



Lifestyle / Food & Drink

How a Taiwan distillery became a global malt whisky player in under 10 years

The Kavalan distillery opened in 2005 and pioneered a way to speed up whisky's ageing process. Its spirits are rated among world's best, and the island is earning a reputation as a destination for whisky connoisseurs

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An upstart Taiwanese whisky is outshining veteran brands on the global stage as the island fast earns a reputation as a stamping ground for connoisseurs.

Taiwan's whisky drinking tradition is nothing new, fuelled by long business dinners and a "bottoms up" culture of throwing back hard liquor.

In 2015 it ranked as the fourth largest market by value for Scotch, behind the US, France, and Singapore, according to the Scotch Whisky Association.



A flourishing scene of specialised bars and tasting workshops has emerged as Taiwanese drinkers become thirsty for in-depth expertise.

Helping to galvanise interest is the island’s homegrown Kavalan distillery. Set among rice fields in northeastern Yilan county, it sees a million visitors a year.

“A lot of people only know how to drink, but they don’t know how it is made,” says CEO Lee Yu-ting, who hopes the distillery can “educate” consumers.

Kavalan was founded just 11 years ago by local conglomerate King Car – best-known for mass producing bottled water and canned coffee.

The brainchild of Lee’s father, King Car founder Lee Tien-tsai, experts were sceptical that good whisky could be produced in such a humid climate. But Kavalan has succeeded in wowing the international whisky circle.

It earned its global stripes by taking first place in a high-profile London blind tasting in 2010, beating four Scotches and one English malt just two years after its whisky hit the market.



In 2015 Kavalan's Solist Vinho Barrique was named the "World's Best Single Malt Whisky" by the prestigious World Whiskies Awards.

And this year it scooped the "World's Best Single Cask Single Malt Whisky" at the same awards for its Solist Amontillado – named after a Spanish sherry which had previously been stored in the casks.

Kavalan has capitalised on the tropical climate to develop a method that allows it to age whisky more quickly, says CEO Lee.

That means it can hit the shelves within five years, compared with 10 years or more in traditional production regions.

"People tend to judge the quality based on its age – that's not always correct," says Lee. "Taiwan is the new player in the whisky world."

A little more than an hour away from Kavalan's distillery, in the capital, Taipei, a growing number of specialist bars are testament to the island's burgeoning whisky scene.



Tucked away in a quiet alleyway, L'arriere-cours welcomes a steady stream of customers on a rainy Tuesday night against a backdrop of jazz.

Neatly dressed in dark grey waistcoat and bow-tie, bar manager Peter Huang says the Taiwanese have experienced an awakening when it comes to how they drink.

“Drinking used to be pervaded by the ‘*gan bei*’ culture,” he says, which means draining a glass in a single swig, a drinking style often encouraged in Asia, whether at a business dinner or at a private karaoke room with friends.

“Consumers are becoming more curious about what they’re actually putting into their stomachs,” says Huang, attributing the trend to a proliferation of tasting workshops held by bars and local experts.

Stocked with more than 400 bottles, from Scotches to Kavalan to India’s Amrut, L'arriere-cours does not have a set drinks menu. Instead, bartenders chat with customers to determine what to serve them.



The bar food also reflects its whisky obsession – slices of chicken, more traditionally marinated in Chinese rice wine, are instead soaked in whisky from the Scottish island of Islay.

For regular Mike Su, 35, the personal approach and wide selection has won his loyalty.

“You can try each kind one by one to find the drink you like, most suited to your mood that day,” says Su, who works at a technology equipment distributor. “It is finding pleasure through experimenting.”



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CHARLES MACLEAN

Edinburgh-based whisky expert, writer and researcher Charles MacLean says the level of whisky knowledge in Taiwan is impressive. “In my judgment, there are more malt whisky connoisseurs in Taiwan than any other country I have visited,” he says.

MacLean has followed Kavalan’s rise from the beginning – it was he who arranged the London tasting where it first rose to international prominence.

He describes the brand as “consistently excellent”.

“Of course it is not better than Scotch – or any other non-Scotch whiskies – it is different, made with the same care and attention as other whiskies are.”

While MacLean says Taiwan still has to catch up with its more established competitors, it is now on its way.

“It is too soon to describe Taiwan as being in the top whisky regions in the world,” says.

“But it already has a reputation.”