



Slàinte Mhath

Queen Of The Still

Euan Duguid meets a most discerning Frenchwoman



LEGEND suggests the Auld Alliance originated in 809, when a Scots king named Achaius or Eochaid agreed to help Charlemagne fight the Saxons.

The pen is mightier than the sword, as they say. So it's perhaps fitting that the spirit of partnership is personified in the modern day by a French whisky writer – whose malt musings have earned her the sobriquet "Queen of the Still".

Martine Nouet, who now lives permanently on Islay, is also a globally respected judge and well-went face on the competition circuit, at events such as the International Wine & Spirit Competition. She was made a Master of The Quaich in April 2012, a distinction awarded to very few by the whisky industry.

So how did this former French political correspondent, who was brought up in Normandy, become Scotch whisky royalty? She followed her nose. Literally.

"A press trip to Islay around 25 years ago was the defining moment of my career," explained Martine, who had just begun writing about food and drink at that time.

"When I got off the plane I was mesmerised by the smells, the iodine from the sea, the sheep wool, the kerosene, the freshly cut grass...

Martine Nouet was captivated by Islay



"It was a revelation to my senses – and as we moved around the distilleries many of these tantalising aromas and smells were amplified."

That inspiring sensory safari propelled Martine's career and she became editor of *Whisky Magazine France*, consolidating a reputation as a prominent whisky expert.

She now lives and works from Port Charlotte, Islay, where she moved eight years ago.

Her life's work was almost never realised, though. "I overindulged in rather cheap whisky at a party when I was 18!" she reveals.

"It put me off whisky for years. I was only seriously introduced to whisky years and years later by a companion – just before the Islay trip – when we visited my first distillery, Tamdhu in Speyside."

That early overindulgence – and a traumatic episode in Martine's life – have both had a fundamental bearing on her career.

"I have never been a heavy drinker and will never be," she said. "I have seen the damage made by excessive consumption of alcohol to a person who was very close to me, until he lost his life."

She continued, "I think enjoyment means completely savouring it and taking the time to understand and truly

appreciate the complexities of a whisky."

That ethos, and her highly tuned nose, have combined to make Martine one of the most eminent matchers of whisky and food in the world.

She regularly leads cookery sessions showing just how well whisky can be used as both an accompaniment to and an ingredient in sweet and savoury recipes.

So what's the secret of a good pairing?

"When I pair, I always start from the whisky," Martine says. "The key aromas and texture are crucial."

"For example, if the whisky is very smooth I will need some crunchy ingredients in the dish, so as to balance its softness by a crisp sensation on the palate."

"It's all about working the combinations to obtain the perfect harmony. You can choose to 'tune in' food and whisky by complementing, by opposition or by similarities."

Martine has defined some principles according to the character of the whisky. For instance, whiskies matured in bourbon cask will match perfectly with seafood, whereas sherried whiskies will pair with rich meats cooked in sauces.

It's an approach applicable to many of the other finer things in life, which Martine is pulling off with typical va-va-voom.

"When I taste whisky, I always have impressions, I can see images, I can link the aromas to colours, to seasons," Martine adds:

"So matching whisky to music or dance or painting, for example, is also quite natural."

"Recently I hosted a whisky, chocolate and music

pairing in New Brunswick, Canada.

"I worked with a brilliant French Canadian chocolate maker – she described the chocolates and I chose the whiskies."

"We also had a talented fiddler who played music delicately tuned to our matching. The way all the puzzle pieces fitted – the tastes, the music and the malt – was magical."

"We had an audience of 70 people who were carried away and left the room with their mind floating around!"

So what keeps this French genius grounded? Scotland's whisky island, of course.

"I love to wake up in the morning on Islay, in the calm – or hear the wind roar – look from the window, gaze at the sea and that stunning, ever-changing light."

"I've never been closer to nature, and probably closer to my own self."

"Islay is the perfect place to work, to write, to find inspiration – and to just enjoy life."

Vive la France. ☺

Euan Downs a Dram!

A favourite dessert of Martine's is crème brûlée and coffee – with a Bowmore 18yo as an accompaniment. This mellow mahogany spirit is smoky on the nose, tempered with cream chocolate and ripe fruit aromas.

On the palate it's an incredibly complex yet beautifully soft dram with fruit and chocolate balanced with a light smokiness. There's a long, wonderfully balanced finish.

My verdict: A sweet sensation.

