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# SCHOOLS IN

*The Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival is an opportunity to experience the varied magics of what is arguably Scotch's most famous region, but through its Whisky School it also provides a valuable, in-depth Scotch whisky education*

**T**he Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival is a calendar highlight for many whisky enthusiasts. It's an opportunity to dive into the rich heritage of the region, as well as to discover the ways in which Speyside's distilleries are blending their history with innovation.

In the impressive lineup of festival activities (a whisky and ice cream pairing session with Cardhu? Yes, please), it's the Spirit of Speyside Whisky School that stands out as a little different. The Whisky School is a three-and-a-half-day educational programme for those interested in Scotch. It acts as a deep dive into Scotch whisky and its production, history, and culture.

The school was established more than 15 years ago, as a way to add value to the festival. "It was started by a group of whisky managers, distilling

managers, and whisky enthusiasts, and some people who had been involved with other industry organisations that had a role in educating — distilling education, whisky education — who were all based in Speyside," explains Ann Miller, who chairs the Whisky School committee. Miller is 'the Dram Queen', an independent whisky educator, Master of the Quaich, and former Chivas Brothers brand ambassador of almost 30 years. "The idea was to really give a little bit more opportunity for people to learn a great deal more about whisky making in depth, face to face, from experts."

Those experts include new headmaster Richard Beattie, who this year takes over from former The Glenlivet master distiller Alan Winchester. Beattie, who currently splits his time between Speyside and Japan, where he is working on





the development of a new Hokkaido distillery, has plenty of Scotch experience under his belt to pass on to participants. He was previously production director of GlenAllachie Distillery, and has been Mossburn Distillers' distilling director.

Among the many experts who join the course are Diane Stewart from Edrington, a sensory expert who will teach how to taste whisky via a selection of Macallan drams; Dr Stuart Watts, distilleries director at William Grant & Sons, who leads a distillation session; and Rhiann Ferguson, blender at John Dewar & Sons, who joins the school for the first time this year. Miller herself leads a session on the history of Speyside's contribution to Scotch whisky, providing foundational historical context.

A new addition to the programme for 2025 which Miller is looking forward to seeing is a session on the role of the Scotch Whisky Association (SWA), led by SWA director of strategy and communications Graeme Littlejohn, which will put the Scotch whisky industry into context. The school garners attendees from around the world — the US, Australia, Slovakia, Spain — so it's useful, Miller says, to establish early what the rules are for Scotch, and what the restrictions are under which Scottish distillers work.

Also new this year is a talk on pot stills and distillation equipment, and how the industry is maintaining use of them under the challenge of "reducing energy use, but still making consistently good whisky," Miller adds. "That element, I think, is going to be fascinating." The third new session this year will focus on the use of peat — something not so common in Speyside whiskies, but is nevertheless an important piece of the Scotch whisky puzzle.

To put the learning into practical context, the Whisky School runs visits to distilleries that are, in the normal course of the year, closed to visitors. For 2025, the visits will be to the



**Opening pages:**  
Raising a glass to the Whisky School.

**This page:**  
Learning about peat on-site at Portgordon Maltings.

Glen Grant Distillery and Aultmore Distillery, the latter of which has just installed heat recovery systems, adding real-world context to the exploration of the challenges of climate change. Other stages of whisky making aren't neglected: the school will also visit Portgordon Maltings, Speyside Cooperage, and Forsyth's Coppersmiths.

"We are so fortunate that our links to people actively or recently retired within the industry means that we have the opportunity to arrange access to a lot of really interesting places," says Miller. "Here in Speyside we're spoilt for choice. With more than 50 distilleries, which ones do you choose? It was attempt to show things which were different."

A crucial aspect of the programme is the opportunity to build connections within the whisky community, explains Miller. "The idea is that it is meant to be a great networking opportunity for the 'students' — I say 'students' with inverted commas, because, of course, they're all adults — and networking between themselves, which is always very constructive, but also with us as

the community and with the speakers. In that respect, there are a lot of benefits." To allow for this, there is dedicated time in the schedule for attendees to socialise both with each other and the whisky experts.

The chance to make so many whisky industry contacts, while learning about the production of whisky in-situ in Speyside, is of particular benefit to the attendees, many of whom are interested in entering the industry themselves. Miller estimates that about a quarter of attendees are there because they're enthusiasts, another quarter want to go into whisky production, and the rest are involved, or aspire to be involved, in whisky communications — marketing, hospitality, brand ambassadorship, and the like. As a former brand ambassador herself, Miller knows how crucial it is to be able to speak "accurately and confidently" about whisky. That's not to say that one ever quite stops learning more about the spirit: "I must say, Whisky School has taught me a lot," Miller confesses. "Even after a long career of whisky, I have learned something every day of it." 