



Whiskey casks on the grounds of Glenora Inn & Distillery

# Strong Spirits

Mix old Scottish tradition with the lush Canadian countryside and you get one of the best, and one of the only, single-malt whiskeys made in North America. *By Joseph Guinto*

**THE ONTARIANS** are drunk. No, actually, they are sauced. Pot-stilled, if you will. They are, in fact, single-malted, crocked, pie-eyed, pickled like fiddleheads, and perhaps even Zambonied. Yes, they are very drunk. But they sure can square dance.

It is not even 10 p.m. on this Wednesday night, but the two couples from Canada's most populous province are already comfortably numb (schnockered? Dean Martoonied? Fruit Looped?) when they stumble into the pub at the Glenora Inn & Distillery, a Nova Scotia-based locale that proclaims itself to be North America's first single-malt whiskey distillery. The Ontarians' arrival is somewhat abrupt, but it's not unappreciated by my imbibing companion and me. We've been in the pub — a cozy, dimly lit space with buttercream walls and hardwood floors — for an hour and are tasting our way through all of Glenora's offerings. These include a rare 15-year-old single malt and a whiskey that spent

its final months before bottling in an ice-wine cask. The whiskeys are good. Some, especially the ice-wine whiskey, are excellent. But the pours are small and the prices large. Twenty Canadian dollars for one ounce? I've paid less for the legendary Johnnie Walker Blue. What's worse, the pub has been a wee bit quiet during our stay. Canadians can be nice to a fault at times, and most of the pub-goers are speaking only in polite whispers.

So when a father-and-son team starts playing ceilidh music (pronounced kay-lee) — a fiddle-based, barn-dance Celtic sound that's popular in Atlantic Canada but whose roots are in Scotland and Ireland — and the Ontarians start swinging their partners do-si-do, well, the Scotch starts to go down all the easier.

Scratch that. It's not Scotch — not legally, anyway. The Scotch Whisky Association has actually sued to ensure that Scotch can come only from its namesake place. In the same way that Champagne from anywhere except Champagne, France, is just sparkling wine, Scotch from anywhere outside of Scotland is just whiskey. Or whisky, depending. But never Scotch whisk(e)y.



Cape Breton Island shoreline

Never. Not even if Glenora is located in Nova Scotia, a.k.a. New Scotland. Not even if Glenora's gleaming white distillery and accompanying chalet lodges are in Inverness County, which takes its name from Inverness, Scotland. Not even if Inverness, Scotland, is near the famed Glen Ord single-malt Scotch distillery or if Glenora sells its whiskeys under the name Glen Breton. And not even if Glenora's main distiller is a man named Daniel MacLean, who although a native Cape Bretoner, speaks with a distinctly Scottish twang — he sounds very much like *The Simpsons'* Groundskeeper Willie when he pronounces *bottle* as “bah-ul.” No, in spite of all that, Glenora cannot claim to be making single-malt Scotch.

Still, you can see where someone might misunderstand. After all, on Cape Breton Island, Scottish heritage is everywhere — some road signs are even in Gaelic — and the landscape of rolling hills and craggy beaches can look strikingly like Scotland's. So you'd be forgiven if you tasted a dram of the Scottish Highlands in a glass of Glen Breton and then happened to call any of the

Glen Breton line of whiskeys Scotch. Especially because that's what the locals do. “The local community calls our whiskeys Scotch because they're allowed to,” MacLean says. “I mean, who's going to sue them?”

**HOPEFULLY, NO ONE** will sue Cape Bretoners. They're stretched thin as it is. With 35 mostly seasonal employees, Glenora is the single biggest employer in Inverness County. You don't need to be Ben Bernanke to know that in a county with about 8,000 workers, if your leading employer has just 35 jobs, that's a bad sign. The rest of the island isn't faring much better.

Which is not to say Cape Breton Island doesn't have its advantages. Perched like a big thumbs-up in the northeastern part of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia, it is, in warm weather, a true paradise. Rated one of the world's 10 best islands by *National Geographic Traveler*, it is lushly green, looking comically like a giant Christmas-tree farm in the areas where it doesn't look exactly like Scotland. With fewer than 150,000 people living on its 4,000 square

A secret like this will be hard to keep for long.

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miles, Cape Breton remains mostly undeveloped and feels remote, although it is anything but. Glenora Distillery is just a three-hour drive north from Halifax, which, in turn, is just a short flight from the northeastern United States.

But if Cape Breton is a paradise, it is a little too much like the Garden of Eden — beautiful, but the natives don't get to stay. At least, not if they're young and want a job. The population there has been in decline for 20 years, and unemployment has been in the double digits for even longer. Cod fishing, the industry that first brought Scottish, Irish, and Acadian settlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dried up when refrigeration spoiled the demand for salted fish. The mining jobs that replaced the fishing ones have also now dwindled, as has employment with the logging companies, which turn those Christmas trees into armoires.

All of that helps explain why Glenora is so important to Cape Breton. Not only is it a source of seasonal and some year-round jobs — the chalets and other rooms at the inn are open in the spring, summer, and fall, while the distillery makes whiskey during the long and brutal winters — it's also a source of community pride. And this is a community that could use a shot of self-esteem.

Donnie Campbell, Glenora's self-titled whiskey ambassador, and I are discussing just that when we meet one evening in Glenora's pub. Campbell is, of course, of Scottish heritage. His family came over in 1802. During a trip to Scotland to study the country's spirits, a subject he's long had a passion for, he visited the very spot from which his ancestor Donald Campbell departed.

