

TO THE WINE (AND SPIRITS, AND BEER) SHOW WE WILL GO

A day at the 2014 Grande dégustation de Montréal

Friday & Saturday, Nov. 7-8, 2014

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Early afternoon, before the crowds, at the 2014 Grande dégustation de Montréal

When you go a wine-and-spirits show, you have to have a method, a plan of attack. [La grande dégustation de Montréal](#) is one such show: two afternoons and evenings, over 1,500 things to taste (and even some beer) and 170 producers to meet. There's no way you're going to get to everything, so you have to be choosy.

You can take the easy route, be led by the hand by the [SAQ](#) and focus on the promotion-du-jour: this year, the wines of South Africa. You can concentrate on a favorite varietal: Riesling, say, or Syrah. You can get nationalistic and stick to one country: France, Italy, USA. Or you can do what I and probably many others do and approach the salon as you would a meal: in the usual order from light to heavy.

By light, I don't mean just some easily approachable wines like young Italian Pinot grigio. And by heavy I don't mean fruit bombs of overripe Napa Cabernet sauvignon. I mean you should chart your progress of tastings as you would an evening of fine dining: Start with champagne, move through to the most appropriate whites, then the right reds, and end with some good vintage port, or for serious drinkers, the best aged rum or single-malt whisky you can find (I've long given up its trendy corollary, cigars, and besides, you can't smoke at the salon).

And remember: Don't be shy to strike up a conversation with the person serving you, and don't forget to bring along a friend or two to partake in the pleasure – very important.

I did all of that at this year's Grande dégustation, which ran this past Friday and Saturday at Place Bonaventure. Prices were 50 per cent higher than last year – each coupon for tastings ran \$1.50, versus \$1 in 2013 – so the public was forced to be a bit more choosy than usual. But there were plenty of good choices.

First the **champagnes**: I went to the three stands serving it: [Bollinger](#), Ayala and Devaux. My favourite: **Bollinger's La grande cuvée 2004**, a very good year, served in the maison's own glass (you have to ask and say please). This vintage had all the toastiness, fine bubbles and



2004 was a very good year

lingering finish I love in a good champagne. Nine coupons (\$13.50) per serving was a bit steep for my friends, so they passed, but considering the bottle retails for \$158.75 locally I didn't think that was asking too much – and it's actually more expensive in France, the Bollinger representative told us. For bubbly, my friends preferred ordering something younger and less expensive: a Spanish cava and an Italian rosé.

Next, it was on to some **quality whites**. I did some one-stop shopping at the [**Val de Loire**](#) stand, where a very engaged presenter gave me and a wine-student colleague a crash course in the geography and typicity of **Chenin blanc**, an underappreciated varietal that's also big in South Africa. We got tastings of the grape's expression in young wines (mostly 2012 and 2013) from Saumur, Savennières, Chinon, Anjou and Vouvray, and the range of flavours, from biting to mouth-coating, was a revelation to me – certainly worth exploring this grape further. (Also worth a detour at an adjacent stand was [**Joseph Mellot**](#)'s delicious **2012 Sancerre Cuvée 500 ans**, celebrating the winery's 500 anniversary.)



Some of the Montresor Amarones at the show

2012, a 2011 and finally a 2003 bottled under the **Capitol della Crosara** label that was just so luxurious I wanted it to go on forever; at over \$130 a bottle, it's not something I'll taste every day, and in any

Next up, the reds.

[**Montresor**](#) was an Italian producer I'd been curious about ever since a guest brought a distinctive (frosted) bottle of their flagship **Amarone della Valpolicella** over for a party. With a very enthusiastic rep leading the way, I drank my way up from an excellent ripasso to three of their Amarones: a

case it's not listed at the SAQ. In varying degrees, these wines had the heft and high alcohol (15%) one looks for in a good Amarone, a classic blend of mostly Corvina and Rondinella grapes from the Veneto that go through a special drying process to concentrate the sugars and flavours before pressing.

Now I was ready for the hard stuff. But first, a bit of a surprise (every show should have one). My friends dragged me over to the [**Gonzalez-Byass**](#) stand to get a taste of their 30-year-old Spanish **sherry** called **Noé**. It came out of the bottle looking like as viscous and molasses-brown as balsamic vinegar, but had a lightness and acidity on the palate that belied its age and character – superb. We bypassed the ever-reliable [**Ramos Pinto**](#) port stand, where the 30-year-old tawny is always an awesome tipple, and headed to the far northeast corner of the hall: whisky territory.



Martha Harrison, of Montreal agency Connexion Oenophilia, serves up some Springbank

I wasn't interested in the best-known corporate heavyweight **single-malts** – Balvenie, Glenmorangie, Glenlivit, Macallan and the like. No, I wanted the fierce independents, especially the one at booth M34, the very last in the row: [**Springbank**](#). I've been hooked on Springbank's **10-year-old** for well over a decade-and-a-half now, ever since my nephew turned me on to it. I'd been drinking single-malt Scotch since my early days as a salaried journalist (thank you, paycheque!). It started one night after supper when a close friend in the Gatineau brought out a three-sided green bottle from his bar and said: “Have you ever had this?” It was, of course, Glenfiddich, and there was no looking back. I keep a bottle of Lagavulin 16-year-old handy (it's great sprinkled on vanilla ice cream)

and also a bottle of 10-year-old Talisker. But Springbank's 10 has it all, I feel: the perfect balance of salt (the tang of the Atlantic Ocean), sugar (from the malt) and smoke (that heavenly peat), as well as the virtue of being all made in one place, from malt to bottle.

