Features: An evening with Johnnie Walker Blue Label’s latest Ghost and Rare bottling

15 Dec | Written By Ebel Tang

Source: Diageo

In October, blended Scotch whisky brand Johnnie Walker unveiled the fourth release in its Blue Label’s Ghost and Rare line of limited edition bottlings. Dubbed Johnnie Walker Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich, this blend places the long-shuttered Speyside distillery’s malt whisky at the forefront.

However, this particular expression would arrive on Singapore’s shores only in early December. To mark its release, Johnnie Walker held a tasting and degustation dinner at newly-opened fine dining joint Caviar in Palais Renaissance. In-person events are starting to make a return and I couldn’t be happier to attend.

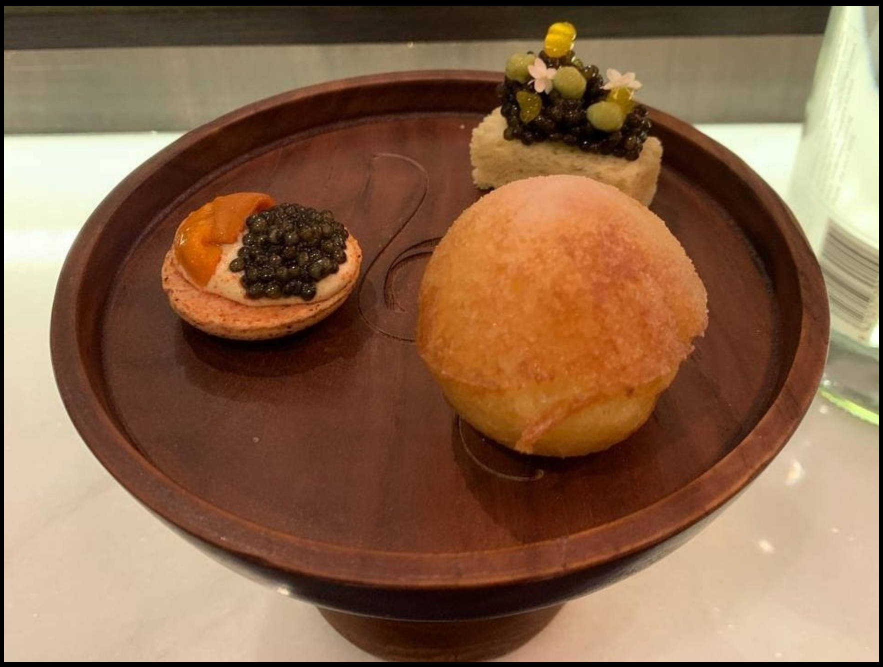
Plus, it wasn’t everyday that I got to see the ‘Cocktail Chic’ dress code being invoked. Here’s what went down after I got suited up.

On arrival

Caviar is conveniently located next to the escalators at B1 in Palais Renaissance, so there’s no need to look around the shopping mall’s nooks and crannies. It’s an intimate space through and through, with three sections in total: a chef’s table, main dining area, and private dining room.

Couple this with the current capacity restrictions for F&B establishments in Singapore and it meant a short list of invitees (20 maximum, by my count). I was assigned a seat at the chef’s table and soon came a glass of Johnnie Walker Blue Label as a welcome drink, because what else would be appropriate this evening?

However, the Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich would have to wait.



Before we stacked the Johnnie Walker Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich up against the regular ol' Blue label bottling, the first course was served to get our palate going. Aptly called 'Snacks', the trio of small bites you see consist of the following:

1. Caviar Ball (bottom right): Deep fried pastry shell filled with creme fraiche and Polanco Oscietra Grand Reserve caviar
2. Brioche Toast (top right): Brioche toast topped with Royal Oscietra caviar and egg yolk
3. Tomato Macaron (left): Macaron half topped with uni and Sturia Oscietra caviar

There was no need for the blinis, egg whites, egg yolks, and chives that traditionally accompany caviar. The youthful kitchen crew's creativity when crafting the menu was obvious from the very first course, which would go on to set the tone for the rest of the evening.

