

# WHISKY

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## WHISKY & HOLLYWOOD

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**IRELAND SPECIAL**

Behind the scenes at Midleton distillery



Icons of Whisky \* Jerez \* New York's Dale DeGroff \* Old whiskies: special tasting



# Smooth operators

The Midleton distillery in Cork is the engine room of Irish Distillers and it's like no other distillery on earth.

Dominic Roskrow reports

**T**alk about whisky from islands off the west coast of Scotland and you tend to think Islay, Skye, Mull and Jura. The biggest western isle of them all is starting to make some serious waves when it comes to the art of distilling.

And perhaps it's time for those that have previously dismissed Irish whiskey as bland, unexciting, limited and staid should take a fresh look at what is happening at Midleton in County Cork.

The distillery – or more accurately distilleries – is at the heart of Ireland's whiskey production, and after years of living in the shadow of its Scottish cousins, there is a growing feeling that the time is right for a coming of age.

All of which is ironic when you consider that Ireland's whiskey story stretches back as far, or further, than Scotland's. It was well-established wherever whisk(e)y was drunk, it enjoyed a dominance in the spirit world, and queens and lords drank its spirits and the likes of Sir Walter Raleigh wrote about it.

But the story of Irish whiskey is a story of hurdles that it spectacularly and disastrously failed to negotiate.

And the story of modern Irish whiskey only starts properly in the late '60s and is just seriously impacting now.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do," admits Midleton chief blender Barry Walsh. "We have lived in the shadow of Scotland and in the past we did not react to changes as fast as the Scots did."

"But on the other hand we've come an awful long way in recent years, and we're starting to get people to take notice."

This is a view shared by the other two parts of the 'holy trinity' of Irish Distillers, master distiller Barry Crockett and the man responsible for the casks, operations director Brendan Monks. Both agree with

Barry Walsh's assessment, saying that the coming of age is a result of a gradual and consistent improvement in the quality of Irish Distillers whiskeys over recent years, and not because of a sudden improvement in the last couple of years, as has been suggested in some quarters.



The renewed interest has stemmed from two almost diametrically opposite directions; the rise and rise of Jamesons as a smooth, easy to drink whiskey that younger drinkers feel comfortable with; and from a renewed interest among whiskey fans in the more traditional Irish distillations that standard Jameson has moved away from.

In Ireland Irish Distillers all but holds a monopoly, with only Cooley offering a dissenting voice. The new Midleton plant, opened in 1975, is its engine room. And it is here that both the resurgence in Jameson and the development of brands such as

Redbreast, Power's 12 and Midleton Very Rare has been centred.

The story of Irish is as old as whisk(e)y itself. It's referred to in documents stretching back 900 years, and the Irish will tell you over a drop or two that their missionaries brought the drink to Scotland after discovering it from Arab merchantmen in the Middle-East.

So it is with some irony that the Jameson whiskey story starts with the arrival of Scotsman John Jameson in Dublin in about 1770. He wasn't the first distiller but his decision to spread the Irish whiskey story would help agitate a whiskey industry that looked set to sweep the world.

For many years that's exactly what happened as Irish enjoyed dominance just about anywhere where whiskey was consumed. But it was not to last. For the next 180 years Irish whiskey would reflect the nation's political and economic fortunes and stumble from one crisis to another.

First the fruitless and bitter war with the British would lead to a ban on Irish throughout the Empire. The big Irish distillers initially resisted innovation, including the arrival of Aeneas Coffey and Robert Stein's continuous column still. Then the economic depression that would result in the famine would lead to the loss of a number of distilleries.

And Irish fared no better with the dawn of the 20th century. Prohibition not only closed off Ireland's biggest trading market, but allowed unscrupulous bootleggers to pass off low quality moonshine as Irish, undermining the country's reputation for generations. Other traders sold Scotch for 'medicinal' purposes, further weakening Ireland's grip Stateside.

And then, to cap it all, American servicemen based in Britain during the second world war discovered the more





THE OLD JAMESON DISTILLERY

THE OLD  
JAMESON  
DISTILLERY  
TOURS  
DAILY





ABOVE AND BELOW: THE TWO SIDES OF IRELAND – A HIP STYLE DRINK WITH CELEBRITY SUPPORT, AND THE OLD DISTILLERY'S MASSIVE STILL

rounded tastes of Scottish blends and brought a passion for them home when the war drew to an end.

Irish whiskey in its traditional form and outside its own national boundaries, was all but dead and buried.

In a sense, then, the Irish story only really begins some 35 years ago, when the decision was taken to reinvent Irish whiskey. That meant a complete overhaul of the way that whiskey was made, and this in turn resulted in the closure of the old Midleton distillery and the opening of the giant plant just a few hundred metres away.