At the salon, I got the lowdown on Springbank first from its Montreal agent, Martha Harrison (who's Irish) of [Connexion Oenophilia](#). Then I went in depth with Melanie Stanger, the distillery's sales and marketing agent, a Scot who lives and works in Campbeltown, where the whisky is made, way out on the southern tip of Kintyre in western Scotland. In the early 20th century, Campbeltown was a boom town of



The 10: It has it all



Springbank sales rep Melanie Stanger pours the 10-year-old single malt

the whisky trade, with close to 30 distilleries and a thriving export business; Prohibition in the U.S. eventually put a stop to that. Today there are only three distilleries left: Springbank, its fraternal relation Glengyle (which makes Kilkerran single-malt), and Glen Scotia. Unlike all but one other single-malt distillery in Scotland (Kilchoman; more on that

later), Springbank is totally vertically integrated: Not only does it floor-malt its own barley, it does everything else, too: mill, mash, ferment, distill, blend, cask (bourbon and sherry) and bottle. It's also family-owned and run by folks who trace their lineage right back to the distillery's founder, Archibald Mitchell, in 1828 – the oldest of its type in Scotland.

Part of the appeal of Springbank for me, I think, is that for a few years back it stopped being available at the SAQ (something to do with labelling issues, Harrison told me) and I had to seek it out when I travelled. I've brought bottles back from Ottawa, Calgary, New York, Washington, Cambridge in England, Gretna Green in Scotland, and Vienna (hello, [Potstill](#), the loveliest little whisky shop in Austria).

Buying abroad was easier on my wallet, too; the 10-year-old now runs you \$92.50 at the SAQ, which to me is outrageous; in the U.S. it's only about \$60, about what I paid at the SAQ a decade ago. One friend who's from France but is often in the U.S. on business remembered my raves about Springbank and lugged a bottle in his luggage through three airports to give it to me as a present after supper; I still have it. The 10-year-old is my go-to whisky, but I've also had bottles of the distillery's other offerings: 12- and 15-year-old Springbanks, the heavily peated Longrow (including its now-discontinued variety called

CV), a triple-distilled Hazelburn 8-year-old, a 100-proof 10-year-old, and, in 2003, a special 175th anniversary bottle of 12-year-old that I made to last as long as I could.



Springbank cask-strength: powerful stuff

The [Springbank 10](#), 12 (\$126 at the SAQ) and 15 (\$147), as well as a Hazelburn 12-year-old (\$126) and a Longrow (\$76), were all available to sample at La grande dégustation, but so was another product I'd never tried: a 12-year-old Springbank (\$102) that was bottled at cask strength – that is, undiluted, just over 50% alcohol versus the usual 46%. I've had stronger

cask-strength whiskys before, right up to just under 60% (that would be Aberlour's A'bunadh, in a squat bottle), and if I've learned one thing, it's that they're not for the foolish or faint-hearted. You'll singe your nostrils if you're not careful, so powerful are the fumes. Purists

love cask-strength because it puts them in control of how strong they want their dram: Just adding a few drops of water can change everything. I tried it with my friends at the salon (there was a vial of real Scottish spring water handy, with an eye-dropper to administer the desired dose), and the purists were right: This is a fun way to imbibe, kind of like a controlled experiment in boozing.

Then we looked across to the next table, to a small distillery called [Kilchoman](#). Like Springbank, it's represented here by the Oenophilia agency, and again, it's proudly independent and totally vertically integrated, from barley to bottle. But unlike its counterpart, Kilchoman is a young company – very young. It's been in business on Islay for less than a decade, founded in 2005, and began bottling only in 2009. I was curious to sample its wares for several reasons. 1) Though the whiskys are still toddlers (only three-to-five years old in bottle), they're also high-quality and high-priced (\$94 to \$175). 2) The Englishman who founded and runs the company, Anthony Wills, was right there at the booth to talk about his pride and joy (and looked the part in pants made from the Gunn clan tartan of his Scottish wife). And 3) There was a cask-strength to try – at a whopping 59.2%!



Kilchoman founder Anthony Wills makes a point

Wills was a rush of words: "We wanted to go to the top-end of the market, the connoisseurs and enthusiasts," he said, remembering how he started out. "And what we've done is create a small boutique farm and artisanal distillery, with limited production of about 150,000 litres, to achieve that." (By contrast, a mega-distiller like Glenfiddich produces 10 million litres a year, most of it destined for blends, which still drive the vast bulk of the Scotch industry. Ardbeg, a well-known

Islay distillery, produces about 400,000 litres – about where Kilchoman would like to be in a few years.) “It was a gamble,” Wills said. “We started with a million (British) pounds, and half of that was my own money. It’s never easy. We nearly went bust three or four times. You always need more money, and the more we get (from investors), the more my own shareholding diminishes. It’s hugely challenging, but we’re very happy to be in the profitable position we’re in now.”



Kilchoman’s “small batch” – only 1,000 bottles

Wills jumped up to fetch his bottles for a private tasting, just him and me. This was the end of my day at the salon, so needless to say I was no longer in spitting-and-dunking mode; none of this would go to waste. There were four Kilchomans on parade: Machir Bay, the flagship whisky, matured in older casks; 100% Islay, lighter and less peaty; Loch Gorm, matured in all-sherry casks; and a limited-edition (only 1,000 bottles) Small Batch Release, bottled at full cask-strength. I can’t say I was

tempted to abandon Springbank for the new kid on the block, but these whiskys were certainly impressive – all the more so for tasting so developed at so young an age. Of the four, I liked the Loch Gorm the best: a nice balance of sweet and smoke. I thought the Small Batch would blow my brain away, but it was smoother and less explosive than I expected. It got even better when I added a capful of Evian – true, another nation’s water, but sometimes you have to improvise.

Kind of fitting, actually: My afternoon of dégustation had begun with champagne and now was ending with some H₂O from the French Alps – some kind of symmetry there, maybe even a plan. Glad I had one.