

The Willy Wonka of Whiskey

Aoibhin Fallon goes behind the gates of Waterford Distillery to meet the newest whiskey producer in town...

There was great excitement and optimism when it was revealed just over a year ago that the old Guinness brewery site in Waterford City had been bought. There was further good news when it was announced that the owners were converting it into a distillery to make a new brand of whiskey. Since then the noise coming from the factory has been quite muted and the people of Waterford are beginning to wonder what exactly is going on behind those famous gates.

I decided to go along to find out and there I met with the charismatic Mark Reynier, who has a very impressive track record not only in whiskey production but in the wine trade also. An instantly likeable man, he not only clearly has a driven passion for the “water of life” but he also has an ambitious mission which can only be positive for this city and the county as a whole. He explains first of all what brought him from an island in Scotland to the Deise.

“The reason I am here now is because of three things. The first is because the Irish whiskey sector is a mess. There are some big players but it has been dominated by Pernod Ricard for the last 40 years and that sort of monopoly with anything is never a healthy thing. I think Irish whiskey is ripe for development.

The second reason is because of this extraordinary site here. 40 million euros worth of distillery built in 2003 and then shut down a decade later. It was an amazing opportunity. Distilling is 2 thirds brewing so it wasn’t a massive job to convert this to a very modern distillery.

And thirdly there was the barley. The barley growing in this region is not only the greatest in Europe but in the world, and



Mark Reynier pictured at the local plant.

whiskey is about barley.”

With this in mind Mark and his company went about finding the best barley growers in the region and they have narrowed it down, using a sort of audition process, to 46 farmers. Each of these farmers has been vetted and examined to make sure that the final mix is “the most profound whiskey that not only Ireland has ever seen but the world has ever seen.”

He is fond of grandiose statements is Mr Reynier but thankfully he has the track record to back it up. London born Reynier is a third generation wine merchant carrying on the tradition held by his father and French grandfather. It was while running a successful chain of wine shops at the age of 25 that he first turned to whiskey. He was

attending a wine fair in 1986 when he won a bottle of 50 year old scotch. This began a love affair with the amber liquid which led him to make a bid for a disused distillery Bruichladdich in the Hebridean island of Islay which he bought for 6 million pounds and then sold for 58 million in 2012. Many of his backers in Bruichladdich gladly supported him once again when he turned to the Waterford brewery which means that he has a certain level of financial security and the comfort of not having banks screaming at him for an immediate return.

This is evident when I ask him whether the company is considering producing gin or vodka at the distillery which has a more immediate return and which is done by some distilleries to fill the financial gap while waiting for their investment to, so to speak, mature.

He says “There is no real shortcut for actually having adequate capital and it is a capital intensive business. I think there is a certain degree of enthusiasm to be able to get something to sell and see it being sold. And there is a misunderstanding that that is a revenue that is going to be serious enough to help in the process of distilling whiskey. But actually I think it’s a bit of a mistake. It’s actually a distraction, its taking your eye off the ball. We don’t have to do that here. In financing this whole exercise, lessons I had learned was to remove those sort of pressures so we can actually do this properly. This is going to be a big thing and it’s got to be done properly.”



The plant at Grattan Quay.



The first still run at the Waterford Distillery.

So he is knuckling down to what he does best, making whiskey. At present, barley from 3 of the 46 farms has already been distilled with work on the fourth starting this month. “We are at full stride and distilling is at full capacity” he says.

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He speaks about the ‘terroir’ which, I learn swiftly, is a wine term meaning the impact that different soils have on the taste of the end product. He has now translated that into whiskey production and is adamant that the soil, and the barley, should be as local as possible. “I think if you are going to make whiskey from an area you should use barley from that area. You don’t make Chateau Latour with grapes from Argentina. It’s all about traceability – we know all about every grain of barley down to the field it came from, who grew it, how it was fertilised, when it was sprayed, to where it was stored.”

This commitment to the local area is very encouraging especially, as I explain to him, as we have been dumped before, and it

hurt. This commitment is also something that Mark Reynier wants to see all the way through the distilling process and so they have applied for planning permission for storage warehouses near Waterford airport, which will allow them to mature the product right here where the process began.

Why there? I ask him. “Well it’s only half a mile from the sea and it is wonderfully exposed to the sea breezes. And this is all very good for maturing whiskey as whiskey absorbs the flavours of where it is. If it was Heathrow airport I would be a little bit worried but where we are with the prevailing wind bringing in the marine air is perfect. It gives a salty sort of coastal flavour. It’s about Waterford. If we are going to call it Waterford whiskey and it is made in Waterford distillery it should be matured in Waterford in my view. Also if you are going to use the attributes of a place you should at least put something back. I mean call me old fashioned but I find it quite a fundamental thing. So if you are going to use the barley and the water and the name and the people, and the place and that is all eventually going to form part of your marketing strategy, you gotta put something back.”

He talks a very positive talk when it comes to Waterford but what are his impressions of the city so far?

“I know I will get into trouble for saying this because everyone keeps saying it’s a city, but it doesn’t feel like a city to me, and that is a compliment, it’s not being derogatory. A city to me is an impersonal place, of vast volume and I don’t feel that about here. I feel it is far more friendly and visually it looks a bit like an inland town on a river but of course it’s the sea, so it’s got that sort of Cornwall seaport feel, stacked up from the quay. It’s quite confusing and interesting. You are thinking, a river? But it’s the sea. A port? But its inland. It’s full of these contrasts which I think is interesting. I have been quite surprised by the insecurity



The pot stills during their installation at the Distillery.

shown by Waterford people saying, “do you really like it” and I think “why can I not like it?!” And that’s a shame. But this venture will be good for the city but the frustration is that you are not going to be able to see anything for a while. Nobody knows what’s going on in here which is actually a bit of a shame.”

I joke that he is like Willy Wonka behind the big gates brewing up wonderful and elaborate concoctions. He laughs “It is exciting for us what we are doing, we are laying down the bedrock of an international brand that is going to be seen the world over. It’s all very exciting for us but people get frustrated not seeing anything and unfortunately you won’t see anything probably for 5 years. That’s a self imposed date, if we think things are going well enough and we like what we see earlier then we will go earlier. But that remains to be seen. We are not under any pressure to go off half cocked and that’s the point. But when we are ready then we will make a lot of noise and then everyone can share in the pride of that. We are making something profound, something that will make a difference, something that Waterford will be very proud of and something that is going to be here for an awfully long time.”