Today the old distillery is Midleton's heritage centre, and it provides a fascinating insight into the past.

Stand in the courtyard and look up at the tall and imposing buildings, once a hubbub of activity but now silent and a touch eerie, and you can feel the presence of the generations of people who laboured here.

It has been lovingly preserved and the old vehicles alone make it worth a visit. In one area, for instance, there is the distillery's own horse-drawn fire engine.

"Thankfully it was never required in the distillery," says tour guide Catherine Schafer. "But it was called to a fire at a shoe shop in the town. By the time it managed to get there the shop was completely burned

down. So the fireman's one moment was to not get to a fire in time."

The old distillery also boasts the world's biggest copper still, with a whopping capacity of 143,872 litres or 31,648 gallons, built in 1825.

It's so big that the building had to be built around it once it was completed.

The two other copper stills here were the last to be made in Ireland, and were completed in Dublin in 1849.

"The originals had to be replaced because someone heated one of them up when it was empty and it exploded," recounts Catherine. "It damaged the other still and they both had to be replaced. But thankfully no-one was seriously hurt.

"One worker was coming up the stairs when it happened and they found him with only his hat and shoes on. The rest of his clothes were shredded.

"He's still alive and occasionally he comes round here just to make sure that the guides are still telling his story."

If the old distillery is a poignant reminder of where Irish Distillers came from, then the new distillery a few hundred metres away is a good indicator as to where it's going. Not only does it dwarf the old buildings but despite the fact it's only 30 years old, part of its vast storage tanks stand redundant due

to the need for bigger and better ones.

Make no mistake, the new Midleton is huge. More than 500,000 casks are stored on site. The total distilling capacity would produce 18 million litres of pure alcohol every year. They estimate there are 200 million bottles worth of whiskey maturing here, and that 12,000 bottles are lost to the angels each day.

If you're of the view that the only real difference between an Irish whiskey operation and a Scottish one is triple distillation, then Midleton will astound from the outset.

Designed to take over the work of four former distilleries and now the producer of the component spirit for all Irish Distillers whiskey brands with the exception of Bushmill's, it comprises two separate distilling operations; a grain one, consisting of three column stills and using mainly malted barley and maize, and a pot still operation, which produces the pure pot still whiskey for which Ireland is famous.

The unique nature of the operation is obvious right from the earliest part of the fermentation process.

"The pot distilling is done with a mix of malted and unmalted barley," says master distiller Barry Crockett. "The quality of the barley is essential because it is partially







ABOVE: THE OLD DISTILLERY HAS BEEN TURNED IN TO AN EXCELLENT HERITAGE CENTRE, EXPLAINING THE BIRTH OF THE COMPANY IN DUBLIN

used unmalted and so it is no coincidence that we are in Cork where the climate is so temperate and the quality of the barley more consistent.

"We put a much higher emphasis on the brewing process than many other distilling operations and over the last few years have worked hard to make the liquid as pure and clear as possible and to remove as close to all the solids we can."

The option of playing with the ratios of malt to unmalted barley is just the first weapon in the hands of Barry Crockett. He has two more.

During distillation he has the option to transfer the spirit from pot to column and back again and to play with any sequence that the two distilleries and the three parts of the process permit; and he can vary the cut points for the spirit, leaving a longer tail on the more traditional Irish whiskeys such as Powers.

"It presents us with all sorts of options and gives us the option of producing lots of different whiskies from one plant," he says. "Effectively it's a case of having all the company's distilleries in one operation."

If the distillation process is surprisingly complex, then the plant's maturation process is no less impressive.

When decisions were made 35 years ago to improve quality, the casks were very much part of the equation. A complex system of cask identification was introduced so that bad and tired casks could be whittled out.

An ongoing policy of getting rid of casks

and replacing them with quality ones has been paying off ever since."

On the practical side casks were specifically designed so that they were stronger at their centre, and then stored standing on their end stacked on palettes.

That sort of cask management by Irish Distillers, it claims, put it ahead of many of its Scottish cousins, and the focus has been kept as intense ever since.

Brendan Monks is known as the wizard of wood, and with good reason. His job these days entails knowing exactly what each of that 500,000 plus cask inventory is up to, and in travelling to Jerez, Porto, Malaga and most recently Marsala in Sicily to source casks and make sure they adhere to his standards.

"In the early days people thought we were mad to run our warehouses like this," smiles Barry, "but since then similar systems have been introduced elsewhere and some of our cousins have come across to see what we've done or sent their warehousemen to work alongside ours."

