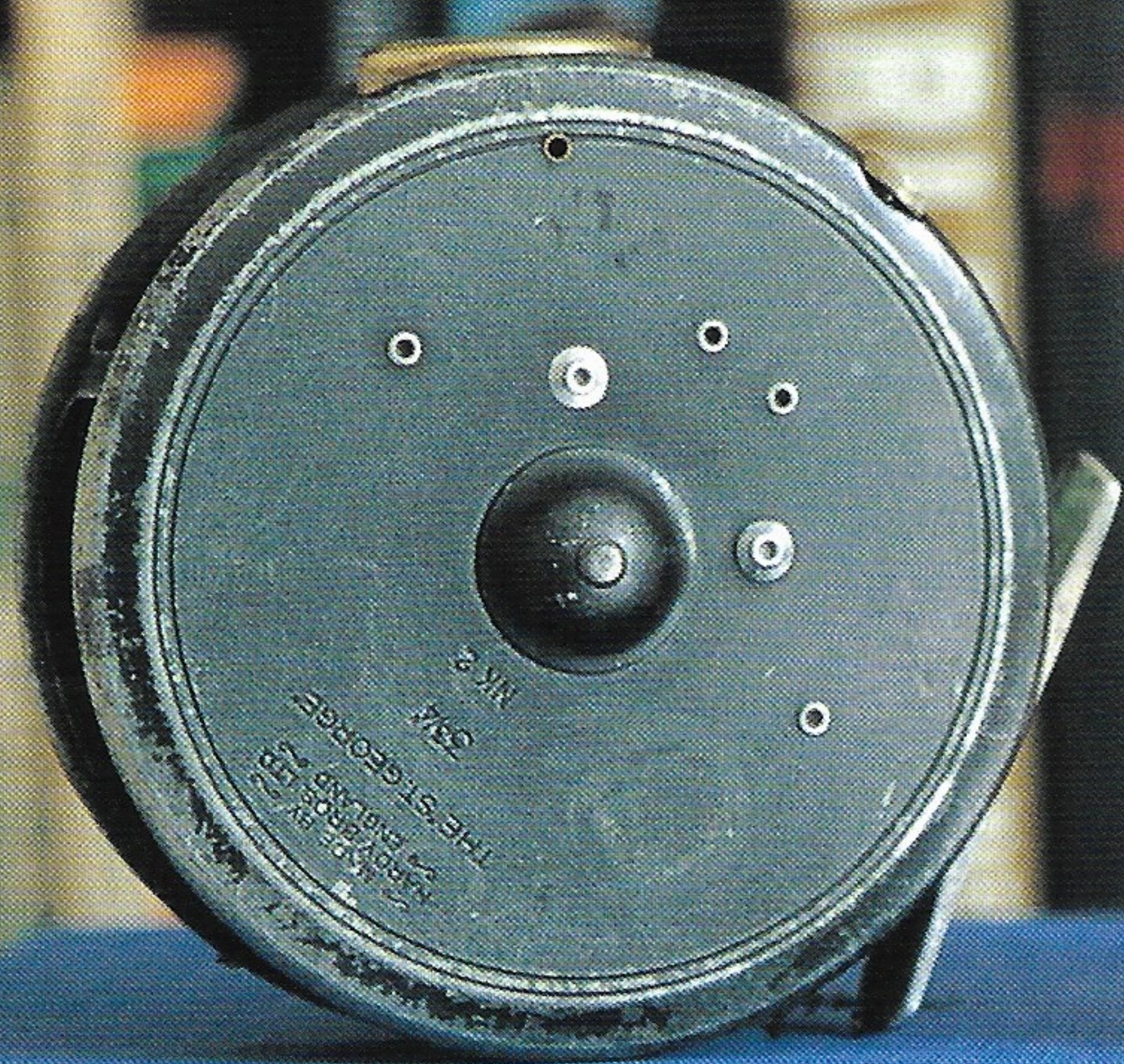


BY HUGH MCKERVILL

Elixir of LIFE



ATLANTIC SALMON & THE FLY FISHERMAN
GARY ANDERSON

Enjoying a sip of single malt at the end of the day involves as much refined knowledge and deft skill as the art of fly-fishing itself. A sermon on Scotch.

AFTER MORE THAN A HALF-CENTURY OF observation, not to mention a notable degree of personal involvement, I feel qualified to argue that the practice of enjoying a “wee nip” at the end of a busy day of fishing is a rich and worthy tradition. It’s a rite that forms an integral part of most decent fishing trips—sort of like a colourful thread woven into the texture of a tartan. There would still be cloth without it, but it wouldn’t be quite the same.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that not all anglers drink alcohol. For reasons of moral conviction, personal preference or health and self-preservation a percentage of sport fishers, as in the population at large, abstain from the consumption of alcoholic beverages. My father was such a man. He believed that even one drink would take the edge off his aim as a dart player, give a business advisory an advantage in bargaining or blunt his piercing perception of everything around him. In this belief he was, of course, scientifically correct, though it must be said that his conviction was less rooted in science than in the moral rectitude of North Irish Presbyterianism. If the truth be known he didn’t like the taste of beer, wine or liquor anyway so, generally speaking, he just didn’t imbibe. Then again, when all is said and done, he wasn’t much of a fisherman either.

