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PROFILES

# An American Single Malt Pioneer

Washington's Westland Distillery is carving out a niche for American single malt whiskey.



Matt Hofmann, cofounder of Seattle-based Westland Distillery, is pioneering American single malt whiskey through a refined, experimental approach.

It's not easy to make a splash in the spirits world these days, especially as a new player, but [Westland Distillery](#) has done just that. The Seattle-based whiskey maker is pioneering a new spirits subcategory with American single malts, offering a lineup of expressions—some made with local peat and aged in local oak—that have been embraced by critics and connoisseurs alike. The brand's recent acquisition by [Rémy Cointreau](#) has bolstered awareness and further cemented Westland's status as an innovator to be watched.

“When we started this business, a lot of people thought getting into single malt wasn't the right move,” says Westland cofounder and master distiller Matt Hofmann. “We want to make the most

authentic whiskey possible.” He notes that the American single malt category allows for more diversity than in Scotland. “You can’t reproduce our products anywhere else in the world,” Hofmann explains. “They’re tied to this specific region. We’re not afraid to do things our own way, and that freedom allows us to move ahead and to make something new, interesting and distinctive.”

Westland launched its flagship whiskey, the 46-percent abv American Oak Single Malt (\$59.99 a 750-ml.) in 2013, and followed it soon after with Sherry Wood American Single Malt and Peated American Single Malt (both 46-percent abv and \$69.99). These three whiskeys make up Westland’s core product range and are joined by several additional specialty offerings, including the highly acclaimed Garryana (56.2-percent abv; \$125), the first of the brand’s Native Oak series. It’s named for a type of white oak tree that’s native to the Pacific Northwest and is used to make the barrels for aging the whiskey. The initial run for Garryana launched in 2016 and sold out. The next expression is launching this month.

Hofmann, who studied whisky making in Scotland, aims to put a uniquely American spin on his products while also differentiating them from other American whiskeys. The Westland portfolio varies greatly from traditional domestic whiskeys like Bourbon and rye by design. “We’re literally as far away from Kentucky as you can be,” Hofmann says. “For us to be making the same product they make 2,000 miles away doesn’t make sense. The best raw ingredient for us to make whiskey with is barley, and the Pacific Northwest is one of the best barley-growing climates in the United States. That’s our focus—to make a product with a sense of place.”



Westland's approach to single malt embraces the unique terroir of the Pacific Northwest. Its Garryana release (pictured) is matured in casks made from a species of oak native to the region.

## Whiskey Fundamentals

The Westland team has faced challenges in creating a new domestic whiskey category. While farmers in Washington and Oregon have long grown barley, they haven't always focused on the varieties Hofmann wants to use, as he chooses barleys based on flavor profile rather than yield—a more expensive route. Similarly, fresh peat is readily available in the region. But when Westland started, there weren't any facilities that could produce peated malt, so the team had to find a malting company that could work with their peat and barley. They also had to find a cooper willing to work with unusual types of oak for barrels, as no supplier existed.

“We’ve had to develop from the ground up,” Hofmann explains. “It’s been a challenge, but also a great opportunity. What’s happening in the Pacific Northwest for malt and grain is unbelievable. Here, we make whiskeys like no one else. The more we get into the business, the more we see avenues of exploration and development to help tell what the Pacific Northwest can contribute to the whiskey world.”

So far, Westland's efforts have paid off. Founded in 2010 by Hofmann and Emerson Lamb, who left the company in 2015, the

distillery initially made just a few hundred casks a year. In 2016, the company grew to reach 1,000 casks, and Hofmann notes that his facility is designed to produce up to 4,000 casks annually.

Rémy Cointreau's investment is integral to growth, as the larger company can provide resources to help further Westland's production and distribution. The Paris-based corporation acquired Westland last year for an undisclosed sum in a move to boost its whisk(e)y portfolio, which also includes the Bruichladdich single malt Scotch and Distillerie des Hautes Glaces French whisky brands. Simon Coughlin, the CEO of Rémy's whisk(e)y business unit, says Hofmann's vision for Westland and his determination to make a distinctly American product were compelling reasons for Rémy to get on board.



Westland (barrels pictured) launched in 2010, and Hofmann continues to run the company following its acquisition by Rémy Cointreau last year.

“We’re in a good position with the great work Matt and his team have done,” Coughlin says. “As we go forward we’ll be able to produce more local terroir-driven single malts over the coming years. We want to make sure to focus on education and showcase the uniqueness of Westland’s spirits and style, while at the same time investing in future growth. Matt has been a huge advocate of experimentation within barley varieties and there’s already a



selection of these tucked away for the future. We see that trend continuing.”

Perhaps Westland’s biggest barrier has been a lack of regulatory support. The [Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau](#) (TTB) doesn’t have a legal definition for American single malt whiskey, as it does for Bourbon and other domestic whiskies. The TTB does define “malt whiskey” as comprising at least 51-percent malted barley, but the remainder of the mash bill can include other grains. Westland includes “American single malt whiskey” on its labels, but the term can be confusing for consumers.

“We’re leading an effort called the [American Single Malt Whiskey Commission](#),” says Steve Hawley, Westland’s director of marketing. The group—which has support from more than 40 American single malt producers and myriad spirits industry influencers and trade members—has drafted a formal statement of identity and submitted it to the TTB. They’re now awaiting government response. “We want to help people make informed decisions,” Hawley explains. “For us to be positioned properly on shelves and menus is important. We’re an American single malt whiskey, and we’re competing against Japanese whisky and single malts from Scotland, Taiwan, New Zealand and India. We’re pushing an agenda to formalize a standard of quality for American single malt.”



Westland (stills pictured) produces around 1,000 casks a year, with capacity for up to 4,000 casks.

## Standing Out

Savvy consumers are already supporting Westland's product range and delighting in the fact that it's different from single malt whiskies produced in other countries. Hawley says the distiller's goal is to bring a new perspective to a well-established and sometimes staid category. "Using types of oak like Garryana is new for single malt, and it's intriguing for the category," Hawley explains. "We don't want to replicate what distillers are doing in Scotland. We use the same basic process and fundamental materials, but we're bringing an American sensibility and American voice to the single malt conversation. We're creating something totally different from a flavor standpoint, and that's really exciting."

Hofmann isn't afraid to push boundaries to make an authentic American product. When he launched Westland in 2010, his goal was to focus on one type of product and make it to the best of his ability. For that reason, he has no interest in pursuing other spirits categories. In terms of sales and distribution, Westland's priority is the United States and Canada, with international reach to follow in the future. Westland whiskies are available in most major U.S. markets, and they have a presence in duty-free shops and roughly 12 international markets.

"We've always wanted to play in the big leagues," Hofmann says, adding that the partnership with Rémy Cointreau will help immensely toward that goal. "We want this company to be the best that it can be while maintaining the start-up culture and mentality that we have now. Our ultimate vision is to be a global player in single malt whiskey and to create products that can be appreciated by connoisseurs anywhere in the world."

While the Westland team respects the work being done in the craft spirits realm, company executives also note that they don't necessarily want to be part of the craft distilling movement. Hawley says Westland is positioned differently than most craft spirits producers, largely because of its scale and its commitment

to brand positioning on a global level. “The domestic market is our top priority, but we’ve seen how intriguing the idea of American single malts is overseas, especially in markets with their own single malt producers,” Hawley says. “We want the recognition and position that comes from being in countries like Sweden, Japan and France and the credit that gives us in the malt whisk(e)y community.”

Continued innovation will also be important. Hofmann says that along with the new Garryana release, he’s working on some additional whiskies that show more of the diversity available in the Pacific Northwest. He’s currently exploring different barley varietals and oak types for these expressions, noting that next year will likely bring another new release and considerable production growth.



Located in Downtown Seattle, Westland (exterior pictured) features a robust visitor experience.

## Industry Support

Westland Distillery has benefited from a wealth of support throughout the beverage industry. Bartenders and store owners alike are getting behind the brand and its efforts to create a new whiskey category. Education is integral to ensure the products are positioned correctly to reduce consumer confusion. Hofmann says that his goal is for Westland whiskeys to be listed on menus and placed on store shelves in the single malt section, not the American whiskey area. Meanwhile, Hawley and Rémy Cointreau's Coughlin both note that bartenders have been



critical in helping to spread the brand's message and explain why it's special.

"Education is key in setting Westland apart from other American whiskies," Coughlin explains. "Advocacy through the bartender community will be key to the brand's success. Getting the story across and getting clients to taste the liquid is essential." He adds that Rémy Cointreau is also working to educate its in-house sales and marketing teams, as well as its distributor network, so that everyone involved understands Westland's philosophy and the fact that the distiller is forging a new and somewhat unfamiliar category.

Westland whiskies have placement in several well-regarded on-premise accounts. Jack Rose Dining Saloon in Washington, D.C., is a whisk(e)y haven with an encyclopedic menu of more than 1,000 offerings. The tavern carries Westland's core range, and owner Bill Thomas notes that the specialty Garryana release is also popular. "Westland Garryana was a particular favorite of our staff in 2016—not just among Westland's bottlings, but all bottlings released that year," Thomas says. "Westland is a great bridge between the Bourbon drinker and the Scotch drinker."



The Cantilever Room (pictured) at Westland offers flights, cocktails and food.

Playing close to its home base, Westland also does well at Canon Whiskey and Bitters Emporium in Seattle. Proprietor Jamie Boudreau says guests love to try the local brand and notes that

Westland Sherry Wood is a best-seller. Canon offers a wide range of Westland products, from the three core expressions, Garryana and the specialty Peat Week and Winter 2016 bottlings to a lineup of more than 10 single cask labels (\$11 to \$38 a 2-ounce pour).

Single cask expressions are also popular off-premise. Chicago-based Binny's Beverage Depot has partnered with Westland on three exclusive single cask offerings over the past few years (\$89.99 to \$99.99 a 750-ml.), and spirits buyer Brett Pontoni says they always move well. He notes the brand gets a lot of interest in his stores from Scotch drinkers. "When we do tastings, Westland is an easy inclusion in the world single malt category," Pontoni explains. "We do consumer seminars where we pair Westland with a Scotch and single malts from Japan and France. Westland is doing business in a consumer segment that doesn't stay in one whisk(e)y category and experiments with different whisk(e)y styles."

Nima Ansari, the spirits buyer for New York City's Astor Wines & Spirits, says Westland's portfolio is growing nicely in his store, noting that the Garryana release has been especially popular. "We've seen a noticeable level of increased awareness for the Westland brand in the past year," he adds. "We've worked with Westland since its beginning and really believe in what they do. There's a considerable amount of difference between their expressions and we embrace those variations, particularly because their quality remains high across the board. Westland has invested not just in promoting their brand, but in establishing a groundbreaking new category in American single malt. It's one of the most exciting new developments in spirits expansion."