"I'm a Campbell, and I'm very proud of my heritage," he says over the soft strains of ceilidh music. "I think most people from around here feel the same way. People are proud of their culture, their language, their music. The Gaelic language is everywhere here. And you could knock on any third door in this community and find a professional musician playing the style of music we're listening to now. So a good, quality single-malt whiskey fits into that picture.

"But with the inn, we don't try to sell people a Scottish vacation. We sell them a Nova Scotia vacation. And with the whiskey, we aren't making Scotch. We put a big red maple leaf on our label and on our box,

and it says 'Canadian Single Malt Whisky.' We're proud of that."

There's more than just pride at work here. There's also truth in advertising. Glen Breton whiskeys are distinct. They are similar to Scotch, for sure. But they're not at all like the aggressively peaty Scotches of Islay such as Laphroaig and Lagavulin. They are more subtle, with only hints of peat, more

like the Scotch whiskeys (no *e* in this case) of the Highlands but with a vaguely Canadian Club-styled, blended whiskey flavor too. The end result is that the flavors are complex but light — simultaneously sippable and quaffable. In other words: They're something Cape Bretoners can be proud of having made.

The funny thing, though, is that Cape Bretoners don't seem like the types who'd

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## TRAVEL

go for \$20 shots of single malt. On the island, you're far more likely to encounter a guy with a bushy red beard who is wearing overalls — I mean this literally — than you are to see someone wearing an Armani suit. Or any suit, for that matter. And, indeed, when Glenora first opened in 1990 (it has gone out of business twice since then and is now owned by Lauchie MacLean, who hit on the right marketing mix in 2000), you'd have been even harder pressed to find a local nosing a glass of single malt in one of the island's groggeries.

Despite the strong Scottish and Irish roots on Cape Breton, Atlantic Canada actually draws its imbibing traditions from its connections to the sea. Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum and all that. "Nova Scotia is known as a

**"People are proud of their culture ... So a good, quality single-malt whiskey fits into that picture."**

rum-drinking, or a beer-drinking, culture," Daniel MacLean says. "Especially Cape Breton Island. You never used to see single-malt whiskeys or Scotch in people's houses. But now, since we've been on the market, we run across more people who are drinking single malt."

That is, with one notable exception. "My father won't drink it," MacLean says of the Glen Breton whiskeys he makes. "My father's generation was insane about the rum, and he's still a rummy. I told him to take a bottle out of my cupboard. He said, 'Nope. It'll just go to waste.'"

**ON THE EVENING** my wife and I arrive at Glenora, having a glass of whiskey seems perfectly fitting. It's raining hard as we head down a gravel road lined with pine trees that serve as the distillery's impressive entrance. We continue on behind the building where the whiskey is made and go up a winding path to our chalet, one of six on the grounds. A front deck on the building overlooks the valley and the distillery below, both of which are shrouded in fog as we first unlock the door. Inside, the building is small but comfortable. There's a loft-like bedroom upstairs, and living quarters

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on the ground floor include a kitchen, fireplace, hot tub, and satellite TV, so you can watch *The King of Queens* while you soak in front of the wood-burning fire.

The next morning, we wake up to take in the view. Intensely green hills are immediately to the right. To the left, interchanging valleys and hills extend to the horizon. The only building in sight is a church with

a single tiny white spire. The idyllic scene is spoiled only by a noise that I assume emanates from the ribbon of road running in front of the property. It takes me two days to realize that I'm not hearing traffic; there is almost no traffic. I'm actually hearing MacLellan's Brook, a spring-fed stream that runs from nearby hills a mile and a half away down into the valley and then through the

Glenora property, where pot stills made in Scotland by the Forsythe company are used to produce the Glen Breton line of whiskeys. The brook is named for the family who first owned the 900 acres of farmland, cattle pasture, and apple orchard where Glenora now sits. The 85-year-old grandson of the original owner still lives near the property.

As we set out from Glenora to explore the rest of Cape Breton Island, I begin to think that the 85-year-old MacLellan is onto something. Perhaps not in February, when 10 feet of snow may block his driveway, but in the warm months, Cape Breton is fetching. That's particularly true along the Cabot Trail, a 185-mile stretch of environmental perfectness that's lined with hiking trails and impossibly scenic cliffs overlooking the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Driving along the trail, we happen upon a female moose feeding by the side of the road. After getting out to take some blurry snapshots — this cameraman was afraid of getting too close — we make a U-turn and head back, at which point a male moose crosses the road directly in front of our car. Fact: A male moose always has the right of way.

So, moose, yes. A plethora of fine restaurants and a chatty populace, no. But if Cape Breton's restaurants tend to offer too many buffalo wings — Glenora's main dining room, with its whiskey-laced entrées, is an exception — you can always cook mussels.

After some effort, I find a fish market — actually, it's just a shack — on a pier at the end of a dusty road off the main drag in the town of Inverness. There, I buy a couple dozen of the Best. Mussels. Ever. They are our dinner on our final night on Cape Breton, enjoyed from our chalet's deck. The meal is washed down with a 2006 Côte de Bras d'Or Cayuga, a white wine, from the nearby Jost winery, which supplies Glenora with the ice-wine casks for its ice-wine whiskey.

With MacLellan's Brook babbling off in the distance, I think back to my conversation with Campbell. Mussels and a bottle of vaguely French white wine consumed from the deck of a chalet certainly does not a Scottish vacation make. No, this is uniquely Nova Scotia, uniquely Cape Breton Island. With dinner finished, and with the sun setting and fog rolling in, we toast to the trip. The beverage of choice? Some good, proud Canadian whiskey. **AW**

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