However, the event's focus was the whisky, which is exactly where we turned our attention to before the bread course was served.

Comparing two Blue Label expressions

EXPERIENCE THE DEPTH OF THE RAREST WHISKIES WITH JOHNNIE WALKER BLUE LABEL AND JOHNNIE WALKER BLUE LABEL: GHOST AND RARE PITTYVAICH.
Blue Label
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INTRODUCING JOHNNIE WALKER BLUE LABEL: GHOST AND RARE PITTYVAICH, THE LATEST EDITION IN THE SERIES. DRAWING ON RARE AND IRREPLACEABLE CASKS FROM THE LEGENDARY SPEYSIDE "GHOST" DISTILLERY OF PITTYVAICH, THIS HIDDEN TREASURE OF THE WHISKY WORLD CLOSED ITS DOORS IN 1993 AFTER ONLY 19 YEARS.
PRESENTING JOHNNIE WALKER BLUE LABEL: A DRINK OF UNRIVALLED DEPTH, WITH COMPLEXITY AND FLAVOURS TO APPRECIATE. ONLY ONE IN EVERY TEN THOUSAND CASKS HAS THE ELUSIVE QUALITY, CHARACTER AND FLAVOUR TO PRODUCE THIS EXQUISITE COMBINATION OF SCOTLAND'S RAREST AND MOST EXCEPTIONAL WHISKIES.
Please Drink Responsibly.

Principal Trainer of The Beverage Clique, Sean Ou, would be guiding attendees through this section. An abbreviated history of the Johnnie Walker brand was given before diving into a comparison between the two expressions. We started with the Blue Label first as the baseline whisky before tasting the Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich.

On the surface, their differences are minor. Johnnie Walker Blue Label's ABV is 40% whereas the Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich clocks an ABV of 43.8%. Both are chill-filtered and have caramel colour added. However, look under the hood and you'll find that Johnnie Walker is keen to differentiate these two expressions.

You need only look at the official tasting notes of the two expressions to find out.

Johnnie Walker Blue Label

Nose: Wonderfully mellow and rounded. Replete with dry smokiness artfully mixed with the sweetness of raisins.

Palate: A velvety combination of vanilla, honey, and rose petals. Then, it broadens out to include a zesty orange flavour with notes of hazelnut, sherry, and dark chocolate.

Finish: Rich and luxuriously long. It showcases Johnnie Walker's trademark smokiness in the most sophisticated way.

Johnnie Walker Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich

Nose: Sweet, fruit notes of fresh apple gather with the autumnal flavours of Pittyvaich. There are also aromas of dark fruit and berries.

Palate: Gentle butterscotch, stewing orchard fruits, and a dash of cinnamon

Finish: Beautifully balanced with the delicate subtle sweetness of honeycomb and soft wood

Although Johnnie Walker is famously opaque when it comes to the component whiskies of its expressions, they do give a few clues away here and there. For the regular Blue Label bottling, there's whisky from the Clynelish, Cardhu, Benrinnes, and Caol Ila distilleries in there, amongst other distilleries in Diageo's portfolio.

The Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich has different recipe that champions Pittyvaich's malt whisky. There's also grain whisky from fellow ghost distilleries Port Dundas and Carsebridge. Johnnie Walker reveals that malt whisky from the Mannochmore, Auchroisk, Cragganmore, Strathmill, and Royal Lochnagar distilleries are used too.

On paper, this leads to two very different blended Scotch whiskies. However, here's my set of personal tasting notes after going back and forth between them.

Johnnie Walker Blue Label

On the nose, it's very gentle due to the relatively low ABV, with heather honey and spices present. On the palate, it's waxy with a touch of smoke. The sweetness really comes through after you've had a bite of food. The finish is short, with whispers of smoke.