Bourbon casks come from sister companies Wild Turkey and Jim Beam.

The casks, I note, aren't bar-coded. "We couldn't see any point," says Brendan. "We looked at what benefits we would get from such a system and concluded very little. We already know where every cask is and what it's doing."

The trips to Porto to source port casks or Marsala for sweet wine casks raise the controversial issue of finishes but Brendan points out that if a whiskey is finished in a

particular type of cask all the whiskey from that brand is treated the same way, rather than a fraction of it being put in to a wine cask for effect.

And he argues that this is anything but a new fad created by marketing people to jazz up whiskey sales.

On the contrary, he says, it's the old, traditional way of doing things.

"We have documents showing that using such wine casks was the way it was done in the old days," he says. "When I contacted the Sicilians about the possibility of using their casks again I got a lovely email back. It talked about re-establishing business after what was described as 'a long shadow'."

"It was referring to a gap of 100 years. They know the history, and they're aware of the folklore surrounding the link with whiskey in the old days."

When we finally sit down for a tasting back at the stylish Hayfield Manor Hotel that evening, I'm still trying to absorb the mass of information and getting to grips with a whiskey production process that includes such emphasis on brewing, the interaction of two distinct distilling processes, the variances in the malted and unmalted content and in the cuts, the degrees to which grain whiskey and pot still play their part, and the maturation process – not just how long the whiskey is in the cask but what sort of cask it is kept in.

It all comes in to focus when you sip the fine spirits that are currently coming out of Irish Distillers.

The standard Jameson is whiskey's





ABOVE: A CASE OF OLD IS BEAUTIFUL? WHEN IT COMES TO THE VINTAGE DISTILLERY VEHICLES AT MIDDLETON IT IS ANYWAY

equivalent of U2 – you pretty much know what you’re going to get each year and the quality is consistently high. In actual fact and as mainstream blends go, it’s stunning stuff, the pot still characteristics make it classically Irish but there are all those great notes associated with bourbon – vanilla and rich fruits particularly – delivered evenly and with a gently descending finish.

Excellent as it is, though, familiarity breeds not exactly contempt but a degree of indifference and the temptations of the other expressions on offer become too hard to resist. That said, though, you’d rather U2 than the Bay City Rollers, and Jameson is to most standard blends what properly kept and served Guinness is to Foster’s.

Jameson 12, though is another story. While the standard blend contains ‘significantly more’ grain whiskey than pot still (the exact amounts are a company secret but you get the feeling that the ratio is somewhere around 2:1) the 12-year-old is pretty much the other way round. Where the standard Jameson bears no age statement but probably averages eight years, the 12 benefits from its age; and where the standard blend is matured predominantly in bourbon casks, the 12 is mostly sherry cask.

It shows.

The sherry is highly noticeable on the nose and acts like a curtain, slowly pulling back to reveal the classic Jameson characteristics. Then the taste changes direction sharply on the palate, as the sweeter sherry notes are pushed aside by

the more bitter pot still, and the sweeter raisin is replaced by something akin to apple. The finish is easy and satisfying. A great whiskey.

Best of all from the family is the 18 year old. For me it presses all the right buttons.

The sherry’s still there and noticeably so, but less so than the 12 year old. A complex blend using two differing pot still whiskeys and a process of recasking and remarrying the blend has given it a complex mix of honey, bourbon vanilla, and delicious oak. All at once it is blatantly Irish, with sherry, bourbon, wood and fruit all in sparkling interplay. By anyone’s standards this is world class.

Powers Gold label and Powers 12 give a good insight into how pot still dominated blends still have a place at Irish Distillers, but it’s the Redbreast 12-year-old that really impresses, perhaps hinting that while Jameson will raise the profile of Ireland at one end of the market, the more specialist end of it will be enthused by whiskeys such as this.

Irish Distillers has its critics and its attitude towards Cooley a while back left many with a nasty taste in their mouths. But it remains an underdog when the bigger picture is considered, and certainly when it glances across to its bigger cousins overseas. And though the new Middleton might look like a giant factory, there is little evidence of dumbing down of the flagship products, and the company looks set to focus on the very best of Irish to take the country’s whiskey forward.

Middleton is a truly astounding operation, and in its whiskey and the people who make it Irish Distillers has something unique to sell, something that can and indeed should appeal to whisky drinkers the world over.

Time and time again they tell you that they know they haven’t told their story well enough as yet.

And more and more you sense that this mix of modesty and understatement is all set to change.

It’s well worth listening to what they have to say. I suspect that something very special indeed is coming out of the west.

And in this case, it’s something that’s not coming from Islay. ■