Now I’m not suggesting that non-drinkers make poor anglers. On the contrary! I’ve run across a number of very fine sport fishers who, like my dear departed Dad, eschewed the use of strong drink. Not many mind you, but a few. I respect and admire these people. They avoid what my maiden great-aunt unctuously referred to as “the pervasive evils of intoxicating spirits,” the prevalence of which in Ireland, she always claimed, accounted for her enduring maidenhood. “The lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine,” she would say, and in County Antrim where we lived that didn’t leave many pairs of eligible lips. Such resolve demands respect. Just the same, when it comes to angling, one thing does occur to me about teetotallers on fishing trips. I have noticed that as raconteurs they tend to lack élan. Their stories are fraught with a discernable dullness; a want of literary and dramatic colour. The salmon that rise to their flies, the strikes they experience, the



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fish they hook and lose are always way smaller, fewer in numbers and much less vigorous than those encountered by story tellers who are on their second Scotch. It’s just something I’ve noticed.

In my own case, having spent ten years as a minister of religion, plus nearly as long in academic preparation, I squandered the better part of two decades in the embrace of near total abstinence, a dereliction which I have resolved to correct over time. I now subscribe to the doctrine that a wee snort or two to round out the day adds lustre to a fishing trip. It lubricates loquacity. It promotes human bonding, or if not, it adds bite to debate and encourages the honest expression of aversions, both personal and political. A wee dram may mellow the mind. It can assuage disappointment, mollify feelings of personal worthlessness occasioned by leader knots, render adverse weather conditions irrelevant, rejuvenate hope for tomorrow and persuade even the worst pessimist that the universe is indeed unfolding—though, admittedly, probably not as it should. The well documented medical fact that alcohol has a tendency to cause (as Shakespeare put it) “ambition to outstrip ability” in certain areas of human endeavour is usually of no immediate concern on male dominated fishing trips.

Just the same, one cannot talk responsibly about the use of alcohol without recognizing that over indulgence can be a problem. Overindulgence can lead to unnecessary crudity, the expression of extravagant

opinions, loutish jokes that are in poor taste and the missing of magnificent sunrises due to resounding hangovers, to say nothing of more serious and potentially deadly health problems.

On the other hand, to sit back and sip one's favourite potation after a day of casting can be a time of sweet dénouement. This is when the day's highlights and disappointments are fondly recounted, when patterns and sizes of flies are discussed *ad infinitum* and the minutiae of casts, raises, strikes, water and weather conditions, fish sightings, snapped leaders and other minor disasters are recalled in amazing, if excruciating, detail. Soon mighty pondering and brow-furrowed profundity are in evidence. Astounding recitations of useless trivia are demonstrated and sagacious proclamations of the obvious are gravely pronounced. It is a time of enhanced reality, a time when mere facts are not permitted to shade the blinding truth of unequivocal opinion. As the evening progresses, participants who were total strangers before arriving at the lodge may experience loving groundswells of eternal brotherhood sweeping over them. True, once back home facial features will fade from memory and names will be forgotten. But never mind. It is the eternal "now". "Here, try a wee splash of this Laphroaig! Don't you just love its earthy aroma of peat smoke and its scent of summer air arising from the heather?"

Such heady human experience has elevated the after-fishing drink to the status of sacred rite. It's a liturgy based on tradition and refined into ritual by generations of repetition. It's a predictable ceremony

complete with introit and benediction where *Salmo salar* is the spiritual host and whoever has the floor is high priest. It is an act of communion, and it is difficult to envisage a fishing trip of any substance or duration where two or three devoted fly fishers are gathered together without some form of the rite being reverently observed.

The brand of libation used in the ritual will depend upon factors such as taste preferences, sophistication of palate, pocketbook capabilities and cultural traditions. The chap from Britain, for example, still slightly intoxicated with the memory of days of imperial power in the Punjab, may show up with a bottle of gin and cans of tonic water—the better with which to combat malaria. The average American is liable to tote a square bottle of sweet and sooty Jack Daniel's that's been filtered through maple charcoal down in Tennessee, or worse still, oaky vanilla flavoured bourbon reeking of burnt caramel from Kentucky. I'm told that large quantities of vodka are habitually quaffed on the Kola Peninsula, although it is difficult to find anyone who has been there who can actually remember. Here in Atlantic Canada rum is highly favoured. This seems appropriate enough considering the fortunes that were made along our shores from mercifully running the stuff south of the border during U.S. Prohibition which started conveniently about the time Canadians had already caught on that it didn't work.