Johnnie Walker Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich

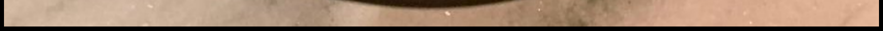
On the nose, there's the sweetness of fresh fruits and a touch of fresh-cut grass. The palate is as waxy as the regular Blue Label, but more full-bodied. There's a touch of smoke here again and subtle wood notes. Waxiness lingers in the finish. It's definitely more complex than the Blue Label, given the different component whiskies here.

Then there were ten (more courses)

The bread course wasn't listed on the menu but it was no afterthought either. The braided bun was baked using beef tallow instead of butter and the other bread roll was deceptively good as well. Ditto for the butter, which I swear had foie gras folded in. However, the course that followed really stole the show.

Dubbed Botan Ebi, it's clear what the hero ingredient of this course is. The sweetness of the botan ebi paired well with the buttermilk sauce, which was probably spiked with lemongrass and galangal. The brininess and creaminess of the caviar added depth. This could easily make its way into a Thai fine dining joint.

This was the first surprise course of the evening, although it wasn't much of a surprise since it's listed in the menu (as Burrata, no less). It was a fun dish to dig into though, requiring folks to stir the slivers of green grapes and dollop of uni into the burrata cheese. This worked well with the regular Blue Label bottling.



The name Potato & Egg did not do justice to this luxurious bowl of whipped potato. The silky smooth mash had Iberico lardons folded in before being topped with a chicken egg yolk and Polanco Siberian Reserve caviar. I just wish that it was topped with a runny duck egg yolk instead.

The grilled stalk of fermented leek and rich sauce saved the halibut fillet here, which was under-seasoned and slightly overcooked. The salmon roe provided bursts of much-needed salt and maritime flavours too. It didn’t work well with either Blue Label bottling but the next course would put the meal back on track.

Mother of pearl spoon meets Kaluga Queen caviar. It’s paired with the Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich bottling and naturally, they work well together. The caviar’s briny flavour and creamy texture harmonise well with the Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich’s sweetness and full-bodied palate.

This Bressan pigeon course would be the final savoury item before we moved onto a trio of dessert courses. The doneness for the pigeon breast was perfect, although I wish that the celeriac was pickled or treated in some form. The pigeon leg topped with Superior Oscietra caviar served as a perfect final bite.

Told you the kitchen crew was young

I won't be walking through the three dessert courses as they did not pair well with the two Blue Label bottlings, although they would've been perfect with champagne. In this instance, they served as excellent palate cleansers and were a great way to close the meal.

As the meal wound down and with more opportunities to taste both Blue Label bottlings, I understand why Johnnie Walker's premium expression is polarising. The regular Blue Label bottling is a fantastic whisky with friends or family in a casual setting, especially with yakitori or Cantonese-style roast meats.

Its low ABV and component whiskies' age means that it goes down easily and pairs well with both sweet and savoury items. Ditto for whatever mixers you throw at it. However, the mild flavour profile at this price ($200 at least) might be a pill too bitter for many whisky lovers to swallow, especially if it works best for casual drinking and light bites.

Closing thoughts

Source: Diageo

Johnnie Walker Blue Label Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich is Dr Jim Beveridge's final Blue Label bottling before he passes the Master Blender reins to Emma Walker, so this expressions bears added significance. It's immediately available for $558 a bottle at 1855 The Bottle Shop and each one individually numbered.

With regards to the dinner degustation at Caviar, it'll set you back $328 per person. However, the sequence of the courses will be different, with the team divulging that dishes were swapped around to accommodate the two whiskies. Furthermore, the Kaluga Queen caviar was picked specifically to go with the Ghost and Rare Pittyvaich bottling.

It's heartwarming to see in-person events returning in Singapore, even though it might not be the end of the 2-pax, 5-pax, and 8-pax carousel for F&B establishments yet.

Next up for Johnnie Walker would be its usual set of Chinese New Year bottlings come February. Apart from that, the Moet Hennessy Diageo team weren't willing to budge when it came to the brand's grand plans for 2022.

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