

Signal



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In the world of whiskey, barley is just barley. But one Irish distiller is trying to change that with a bold experiment, writes Teresa Crowley.

Tang of the earth

Terroir, or the ‘tang of the earth’, is one of those enigmatic French terms for which there is no English equivalent.

Originally associated with the earthy notes in many Old World wines, terroir is now more often used to describe wine by region. Thus it has lost its original meaning: the conditions unique to an area that affect the flavour and character of a wine or food. These factors include climate, soil and terrain type, as well as local production techniques. So terroir, in the true sense, is a mix between a geographical definition and a cultural one - it is the reflection of the complex relationship between people, the land they work and the produce they make from it.

The French led the way in recognising this unique symbiosis of land, culture, tradition and climate. It has since been emulated around the world in wine, spirits and artisanal food, in part because the ambiguity in its meaning was a gift to marketing departments everywhere. Terroir couldn't be fully understood or charted, yet an expert palate could taste a chardonnay from the Côte de Beaune in Burgundy and immediately get a sense of the centuries of tradition, soil types and vineyard practices, and above all, that mystical connection between a product and place. You couldn't see terroir; it couldn't be observed in any tangible way, nor scientifically calculated. That is, however, until now.

A recent study by academic Dustin Herb in Oregon University, an expert in barley and grain malting for the brewing industry, used spectrophotometers - a uniquely sensitive instrument capable of detecting and measuring chemical compounds in plants - to discover that while there is little perceivable flavour difference between varieties of barley, there were some differences based on where the barley was grown. The results of this study were no surprise to Mark Reynier, the whiskey entrepreneur who established Waterford distillery in 2014 and whose background in the wine industry convinced him of the importance of terroir in producing the finest whiskies.

Something of a legend in the premium whiskey business, Reynier bought the struggling Bruichladdich distillery on the Scottish island of Islay in 2000, primarily for the stock of maturing spirit in its vaults. Twelve years later, he sold the rejuvenated distillery to Remy Cointreau for £58 million. His time at the helm of Bruichladdich saw him develop a host of new and innovative bottlings of Scotch in some of the most sought-after and expensive wine casks on the market, a tried and tested technique for adding depth - and value - to whiskies. But it was his early exploration of the potential of the terroir concept to enhance the appeal and complexity of premium whiskies that he has carried over into his latest venture, a foray into the Irish whiskey industry.



Like a vine, barley has roots nourished by minerals in the soil, deriving from the bedrock itself after millennia of erosion.

In many ways, Ireland was the obvious next stop for Reynier. For much of the past century, we were the sick man of the global whiskey industry. