Beware of fakes, whisky fans told after single malt fraud

Simon de Bruxelles

Whisky connoisseurs are being warned to watch out for fakes after investigators found a bottle of 113-year-old Laphroaig purportedly worth thousands of pounds was a fraud.

The sealed bottle, which was of the correct age and design, contained cheap blended whisky made between 2007 and 2009 instead of a single malt produced over a century ago on the Scottish isle of Islay. The value of rare vintage whisky has soared in recent years as Chinese collectors and other investors have poured into the market.

The same investigators also claim to have identified two part-fake sets of bottles of Macallan Fine and Rare, on sale for £500,000 and £250,000.

Andy Simpson, of Rare Whisky 101, said he and his partner David Robertson bought the 1903 Laphroaig from an auction house "75 per cent certain" it was a fake. The bottle had come from Spain. He said: "As soon as the bottle was opened it was apparent it was a nasty cheap blend." The six-month testing process included analysis of the glass used to make the bottle and detailed chemical analysis of its contents.

He said fake whiskies can be divided into three categories — "refills, replicas and relics". "Refills" may be relatively recent but still valuable whiskies such as Macallan selling for around £1,500 a bottle, "replicas" are copies mainly originating in Italy, and "relics" are genuine vintage bottles traded by collectors which can be over 100 years old but which have been refilled and resealed.

The difficulty for collectors is that it can be impossible to spot a fake without opening it, and once the bottle has been opened much of its value is destroyed even if it is genuine.

According to Mr Simpson, around 55,000 bottles of vintage whisky worth at least £12 million will be sold at auction in the UK alone this year.

He said: "This experiment was a chance to try and prove the provenance of a bottle of single malt Scotch which purported to be among the oldest surviving bottles in the world.

"Despite a very convincing aesthetic, our bottle was most certainly a fake. This result goes to show that we're really dealing with some top-class imitations."

Mr Robertson added: "The risk for the market is that we're seeing an increasing number of old, rare archive or antique bottles coming to market, and it's very difficult for the untrained eye to verify authenticity.

"Our Laphroaig 1903 would seem to suggest that there are now some very good quality fakes which have been created to fool unsuspecting collectors and investors into parting with serious money. Our message to whisky fans is buyers beware! Don't take the chance to acquire rare, old, antique-looking whisky unless you can be 100 per cent sure of its provenance."

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