



REASON TO SMILE

IRISH WHISKEY KEEPS GROWING— IN SIZE, SELECTION AND VALUE

BY JACK ROBERTIELLO

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ith all the new distilleries, brands and line extensions emerging from Ireland, whiskey retailers have an unprecedented array of choices that show no sign of narrowing. Accordingly, the proverbial Irish eyes are still smiling broadly at this vibrant sector. Powered by Irish whiskey's inherently smooth style and the swelling popularity centered on a handful of powerful, widely available brands, the category is not just small and mighty—it is expanding dramatically in breadth.

Take two recent additions stretching what Irish whiskey can be: Dingle and The Sexton. Dingle produces distinct small-batch single malt releases—the third finished in ex-bourbon and Port barrels. The Sexton arrives as an especially young (four years old) malt whiskey meant for category novices and cocktail makers.

After decades of relying on the light and fruity blended triple-distilled spirit that predominates, Irish styles are exploding. Single malts and pure pot still expressions, of course, but also grain whiskey, double distilled variants, peated malts and extended aging and finishing in non-traditional barrels—rum, marsala, or exotic woods like acacia. There's even an Irish rye now.

Just about everything good that is happening in whiskey over-

all is happening with exuberance in the Irish sector.

"There are some great opportunities in innovation," says Colum Egan, Master Distiller of Bushmills. "There are a lot of consumers who have been drinking Irish whiskey for some time who looking for something new and innovative within the category. Most of us are coming out with

Clockwise: Bushmills is an old guard distiller still leading the way in terms of innovation. // The Sexton is a new offering tailored toward novices and cocktail makers. // Kilbeggan, now owned by Beam Suntory, dates back to 1757, though its distillery has had a zig-zaggish history. // Red Spot is among the multiple ultra-premium Spot whiskies produced by Pernod Ricard at the Midleton Distillery. // The Caskmates program has brought Jameson critical recognition beyond the brand's identity as a favorite shot.



different and new expressions that appeal to different sectors of the market." Bushmills jumped in two years ago with Red Bush, aged in ex-bourbon barrels rather than a mix of those and Sherry casks.

Egan recently ended his chairmanship of the Irish Whiskey Association, and says ensuring that traditional techniques and understanding were available to new entrants—about 20+ distilleries now operate, up from four in 2014, with as many as 20 in development—was the reason the group was founded.

THE FIELD THICKENS

Major producers are tickled in general with the competition. "It is great for the category, for the growth of Irish whiskey in the U.S. and for the consumer," says Sona Bajaria, Vice President, High End Irish Whiskey, Pernod Ricard USA. "At Midleton we have an open-door policy. We want to maintain the quality and integrity of Irish whiskey and as such offer our support and expertise to these distilleries in their set-up phases."

The basis for optimism is strong: Irish whiskey remains one of the fastest-growing categories. Sales internationally are predicted to hit 13 million cases by 2020, up from 10 million in 2017.



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Recent Nielsen reports put Irish at an annual 12% growth rate here with Ultra-Premium Irish up 7.4%. “We predict the category will continue to grow rapidly as consumers explore new innovations,” says Bajaria.

On the flip side, younger brands are certainly aware—and appreciative—of the way that Pernod Ricard’s Jameson in particular has popularized Irish whiskey, setting the table, so to speak, for new entries.

NEW & DIFFERENT

Launched in 1999, Bernard and Rosemary Walsh scored in Ireland with their ready-to-drink Irish coffee, which became the Hot Irishman, and cream liqueurs years before developing two distinct Irish whiskeys. In 2007 they launched The Irishman; Writers’ Tears Copper Pot debuted here in 2015.

The Teeling family had been in the whiskey business since 1782, but brothers Jack and Stephen have the family name in the spotlight by experimenting with diverse barrel finishes; releasing a rare “single



grain” whiskey; and opening the first new distillery in Dublin in 125 years in 2015.

Operating on her family farm in County Clare, a mile from the coast, Louise McGuane is a leader in the revival of whiskey “bonding,” which practically disappeared in the 1930s. For the J.J. Corry brand, named after a legendary nearby whiskey bonder, she blends and matures whiskeys from multiple sources.

Lambay Irish Whiskey is a crossover project between the House of Camus and the Baring Family’s Revelstoke Trust. Lambay Small Batch Blend is malted barley and grain whiskeys, blended, triple distilled and matured in bourbon barrels with a Cognac cask finish. Lambay Single Malt is unpeated, triple distilled and finished in Cognac casks that have been exposed to the sea air and maritime winds on Lambay Island.

But no new entry in Irish whiskey has come close to the impact of that latest new name: Proper No. Twelve. Created by mixed martial arts champion Conor McGregor, Proper No. Twelve sold out its initial run last fall in less than one month. A blend of Irish grain and single malt whiskey, Proper No. Twelve pays homage to Crumlin, aka Dublin 12, the neighborhood where McGregor was born and raised and which is known for its rich soil and pure spring water.

