



Johnnie Walker House, Beijing is 'the world's largest embassy for luxury Scotch whisky'. Photo: Paul Liu

WHISKY

House lifts the spirits

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The world's best whisky makers are taking the same route as classic wine producers by trying to break into the lucrative mainland and Hong Kong markets.

Last month whisky brand Johnnie Walker opened its second Johnnie Walker House, billed as an embassy for luxury Scotch whisky, in Beijing. In 2011 it opened Johnnie Walker House in Shanghai – the brand's first location outside Scotland – and it proved so successful that the Beijing property was launched as a response to the demand from Chinese consumers.

It is home to some of the brand's finest whiskies, with some collections that are only available for purchase on the site. Gilbert Ghostine, president of Johnnie Walker parent company Diageo Asia Pacific, says that the Johnnie Walker House in Shanghai has been "its most successful experiment in marketing and commercial innovation in Asia to date", and is the reason why Johnnie Walker House Beijing has been opened.

A similar revolution is happening in Hong Kong. Crown Wine Cellars is the official agent here for one of the world's best whiskies called "The Last Drop", which is a blend of 80 whiskies. The youngest of the 80 in the blend is from 1960 and it has proved hugely popular in the city.

"Only 1,300 bottles were

produced and we've been able to sell almost our entire allocation. We've sold 76 bottles of the 88 allocated. This Scottish whisky is HK\$18,888 a bottle," Gregory De'eb, Crown Wine Cellars' general manager, says.

"It shows the respect there is for whisky here now. This whisky is being sold for nearly as much as a bottle of 1982 Lafite wine, which is always regarded as the best you can get. High-end whisky is proving just as popular."

De'eb is adamant that the demand for whisky is on the up in Hong Kong and China. Up to only three years ago it would not have been the drink of choice, but since then things have changed greatly, he says. Another example of its growing popularity is that auctioneers Bonhams Hong Kong has three to four exclusive whisky auctions a year.

"Whisky will never take over from wine, but it will increasingly be a perfect complement to it," De'eb says.

His only criticism of Johnny Walker House is that it is showcasing only one brand. For this reason he feels it is unlikely that one person would go back many times, while if a number of classic whisky producers got together they could have a proper whisky club of all varieties.

"If you are confident about your whisky you should have no problem being measured against others just like the wine producers do," De'eb says.



GREGORY DE'EB (BELOW), CROWN WINE CELLARS



Photo: K.Y Cheng



Clockwise from above left: the grand interior of The Lobby at The Peninsula; The Lobby's take on the sandwich is served with French fries and coleslaw; Main St Deli's croque monsieur includes wilted spinach and mornay sauce; the decor at Main St is reminiscent of an upscale New York deli. Photos: Edward Wong, Jonathan Wong