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## ExecutiveStyle

### Bladnoch is back: David Prior releases three new expressions of 'Australian' Scotch whisky

 Michael Harry | Dec 22 2016



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-  An opera singer is in full voice in the leafy back garden of David Prior's Toorak estate, a 1920s mansion that is part *The Great Gatsby*, part *The Wolf of Wall Street*.
  -  Halfway through aria *Nessun Dorma*, the backing track bursts into skittering techno beats, and the singer grabs a slug of whisky in an

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etched crystal glass. This is the official relaunch of Bladnoch: a new, 200-year-old, Australian-owned Scotch whisky brand. Confused?

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"You can take something old but you can still reinvent it," Prior tells *Executive Style* after the party. "The look and even the taste of Bladnoch is fresh and new."



An opera singer launches the three new expressions at Prior's home. Photo: Hugh Davies

In a daring move, the Melbourne-based entrepreneur purchased the historic Scottish distillery last year, six years after any liquid had been produced at the Lowlands site. Included in the deal was a significant store of aged single malt stock, which has now been bottled for the first time in three different expressions.

### **Old meets new**

The new drams include the no age statement Samsara [\$149], the 15-year-old Adela [\$179] and the 25-year-old Talia [\$350]. "We have really very limited stock of all of them ... literally there is 100 cases of the 25-year-old to last us for the year," says Prior. "We haven't made liquid since '08 or '09, so the youngest whisky in [the Samsara] is going to be at least eight years old."



*“People know I’m mad. It’s not a case of ‘if.’”*

David Prior

To celebrate next year's 200th anniversary, Bladnoch will also release 200 individually numbered 'Bicentenary' bottles of 29-year-old Scotch from the reserves.

In May, the distillery will recommence production of the new liquid, which can't be sold as Scotch whisky until at least three years later. Fans will have to rely on the distillery's younger-pitched Pure Scot blend or get their hands on one of these limited releases before they're all gone.

### **Master mind**

Despite using aged stocks, this is a brand new taste for Bladnoch created by master distiller Ian MacMillan, who has 40 years experience in the industry. "He has recasked it, he's finished it, he's taken certain batches together: he's done all of that to give you a very unique expression of Bladnoch," says Prior.

MacMillan is a crucial hire in the venture, which has 20 employees in multiple countries, including former head of the Scotch Whisky Association, Gavin Hewitt, who is on board as a consultant.





"Ian was working [at Burn Stewart, makers of single malts such as Bunnahabhain and Deanston], which had been bought out by a big South African conglomerate [the Distell Group] ... we chatted, hit it off, I liked him straight away, and thought he had great enthusiasm. He's a risk taker, so we employed him."

### **Lowland fling**

Prior, 46, makes the trip from Toorak to the Scottish Lowlands three times a year, an arduous but necessary journey. "Just to get to Glasgow takes 25 hours, then we're another three hours south, so it's a couple of days before you do anything," he says.

Is it madness? "You just need to ask my wife [Sallie], people *know* I'm mad. It's not a case of 'if'. The geographical thing is another layer of complexity that I honestly didn't factor in. I don't think that way, I think more about opportunities rather than issues. It's definitely a challenge, but it's not an overwhelming or an insurmountable challenge by any means."





The Bladnoch distillery in the Lowlands of Scotland. Photo: Supplied

Prior made much of his fortune with organic yoghurt brand five:am, which he sold for \$80 million in 2014. This was the year he first visited Bladnoch, a picture-perfect town in south-west Scotland, which happened to have a distillery for sale.

### Historic dram

Bladnoch began making whisky in 1817, seven years before production was even legal in Scotland. There's huge responsibility owning such a significant business with 10 warehouses on 55 acres. The previous owners "were literally printing labels off a printer in the office and sticking them on bottles, so it was a very, very different business," says Prior.

Within the walls of the old distillery, the businessman has built a state-of-the-art facility with a 1.5 million litre capacity yielding around three million bottles per annum.



There are extremely limited stocks of the 25-year-old Talia. Photo: Supplied

This is the first Scottish distillery with an Australian owner and one of just a handful not owned by a multinational such as Diageo, Pernod Ricard or Suntory.

"The recommencement of the distilling operation is incredibly important – not just from the point of view of a long term, sustainable single malt brand, but for bringing Lowland single malt back into the whisky market," Prior says. "It's in many ways a rebirth of a whole category within Scotch, which is incredibly exciting."