Those of us with Irish roots like to remind our Celtic cousins that we taught them how to make whisky. Irish monks introduced the art when they went over to Christianize the heathens in the fourth and fifth centuries. We sing the praises of Bushmills Irish whiskey (spelt with an "e") and of Old Paddy or Jameson's or Connemara, all less peaty than Scotch, and after indulging in a couple of samples we'll sing for the love of Ireland and for the girls we left behind us. Canadian whisky sometimes shows up at fishing camps. It consists of rye and other types of whisky blended with nondescript, neutral spirits. Of near necessity, it is generally mixed with other potable substances. Mind you, I've never met a connoisseur of Canadian whisky. I believe the terms are oxymoronic.

Considering all this, I suppose it could be argued that any kind of alcoholic beverage will serve the post-fishing purpose. However, when all is said and done it is Scotch whisky, single malt Scotch in particular, that seems best suited to the cultural atmosphere surrounding the sporting pursuit of Atlantic salmon. Fine Scotch and fine fishing go together like the proverbial horse and carriage—or love and marriage if you prefer. Perhaps it is because of the long and noble tradition of salmon angling in Scottish rivers, the pure headwaters of which also provide one of the essential ingredients of the finest malts. Or maybe it is because good Scotch is so full of subtle nuances and character and its manufacture so steeped in history that its full enjoyment may

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Anticipated protests from Nova Scotia's Glen Breton notwithstanding, traditional Scotch whisky is made only in Scotland and Scotch is the only type of whisky that can be legally manufactured there. The Scots have been making what they called "nisga beatha—or usquebaugh" (water of life) for a long time—ever since those Irish monks showed up, and if truth be known, maybe even before that. Certainly, well before the Edinburgh Guild of Surgeons and Barbers was granted a charter to sell the stuff in 1505, many a clandestine still operated in the heathery glens. Who knows, perhaps some still do!

Over time, four major distilling districts became recognized: the Highlands, the Lowlands, Islay (pronounced *eye-la*) and Campbeltown, which, come to think of it, pretty much make up all of Scotland. Speyside developed as a sort of sub-division of the Highland district. Now, more than half of Scotland's operating whisky distilleries are on Speyside. Further regional subdivisions may be identified and the discerning connoisseur will distinguish subtle character and taste differences in the products from district to district, region to region. Indeed, even two distilleries operating side by side in the same district will not produce identical whiskies.

Regardless of the brand, whether it is a rich mellow Balvenie or a sumptuously coloured and complex twelve year Macallan, all traditional Scotch malt whiskies start with three simple ingredients: barley, water and yeast. The production process, however, is complicated, requiring five essential steps. First, the barley is converted to malt. The malt is then mashed to produce a "wort" or sugar solution. Yeast is introduced to cause fermentation, which results in the production of a weak and impure liquor known as the "wash." Distilling strengthens and purifies the wash, leaving the solids behind. The alcoholic spirit thus produced is then aged, allowing it to mature and develop its special textures, tastes and aromas depending on the type of casks used and the length of the maturation period. Only after the spirit has been aged in oak for a minimum of three years, and provided it has been distilled at a Scottish distillery and meets a number of other strict standards, may it legally be called Scotch whisky. No wonder it is so special.

The bottled product may be any one of five types. *Blended Scotch* whisky is single malt whisky mixed with grain whisky from several distilleries. *Blended grain* whisky is created by mixing grain whiskies from more than one distillery. *Vatted or blended malt* whisky is produced by mixing single malt whiskies from more than one distillery. *Single grain* whisky comes from a single distillery but is not necessarily made from a single type of grain. Finally, *single malt* whisky is made 100 percent from malted barley from one distillery. The nectar of the Gods.



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There is no right or wrong way to drink Scotch. But some strong guidelines do exist. First and foremost, why spend good money purchasing such an exquisite creation if you are going to pollute it with a soft drink? Another abomination is ice, which masks subtle tastes and textures that took years of maturation to achieve. There is some room for debate about the addition of a little water. Many Scotch lovers swear that a splash of water softens the paralyzing effect of the alcohol and releases essential aromas. On the other hand, most North American tap water is so laced with chlorine and fluoride, and Lord knows what else, that it is barely potable on its own, never mind introducing it to an expensive, finely balanced single malt.

Be it Islay's dark, intense Lagaavulin, imprisoned for 16 years in old oak casks, or full bodied Talisker, the Isle of Skye's only single malt, or bracing Glenmorangie from the far northern Highlands, single malt Scotch whisky deserves to be approached with a certain amount of reverent awe. Its appreciation involves all the senses. Look at it. Marvel at the golden glow reminiscent of the rising sun glancing over a silent loch. Don't rush. Use your nose. Inhale the aromas of peat and heather and smoke and salty highland breezes. Then sip. Savour the subtle hints of old sherry, the suggestion of pine and dry, peaty tannins. Feel the glow of its spirit on your tongue as it makes its way to warm the cockles of your heart. Ahaaa! What weight did you say that salmon you released might have been?

Regular contributor Hugh McKervill recommends sipping a dram or two while reading this article. 🐟