

WHISKY-LOVERS-ENCYCLOPEDIAE

THE PPM OF PEATED WHISKY: A MISLEADING NUMBER ?

Full version

In the world of peated whisky, few figures are highlighted as often as phenol levels expressed in **ppm**. On technical sheets, in marketing brochures, or in distillery communications, this number is supposed to indicate the peaty intensity of a whisky. The higher the number, the peated the whisky is assumed to be.

The equation seems simple. But it is largely misleading.

In most cases, the ppm values announced by distilleries **do not correspond to the whisky we taste**. They correspond to the phenol content of the malt, measured after the barley has been dried over peat. In other words, it is an indicator of the **raw material**, not of the final product.

Yet between this malt and the whisky that is bottled, many transformations occur. Mashing, fermentation, distillation, and maturation profoundly alter the chemical composition of the spirit.

The phenolic compounds responsible for smoky and medicinal aromas often decrease significantly. In some cases, the final concentration may be **two to three times lower** than that of the original malt.

The result? Whiskies advertised at **50 ppm** may contain much less in the glass.

This does not mean that distilleries are trying to mislead anyone. This way of communicating has simply become an **industry habit**, **probably marketing-driven**. However, at a time when enthusiasts are increasingly interested in the technical details of production, this practice appears more **anachronistic**.

How can two peated whiskies be seriously compared if the published figures **do not refer to the final product**?

How can a phenol level be connected to sensory perception if the measurement does not correspond to the whisky being tasted?

One distillery has nevertheless chosen to change the rules of the game. **Torabhaig Distillery** now publishes **two distinct figures**: the phenol level of the spirit and that of the final whisky. A simple decision, but one with significant implications. It finally allows us to understand how phenolic intensity evolves throughout the production process.

This approach raises a simple question for the entire industry: **Why not do the same?**

The analytical tools have existed for a long time. Distillery laboratories are perfectly capable of measuring the phenolic concentration of a bottled whisky. Publishing this information would therefore represent neither a technical difficulty nor the exposure of any industrial secret.

It would simply be **a step toward greater transparency**.

Because whisky today is one of the most analyzed, discussed, and studied spirits in the world. Enthusiasts want to understand fermentations, yeasts, distillation cuts, and maturation warehouses. They are interested in **chemistry as much as tradition**.

In this context, continuing to communicate only the phenol level of the malt means maintaining **an incomplete indicator at the heart of technical discourse**.

For the **Whisky Lovers Encyclopaediae**, it now seems time to **update this practice**.

Publishing the phenol level of the final whisky would in no way diminish the magic of the spirit. On the contrary, it would allow a better understanding of how peat **survives, or transforms**, **throughout the production process and the years spent in cask**.

After all, the figure that truly matters is not the one for the malt entering the distillery.

It is the one for the whisky that ends up in the glass.

Dr Patoche