EMERALD ROAD AHEAD

Most industry watchers expect robust growth to continue. “I see Irish whiskey still only scratching the surface of consumer interest in the U.S.,” says Powers Brand Leader Ken Reilly. “Irish whiskey only represents 6% to 8% of the U.S. whiskey market, well

As the Irish shelves are already not nearly as crowded as more established sectors like single malts and bourbon, the playing field has a wide open and level feel to it, which spurs innovations—like Tullamore D.E.W. Cider Cask Finish and Jameson Black Barrel—as well as newcomers like Slane (2015) and Proper No. Twelve (2018).

behind American and Scotch whiskey. The challenge for all non-Jameson brands is to overcome the lack of understanding of Irish whiskey as a distinct subset of whiskey, and to reinforce the unique profile that Irish whiskey offers the drinker.”

“With several Irish whiskeys already bringing to market limited releases, other innovations and special bottlings will likely become a mainstay as the category grows,” says Slane Irish Whiskey co-founder Alex Conyngham. “There will be challenges resulting from increased competition in the marketplace, although this will encourage brands to further differentiate through innovation and flavor profile, which means more choice for consumers.”

EYE ON AMERICAN TASTES

The U.S. market has been dominated by Jameson with Tullamore and Bushmills the most prominent other brands. But the popular style has its limits, says Jack Teeling, Managing Director of Teeling Whiskey Company. “Shifting consumer tastes are driving the segmentation with consumer and trade interests in more unique and interesting Irish whiskey.”

“By continuing to introduce new offerings that drive interest and relevance among brown spirits drinkers, we’ll continue to generate growth within the Irish whiskey category,” says Ivan Hidalgo, Managing Director, Kilbeggan Distilling Company.





Others are eagerly looking to expand the palate. “We always strive to be at the forefront of trends in the industry,” says Conor Neville, Brand Manager, Tullamore D.E.W. “Innovations such as Caribbean Rum Cask and Cider Cask were two of our most recent successful launches. Because of their popularity, we’ve incorporated Rum Cask into our permanent portfolio and have reintroduced Cider Cask for a second fall season,”

Some distilleries focus on particular areas of tinkering. Teeling not only explores finishes, but tweaks its yeast mix and malt selection. Slane uses three types of casks, one a heavily toasted and medium char virgin oak cask, unusual in Irish whiskey.

Jameson has had success with Caskmates done in exchange with craft brewers, notably Caskmates Stout and Caskmates IPA. “With Jameson Caskmates, we have seen the power of crossing over categories by tapping into consumers’ love of craft beer,” says Jameson’s VP of Marketing, Paul Di Vito.

For the high-end Pernod brands, finishing techniques, like Redbreast Lustau, and Red Spot, launching in the U.S. in early spring, are significant. Recently, The Spot Range experimented with the releases of Green Spot Château Léoville Barton and Green Spot Chateau Montelena, the first single pot still Irish to be finished in wine casks.

The popularity of Irish whiskey as a smooth, easy-drinking spirit has set the stage for more serious expressions, such as Pernod Ricard’s single pot still Redbreast. // Killbeggan is even offering an Irish rye whiskey. // Bushmill’s is supporting Red Bush with aggressive online content and social media marketing.

And if consumers respond to the new iterations, the flood will continue. “Trying out different woods and flavor profiles wouldn’t make sense if the market wasn’t open to it,” says The Sexton’s Master Blender, Alex Thomas. “The consumer wants something different and for me as a blender that’s a dream come true.” ■

NO BLARNEY HERE...

JUST SOLID BACKSTORIES

The Irish range is rich in cultural and historical connections that can make for succinct, interesting selling points:

The Temple Bar

Fresh from Dublin, The Temple Bar Whiskey carries the name power of Ireland’s most famous bar (180 years young). The Temple Bar owner Tom Cleary makes three bonded whiskeys: an original triple-distilled Signature Blend; and 10- and 12-Year-Old s followed.



West Cork

One of the few distillers in Ireland to boast actual Irish ownership, West Cork uses exclusively Irish barley as well as fresh local spring water. Their specialty is charred-cask finish whiskey.



Slane

The name Slane is familiar to rock ‘n roll fans, thanks to the world-famous Slane Castle Concert series, founded in 1981. Slane Irish Whiskey was created by Brown-Forman and the Conyngham family of Slane, whose roots in the Irish village date back over three centuries.

Writers’ Tears

This bottling by Walsh Whiskey, which also produces The Irishman, honors the 19th century

Irish novelists, poets and playwrights (George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, to name a few) who drew inspiration at local pubs from their favorite whiskey.



Knappogue Castle

Anchored by a picturesque 15th-century castle, Knappogue Castle has emerged as Ireland’s leading supplier of bourbon-barreled, age-statement single malts, with expressions of 12, 14 and 16 years; complemented by the value-priced Clontarf label recalling the historic battle of 1014.

John L. Sullivan

Conor McGregor is not the only Irish pugilist with a whiskey label... Boston-based M.S. Walker reintroduced John L. Sullivan Irish

Whiskey, named after the legendary boxer and Boston native.

The Dead Rabbit

Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry, co-founders of the award-winning bar The Dead Rabbit, teamed up with Master Distiller Darryl McNally of The Dublin Liberties Distillery to create a namesake five-year-old blended Irish whiskey.



The Quiet Man

For the first Irish whiskey bottled in Derry in nearly 100 years, local distiller Ciaran Mulgrew combines hand-selected whiskeys, finished in first-fill bourbon barrels for sweet and spicy notes.

