

Orkney bere for Arran whisky

Next month, a single malt Orkney bere whisky will be released by Isle of Arran Distillers. This has been produced in collaboration with the Agronomy Institute (AI) at Orkney College (University of the Highlands and Islands) and was made with bere, Scotland's oldest cultivated barley (*Hordeum vulgare*), supplied by the AI.

by **Peter Martin**

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This whisky will be of particular interest to collectors because of bere's connection with the early distilling industry and because it is now only grown commercially on a few of Scotland's remoter islands.

Historically, bere was the most important barley grown in Scotland's Highlands and Islands because it was well-suited to the area's difficult growing conditions. In particular, it is early maturing and can usually be harvested before the start of autumn gales. In addition to providing malt for beer and whisky, it was also milled into beremeal for baking and provided straw for animal bedding and thatch. It was probably the main barley used by the many legal and not so legal distillers in the Highlands and Islands until the early 1800s and may, therefore, have contributed to the high quality of whiskies from this region which made them particularly sought after.



Left: Harvesting bere in Orkney with a horse-drawn reaper in the early 1900s.

Below: Threshing bere in Orkney in the 1930s.

Inset: Ears of bere close to harvest.



Even in 1842, about 26% of the barley used by Campbeltown's 25 distilleries was bere and Orkney's Highland Park still purchased small quantities until 1926.

In recent years, bere continues to be cultivated in islands off Scotland's north and west coasts (Orkney, Shetland and parts of the Western Isles). In the Western Isles, it is mainly grown in a crop mixture with two other old types (landraces) of cereal (small oat, *Avena strigosa* and a rye, *Secale cereale*). In Orkney and Shetland, bere is grown as a sole crop and there are currently just a couple of hectares grown in Shetland and about 25ha in Orkney.

The Orkney crop is grown for the production of beremeal by Barony Mill and for specialist markets, like distilling and brewing, which the Institute has developed since 2004. Bere grain yields are low, about 3-4 t/ha (at 14% moisture), which is about half that of locally-grown modern barley varieties and varies with factors like wind and rain damage. In the Western Isles, loss of crop as a result of grazing and trampling by geese is a major problem.

The AI developed the concept of a 21st century bere whisky to create a new market for bere so that Orkney growers could continue to grow it commercially, thereby helping to conserve this old crop. In collaboration with Isle of Arran Distillers, testing of the concept started in 2004, once the AI had its

own surplus of bere and after funding assistance had been obtained from the Leader+ programme. After malting the bere at the Bairds plant in Inverness, it was distilled at Lochranza on the Isle of Arran and put into fresh bourbon casks.

Throughout its maturation, it has shown a quicker development than Arran whiskies made from modern barley varieties and this is why it is being released as an 8-year-old. Prior to bottling, it was characterised by a malty, herbal aroma, a taste of apples, oak and spice and a finish of malt mingling with spices.

The artwork for the whisky's label and box incorporates photographs, from the Orkney Archives, of local growers of bere during the early 1900s and have been used as a reminder of the crop's historical importance.

There is controversy about the extent to which differences in the taste of whisky are attributable to the use of barleys from different origins, but there are several reasons to expect Arran's Orkney bere whisky to be distinctive. Firstly, there is the antiquity of bere and the fact that it is not a conventional malting variety. Then, there are Orkney's growing conditions – at 59°N, this is the most northerly location where Scottish malting barley is grown. Here, the growing season is short and cool, and although day length is long in mid-summer, the maritime influence is just as likely to bring storms, wind and rain as warm, sunny weather! Apart from creating a challenge for growers, this unique combination of crop and climate, together with distillation and maturation on an island off Scotland's West coast, must surely create a distinctive product.

Good Health! ■

■ The author

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Isle of Arran Distiller's Orkney bere whisky. The bottle label shows an Orkney farmer harvesting bere with a scythe around 1905.