

A Short History of Whiskey!

Whiskey was originally developed either in Scotland or Ireland, both came to be the birthplace of the popular liquor. It is most likely that it was developed simultaneously in both nations at around the same time period. The word “whiskey” is derived from the Scottish Gaelic word “uisgebeathe” and the Irish word “usquebaugh” [*I’m sure you can see the striking resemblance to “whiskey”!*]. Both of these words mean the “water of life” in their respective languages. Stories referring to the drink go back as far as the sixth century. However, the first official records don’t show up until 1494 in Scotland where friars used the liquid in a spiritual mixture called “aquavita”, Latin for “water of life” [*gotta watch those friars!*]. At this time the drink was lauded for the medicinal wonders it seemed to produce. It was thought to relieve colic, small pox, palsy, and any other number of diseases. However, it wasn’t long before it was cherished as a beverage also.

By the sixteenth century whiskey had become an intrinsic part of Scottish and Irish life. It was a reliever and stimulant during the cold winters, a way to relax after a long day herding the sheep, and a welcome extended to visitors and guests. In the seventeenth century, the Scottish parliament, aware of the popularity of the drink, sought to turn a profit by taxing the malt that was used in the blending process of the whiskey. Bloody battles instantly rose up between the tax collectors, or gaugers, as they became known, and the distillers. Illegal stills sprung up almost over night. By 1820, despite the fact that over 14,000 illegal stills were being confiscated a year, over half of the whiskey consumed in Scotland was being swallowed without the government receiving any tax money.

In the early stages of whiskey production, the whiskey was blended with a thick malt. This gave the drink an almost soupy consistency and a deep, smoky flavor. This smoky flavor came from the peat that distillers used in the fires to dry the malt.

However, in 1831, Aeneas Coffey invented a still, which enabled a continual process of distillation to take place. This led to the production of the grain whiskies of today. This lighter, more drinkable grain whiskey extended the appeal of whiskey to a considerably wider consumer market.

Whiskey has survived the United States prohibition, countless wars and rebellions, harsh taxation, and depressions and recessions, to maintain its position as one of the world’s most coveted liquors. Whiskey can be purchased in almost two hundred countries worldwide. Whiskies are produced mainly in the United States, Canada, Scotland, and Ireland. Canadian whiskey is spelled without the ‘e’, like the Scottish whiskey. American whiskey can be broken down into straight, blended, and light whiskey. Federal law regulates whiskey to be distilled at less than 190 proof. Kentucky and Tennessee are the two major regions of the U.S. where whiskey is produced. They use natural limestone shelves and icon-free water, both factors which apparently must be present to produce award winning whiskey.

