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Festive spirit: how a master distiller created a new whisky that's 'Christmas in a glass'

With its notes of almonds, orange peel and spice, the whisky created for M&S by Julieann Fernandez is perfect as a cocktail base, nightcap or punchy addition to mulled wine

by Suzy Pope

Master blender Julieann Fernandez has captured the Christmas spirit. Photograph: Robert Ormerod/The Guardian

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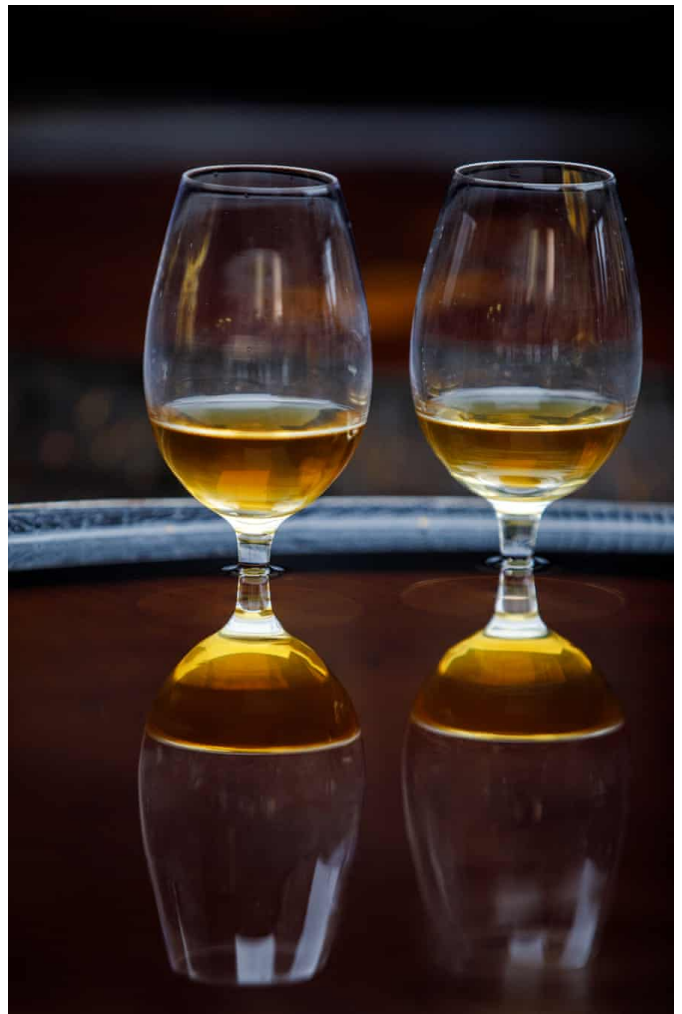
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Between the heather-bruised hills and sweeping glens of Scotland's western countryside sits a traditional distillery where Julieann Fernandez is distilling and blending away with the precision of a forensic scientist.

She is creating a distinctive whisky for M&S, part of a new range of spirits specially crafted for Christmas. With its festive character profile, the whisky begs to be cracked open on the big day – as a cocktail base, nightcap or punchy addition to mulled wine.

The spirit is steeped in Scottish whisky heritage – distilled amid the rugged terrain of Scotland in a building that's been part of the whisky trade since the 18th century. Each step in the whisky's distillation and blending process has been carefully considered to enhance the sweet and spicy flavour profile. And if whisky's not your thing, the Spirit of M&S range includes sloe gin, blood orange and cranberry vodka and Madagascan vanilla rum spirit drink to tempt you.



Casks are all-important to the flavour – the grain whisky matures in red wine casks while the malt uses American oak

Fernandez, the master blender at the distillery, started her career in analytic chemistry, working with whisky samples in a laboratory. She built up her knowledge of aromas as part of a sensory panel, so her nose is second to none.

"My role involves bringing together different malts and grains [whiskies] to create blends packed full of flavour," she says. "I've spent a lot of time at malt and grain distilleries, which is important in understanding exactly how whisky is made and where a lot of the flavours come from."



Julieann Fernandez

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Spirit of M&S whisky is that the grain whisky in the blend is left to mature in red wine casks, hand-sourced by Fernandez herself. "The red wine casks really do contribute a lot," she says. "They impart wonderful flavours of ripe plums, black cherries, and a gentle spice." The European wood in the casks adds a subtle, spicier note to the whisky, like a plum pudding, and is what gives the liquid its alluring mahogany hue.

Meanwhile, the blend's malt whisky is matured in American oak casks and adds typical Highland and Speyside notes for an overall sweet and smooth character. Fernandez says: "The partnership of the red-wine matured grain with the malts gives a blend that is rich and fruity with notes of almonds, candied orange peel and a delicate sprinkle of cinnamon."

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M&S sloe gin, Madagascan vanilla rum spirit drink, blood orange and cranberry vodka

This set of flavours is what makes the whisky feel festive. And as it's all about the feeling of Christmas, the barley, mostly sourced from Scotland, is unpeated to keep the drink sweet rather than smoky. Breathing in the aroma before you take a sip, you get classic Speyside notes but with an undeniable spicy finish.

The first sip is smooth and sweet, but the hint of spice lingers, with a warming and long finish on the palate. M&S's drinks guru, Jenny Rea, who personally develops spirits with makers, continuing M&S's tradition of working in partnership with producers, calls it "Christmas in a glass" with hints of orange peel, ripe plums and gentle spice.

Fernandez agrees: "The flavours and spice present in the whisky are almost reminiscent of Christmas cake, which makes it a perfect winter drink." Indeed, it blends perfectly with the cinnamon and cloves of a mulled wine, and its spicy character transforms an Old Fashioned into a wintry cocktail for the fireside.

The unique flavour profile also makes it one for sipping neat at the end of a big Christmas lunch. Or save it for a last-minute gift for the whisky drinker of the family – they won't be disappointed.

This is not just whisky ...

... this is Spirit of M&S whisky, made with pride by Fernandez and M&S. Find it at your local M&S foodhall.

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