



Farmyard friends



Like the Bard, Alex Nicol has a fondness for the water of life – so much so, he now runs his own whisky company selling cult brands

WORDS WILL LYONS LOUIS ROEDERER UK REGIONAL WINE WRITER OF THE YEAR 2008

SLEEPING rough in the back of a horsebox after a 300-mile drive isn't the easiest way for a 53-year-old to earn a living. At that age, most senior executives who have enjoyed the perks of a distinguished career in the Scotch whisky industry are content to retire to the clubhouse, pick up a couple of non-executive directorships and spend the winter in warmer climes as they see out the final act of their working lives in considerable comfort.

But then Alex Nicol, former marketing director for Scottish & Newcastle and Whyte & Mackay, is not your typical middle-aged whisky baron. Hanging out with students, blogging, dressing up in tweeds, organising off-beat events such as the recent revival of the Victorian whisky picnic in Edinburgh, and generally making a noise as he tours the country's game fairs with his cult whisky brands – Sheep Dip and Pig's Nose – is more his scene these days.

"I was nearing my 50s and had a number of jobs in the drinks industry under my belt," he says. "At the time, I was pretty senior, but it was made clear if I took a particular path I could go even higher. But I thought to myself, 'Why?' Yes, the money was good, but there was always this nagging desire to go it alone.

"I knew I could make a go of it, and time was running out. So I thought, 'Okay, you're not getting any younger – it's now or never.'"

Now, three years later, he runs the

Spencerfield Spirit Company from the stables of his 16th-century farmhouse in Fife. Central to this is Sheep Dip, a whisky whose heritage points to England. "It was originally developed in the early 1970s by

Gloucestershire publican MJ Dowdeswell," says Nicol. "He served it in his pub, in Oldbury-on-Seven."

At the time, it achieved quite a cult status. At one point, it was the number-one bestseller in Harrods, but over the years it suffered under a succession of different owners, ending up mothballed at Whyte & Mackay. And then Nicol came along. Pig's Nose followed as a stablemate three years later.

"It has been bloody hard work, especially in the early days when we didn't have any listings," he says. "But I love it, I absolutely love it. I just have to get out there and do it."

Sheep Dip has been a bit of a hit in the US, where the spirits market loves something quirky and a bit different.

But there is a closer connection, which up until now has not been made public. James Anderson, the Scot who persuaded George Washington – the first president of the US – to distill whiskey on his estate in Mount Vernon, Virginia, farmed at Spencerfield before emigrating overseas. "I don't think there is any stronger connection between early Scotland and George Washington's whiskey," says Nicol.

"Anderson went out in 1791 and

persuaded Washington to get into the spirits business, which grew to be America's first decent-sized distillery."

In an industry increasingly dominated by multinationals, Nicol's small-scale entrepreneurialism is a breath of fresh air. Undoubtedly, the Bard would have approved.

Sheep Dip, 40%, £24.95

This is a blended or vatted malt – in other words, a blend of malt whisky from different single-malt distilleries.

It gets its name from the age-old custom of farmers calling their moonshine Sheep Dip when it was common to disguise homemade whisky in barrels marked 'SD'.

Stylistically, it sits somewhere between a Speyside and a Highland whisky, with a light, gentle, almost floral character. I like to drink it as an aperitif, in a tumbler topped up with plenty of water.

Pig's Nose, five-year-old, 40%, £20.50

There is nothing porky or chunky about this whisky. Soft as a duvet, it slips down to a medley of nutty, tropical fruits with a charming, elegant finish.

Ideal for Burns Night, it is the sort of whisky you can serve to someone who doesn't like Scotch with the confidence that they will finish their dram.



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Stockists: Peckhams (www.peckhams.co.uk); Royal Mile Whiskies (0131 622 6255, www.royalmilewhiskies.com); Spencerfield Spirit Company (01383 412144, www.spencerfieldspirit.com)