

Slàinte Mhath



It All Adds Up...

Chaired by an enthusiastic former accountant, numbers are growing at the Spirit Of Speyside Whisky Festival

by EUAN DUGUID

WE have a saying here," says James Campbell, chairman of The Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival. "One and one equals three."

A curious statement from a highly respected accountant, perhaps. Yet one that does stack up.

"When you bring two people or organisations together, combine their skills and resources and drive towards a shared goal, the results often surpass what you'd hoped for."

Indeed, it's with this ethos that James has led the Festival from 2012.

Each May, some 50 distilleries – along with many local businesses – throughout the famed region collaborate to create a diverse, varied and imaginative programme which draws visitors from over 40 countries to the area.

As well as a variety of events, glittering dinners, tours and open days James has also overseen the development of The Spirit of Speyside Whisky Awards, now among the world's most fiercely fought contests.

The Scots Magazine is, once again, proud to have played a key part in setting the scene for the forthcoming competition, back in November. As part of a panel of industry experts and commentators, I helped select eight finalists. We've now handed over the difficult task of crowning the best of the best to the global public.



James Campbell

Final judging sessions take place at the festival itself, but in recent years worldwide views have been sought.

A whistle-stop tour is under way with the *uisge beatha* shortlist being taken to New York, Malmo, Cologne, Rome, New Brunswick, Amsterdam, Oslo, Dublin and Paris, as well as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast and London. Competition is fierce – so impartiality is absolutely key.

"I was born in Speyside so whisky has always been around me – but I've never

had any connections and loyalties to one company or brand," says James.

"I was coming up to retiring from my business, where I was a partner at Johnston Carmichael Chartered Accountants. I was planning on winding down but then I got the invitation to come along and to become the chairman of the festival.

"A clear goal is to make sure the process is completely independent – and I seemed to fit the bill!"

Impartial and objective, James' contribution has been also been so prolific that he entered 2018 having just been made Keeper of the Quaich – one of the industry's top honours.

He was recognised for outstanding commitment and is



one of very few inductees not to be employed by a distiller. He is also only one of a handful of Keepers who does not work directly in the industry.

James is modest about the accolade. Instead he reverts to type when you ask him about the growth of the festival – responding in numbers.

"From the inception as we move into the New Year we have multiplied the number of people involved. There were about 64 companies and businesses involved in the festival back in 2012. Today there are 134; hotels, businesses, restaurants and bars pitching in. The festival brings around £2million into the local economy

"I am very fortunate to have such a great team working with me at the festival, and one of the highlights is our ticket launch. They will go on preview on www.spiritofspeyside.com in the last week in January, and on sale in the first week of February. In the first hour of ticket sales last year, we sold just over £127,000 worth of tickets – compared to £99,000 the previous year."

James's head for figures is evidently helpful – but the ability to get on with everyone and try and get the best out of them is even more important in his role as chairman.

"Part of my job as chairman is to get more and more people to become part of this success story.

"Quite often our whisky companies are rivals in the marketplace. For the week of the festival, we get them all to work side by side and along with each other –

and it's a very powerful thing to see."

And it's the power of people that keeps drawing the visitors back, James believes.

"The festival gives our visitors not only a unique chance to sample some of the best whiskies in the world, but to learn about the passion and the tradition that goes into making them.

"Our secret weapon is the men and women making these products. Once our overseas visitors meet them, they're absolutely captivated.

"That guarantees their return – that, along with all the friendly, welcoming people of Speyside." 🍷



The festival attracts hordes of visitors



Where there are drams there's dancing!

This Year's Festival Shortlist

In the 12-Year-Old and under category, Benromach 10-YO will go up against Cardhu 12-YO, while in the contest for malts aged 13 to 20 years, another Benromach – the 15-YO – will battle it out with Glen Grant 15-YO.

Glenlivet 21-YO will take on Aultmore 21-YO in the 21-Year-Old and over category, and in the Non Age Statement class it is a head-to-head between Tamdhu Dalbeallie Dram and Glen Moray Classic Cabernet Finish.