

LINKING THE FIELD AND THE PALATE



WATERFORD
DISTILLERY



At the presentation of the Waterford Distillery Best Barley Cup for 2016 to David Walsh-Kemmis were Lisa Ryan and Mark Reynier from Waterford Distillery, David Walsh-Kemmis winner and Alan Dempsey who is the Craft Malting and Brewing Manager for Boortmalt.

Unveiling the uniqueness of the spirit produced from individual fields is at the back of the Waterford Distillery barley cathedral project.

There has been a lot of loose talk devoted to traceability over the past two decades and farmers will rightly ask “what for?” What was heralded as a route to more exclusive and premium markets has become an expectation even in commodities, leaving farmers with additional costs and no extra revenue. Indeed, this has developed into an industry in itself as commodities become cheaper and farmers poorer.

A few weeks ago, I reported on an example where Irish wheat is being milled in Ireland to make brown bread. The baker takes it from a nearby grower’s store, mills it, bakes the bread and sells it in his own shops – The Natural Bakery.

Not long before that, I wrote about the initiative by the new Waterford Distillery to isolate batches of barley for malting and distilling to capitalise on the unique characteristics that each field and variety can bring to the unique character of individual whiskies.

Both projects utilise genuine Irish products for their uniqueness.

The Waterford project began last year when 46 different lots of 100t of barley were grown specifically for this end use. After harvest, these were dried individually and then stored individually in Kilkenny in what project leader, Mark Reynier, refers to as the barley cathedral. We are talking here not just about individual growers but also about individual fields.

These individual silos of barley were then malted separately and then each batch of malt was distilled individually, resulting in 46 potential individual whiskies. While it takes a week to distil one of these batches of malt, it takes three years and a day in oak barrel storage before it can be called whiskey.

Best Barley Cup

Last week, the folks at Waterford Distillery brought in most of these growers for a get-together at their new plant. This operation is so different to most others in that the grower is seen to be an integral part of the process and they are encouraged to participate beyond the farm gate.

As boss Mark Reynier explained, the distiller takes great care of the malt for the week it takes to distil the batch, but the grower has taken great care of it for months before that.

“The uniqueness of the products we produce is largely due to the care the grower takes in growing the crop and also the skill the grower exercises to hone management to the weather and the year,” Mark stated.

Aspects like soil type, soil depth, field aspect and husbandry, all affect the crop and for these reasons it is not possible in nature to repeatedly produce a barley with the same characteristics year on year.

The distillers at Waterford seek to capitalise on this uniqueness and they want the grower to be part of it. This was the reason for the get-together which also doubled as an award presentation. To acknowledge the importance of the grower, they initiated the Best Barley Cup, an award to recognise growers.

In making the presentation, Mark Reynier emphasised that this new award and crystal cup is not just about the quality of the barley delivered or the quality of land on which it was grown. Mark emphasised that this award is very much about the grower, the skilled person and the level of involvement in and enthusiasm for the project.

David Walsh-Kemmis

In this regard, the 2016 award was presented to David Walsh-Kemmis, who farms just off the road from Stradbally to Athy. He told me that when he heard about the project initially, he actually applied to be a grower because of his interest in whiskey and its production. David is predominantly a malting barley grower for Boortmalt, so this was just another angle on a product that he is passionate about.

David is a whiskey drinker and so he appreciates the process involved and its various intricacies. This also generated a curiosity about different fields, husbandry techniques, etc, and so his interest extends not just to the spirit produced from his own crop but also that produced from other growers from different parts of the country.

The barley from David's field has already been malted and distilled. One of the features of this project is that a grower is invited to the distillery when his/her barley is being distilled. Growers commented that this helps them to feel part of the process and to have extra commitment to their crops.

David's was the second batch that was distilled in the new facility and he came to see the process first hand.

During the visit he did not expect to detect any tangible differences between the spirit that was produced from his barley and the previous batch. However, his experience was quite different and he said that he could detect quite a number of differences between the two spirits.

David is excited about having this link from the field to the palate. For him, it provides additional enthusiasm as a grower when he knows that his barley is making a difference. It is a truly Irish product where the primary producer is genuinely part of the end product and there is full traceability along the chain. He commented that: “Winning this award provides recognition for my efforts and provides the motivation to go on and do better next time”.

Protein

In 2015, the variety grown was Taberna. He said that his land always tends to throw low proteins and this particularly suits distilling. Indeed, this crop for distilling produced his lowest protein this year at 7.3%. And the fact that there is no yield penalty makes David even more excited about the project and he said that he would be willing to grow more for this market in the future if the opportunity presents itself.

Protein content became an interesting topic during a tour of the plant. While it is generally accepted that low protein makes for more commercial distillery operation, no barley was rejected on the basis of protein content. High proteins slow down the process and may result in reduced spirit yield, but this does not mean poor whiskey. The consequence of higher protein level was made real when one was shown the machine whose throughput was slowed by high protein.

The Reynier operation wants to create diversity of product, to generate uniqueness and to create profound whiskeys. And this requires variability in the raw material which is quite different to the sameness needed for other modern computer-controlled drinks businesses.

The Waterford Distillery project aims to create 46 different whiskeys each year which can be blended to make unique blends.

Many aspects of location and husbandry contribute to the uniqueness of individual lots.

David Walsh-Kemmis was presented with the best barley cup in recognition of his enthusiasm towards the project and the quality of his product.

This project aims to produce fully traceable and truly Irish whiskeys.