

The original lede of Rogers' story

The air around a distillery warehouse smells like baking bread tinged with the spicy topnotes of witch hazel—warm, tangy, and mellow, the aroma of grandma taking fresh cookies out of the oven in the kitchen while an expensive cocktail party gets out of hand in the living room.

When James Scott smelled that smell for the first time a decade ago, it looked to be his only reward for a long trip. He was in a little town called Lake Shore, Ontario, just across the river from Detroit and home to the warehouses of the Hiram Walker Distillery, makers of Canadian Club whiskey. And Scott, a tall, sandy-haired fungus expert at the University of Toronto, didn't see any reason to be there.

He'd done his undergraduate and graduate work in Toronto—his thesis involved traveling all over the world collecting animal dung in search of the unusual species of fungi that lived in it. He was on a slow track to tenure. And he was already bored. Hunting for other problems to solve (and a little side income), Scott had built a cheesy website for a company—well, just him, really—called Sporometrics, a sort of consulting detective agency for businesses with fungus problems. The very first call he got was from a tk at Hiram Walker named David Doyle.

The land around the Hiram Walker warehouses had been countryside, rural. But as the suburbs of nearby Windsor had metastasized, the landscape had turned practically suburban. And residents had begun to complain about a mysterious black mold growing on the outside of their houses. The provincial Ministry of the Environment was starting to pay attention. Doyle wanted Scott to tell them what the stuff was, and whether it was the distillery's fault. "When he originally described it, it sounded like this black mold was growing inside people's houses and there was some psychic connection between it and the distillery," says Scott. "I told him politely that I didn't really think it was likely to be an issue."

But Doyle pressed. He called back a week later and offered to pay for Scott's time to come down and take a look. Scott finally relented, took a meeting with the distillery officials in Windsor, and then he and Doyle drove the 40 miles to Lakeshore.

When they got out of the car, the first thing Scott noticed was "the beautiful, sweet, mellow smell of aging Canadian whiskey," he says. Then he noticed the black stuff. It was everywhere—on the walls of the warehouse, on the chain link fences around it, on metal street signs. It was as if a cloud of soot had descended over the whole neighborhood. "Out in the back of the property there was an old stainless steel fermenter tank," says Scott. "They'd just thrown the thing out. It was lying on its side, and it had this fungus growing all over it. Stainless steel!" The whole point of stainless steel is that things don't grow on it. Looking closer, he could see the wiggly tracks of slugs or snails, crawling through the stuff looking for forage.

Doyle walked over to Scott as they looked over a black-stained fence and told him they'd been trying to figure out what was going on for 15 years. Mycologists at the University of Windsor had been stumped. A team of researchers deployed by the Scotch Whisky Association had taken samples and told them it was nothing, an unusually thick layer of the kinds of fungus most often found in house dust: *Aspergillus*, *Cladosporium*, *Penicillium*, stuff like that. Harmless, ubiquitous, and—maybe most importantly—in no way the distillery's fault.

"David," Scott said. "That's not what it is. It's something completely different." He started collecting samples.

Rogers' lede as it ran

The air outside a distillery warehouse smells like witch hazel and spices, with notes of candied fruit and vanilla—warm and tangy- mellow. It's the aroma of fresh cookies cooling in the kitchen while a fancy cocktail party gets out of hand in the living room.

James Scott encountered that scent for the first time a decade ago in a town called Lakeshore, Ontario. Just across the river from Detroit, Lakeshore is where barrels of Canadian Club whiskey age in blocky, windowless warehouses. Scott, who had recently completed his PhD in mycology at the University of Toronto, had launched a business called Sporometrics. Run out of his apartment, it was a sort of consulting detective agency for companies that needed help dealing with weird fungal infestations. The first call he got after putting up his website was from a director of research at Hiram Walker Distillery named David Doyle.

Doyle had a problem. In the neighborhood surrounding his Lakeshore warehouses, homeowners were complaining about a mysterious black mold coating their houses. And the residents, following their noses, blamed the whiskey. Doyle wanted to know what the mold was and whether it was the company's fault. Scott headed up to Lakeshore to take a look.

When he arrived at the warehouse, the first thing he noticed (after "the beautiful, sweet, mellow smell of aging Canadian whiskey," he says) was the black stuff. It was everywhere—on the walls of buildings, on chain-link fences, on metal street signs, as if a battalion of Dickensian chimney sweeps had careened through town. "In the back of the property, there was an old stainless steel fermenter tank," Scott says. "It was lying on its side, and it had this fungus growing all over it. Stainless steel!" The whole point of stainless steel is that things don't grow on it.

Standing at a black-stained fence, Doyle explained that the distillery had been trying to solve the mystery for more than a decade. Mycologists at the University of Windsor were stumped. A team from the Scotch Whisky Association's Research Institute had taken samples and concluded it was just a thick layer of normal environmental fungi: *Aspergillus*, *Exophiala*, stuff like that. Ubiquitous and—maybe most important—in no way the distillery's fault.

Scott shook his head. "David," he said, "that's not what it is. It's something completely different."