

Interview Philippe Starck

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INSIDE the OUTSIDER

There is a new voice in the world of Scotch whisky, a stranger with design pedigree and a bold vision who is unbridled by convention — but is the world ready?





Ducking in from the heat of a Miami night, down a gritty corridor and into a freight elevator I am disgorged into a room lit entirely by candles. The temperature is higher here than outside. Outside had been all flamingos, baby pinks, pale blues, and neon; inside there is hushed reverence. The candles reveal a single long table. The view flickers between the medieval and the post-apocalyptic as one's eyes adjust — part of the ceiling has collapsed over here, graffiti on the walls over there. Apparently this was once a famous department store, which closed in the 1990s and has been opened exclusively for this event. As wordless, beautiful men in black kilts waft around with delicate snacks on silver trays, there is a sense that this will not be any normal whisky event.

Then in walks Philippe Starck.

Once a year, the wonderful, brash, pastel insanity of Miami is tempered by the art crowd who descend for the annual Art Basel and Design Miami exhibitions. Here, Starck is being announced as Mortlach's first-ever

creative director. Even those who do not know his name will know the products he has designed, or the furniture, or the buildings. From the Juicy Salif juicer for Alessi, to the Louis Ghost Chair, to Tokyo's Asahi Beer Hall, Starck is a big deal. But so is Mortlach, the 'beast of Dufftown'.

The position of creative director is well established in the fields of advertising and fashion but totally novel in whisky. With Starck's role covering liquid, bottling, and packaging, one may expect some level of whisky expertise.

"To be a whisky expert you need to have lived five centuries," the urbane 75-year-old Frenchman says. "I am not a whisky expert, I am not an architect, I am not an interior designer, I am not an engineer. I am a professional dreamer. For everything I see around me I always think the idea is good, the bones are good, but the flesh is not good. I always try to find the soul of the thing. For Mortlach it was the same. I am not a specialist, but I do love whisky. My role is to find the spirit of the whisky without the useless things around it."



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It is a frank comment, perhaps abrasive to the ears of Mortlach loyalists, but it is delivered with intensity. He means it, especially the part about finding the soul. He talks disarmingly and at length about Mortlach's soul. For Starck, this is Dr Alexander Cowie, the pioneering Mortlach owner who took over the distillery from his father in 1896. It was Cowie who created the distillery's 2.81 times distillation process. Unique to Mortlach, it creates the thick, rich, bold spirit character that the Speyside producer is famed for.

"Cowie brought intelligence to whisky; before him it was instinct. I myself am intuitive, but I love intelligence. Cowie reset people's expectations of what a whisky was, what it could be. You could say this was ambitious — it was. You could say it was pretentious, maybe. To me, Cowie was on a personal search for greatness. It was not luck."

Starck is not without humility. He recognises the gamble of inviting an outsider into the small world of whisky; he would not be comfortable the other way around. "If a guy arrived and told me that I am a master of making cocktails and now I wish to show you how to design chairs... I would say, 'That's nice but go back home.'"

But the team at Mortlach did not show him the door, and he remembers that the first meeting in 2021 with Dr Jim Beveridge (Diageo's legendary now-retired master blender) went very well, though Starck did surprise Dr Jim by creating a blend of his own there and then. "This could have been a suicide, but because of the quality of this person it was not." Dr Jim gave his approval and the partnership began.

Starck feels the process was positive throughout, describing the Mortlach team as his friends, and was delighted that his ideas were listened to. This was not a quick process, though; it was given time to mature with thousands of sample bottles being sent to Starck over two years as he decided on the



Opening pages:

Inside the Miami venue where the Mortlach x Starck partnership was officially launched; Philippe Starck is a respected French designer whose work ranges from furniture to industrial architecture.

These pages, clockwise from bottom left:

Creating the bottle; Staff stand ready with drinks at the Mortlach x Starck launch event, which took place in Miami; Philippe Starck; Cocktails are served at the launch event.





style of whisky he wanted, with much conversation in between. The process reminded him of perfume making, to which he has also turned his hand, taking years to co-create each fragrance.

Starck is forthright in his feelings of what is missing from whisky: "Honesty. More honesty and less marketing, less decor, less opulence. Whisky has been driven to opulence — people with the big car and the cigar. Whisky is not that for me. I want to drink it on the beach with big waves and the wind in my hair. It is the drink of adventure."

Of course, with such a dramatic intervention in the brand, product, and packaging, some drinkers will have strong opinions. Will existing lovers of Mortlach recognise their beloved brand and does this matter to Starck?

"My turn to be ambitious and pretentious," he says with a boyish

smile. "Intelligent and curious people will understand the difference. If people do not, we do not care."

Despite Starck's self-assurance he is the first to state that people should not expect his releases to be dramatically different from the distillery's current fare. "We do not want to create a revolution. This is an evolution." He reflects on his process, "I have thought very carefully about the meaning of this. The meaning of the sound, or the curve, and of the light. The meaning of the smell and the material. This is always my process."

The first releases from the collaboration are certainly distinct (sadly details cannot be shared just yet). They include something that Mortlach has never released before. Starck wanted to do this because it was so bold; it took months for the Mortlach

team to agree to his wish. While the whisky may be, in Starck's words, evolutionary, the bottle and packaging are out of this world. There is barely a straight edge in sight, and the bottles ebb and flow and drip with a kind of organic, alien form.

Diageo, the owner of Mortlach, felt this brand was especially suitable for such a unique partnership. It sees Mortlach standing for "bold reinvention" which was felt to fit extremely well with Starck's work and process. It enables them to tell the next chapter of the brand, but one contiguous with the story so far: the bold reinvention of Dr Alexander Cowie's era, with the bold reinvention of the present with Starck. The hope is that with the spicy, rich, umami taste profile of Mortlach still present in Starck's releases, it will satisfy existing fans as well as those new to the brand. Diageo's expectation is that with Starck's process fuelled by playfulness, boldness, and fun, the releases will inspire drinkers' imaginations.

It would be easy to approach this collaboration with a cynical mind: a beloved but perhaps overlooked whisky brand tags the name of a famous designer to its bottle to sell more units. But this association runs deeper. Starck's affection for whisky, and especially for the story, liquid, and history of Mortlach, is strikingly authentic. The partnership has been more than two years in the making and is sure to continue for the foreseeable. It is brave for a company such as Diageo to take a respected heritage brand and throw the doors open to anarchic genius and the modern world, but Mortlach was experimental from the start and so there is perhaps no brand better suited to such an experiment.

The first of the Mortlach x Starck releases is expected to be available from late spring 2024. When asked if he thinks they have succeeded in creating something unique, Starck is coy. "I am not the whisky expert," he smirks. "You will have to tell me." □



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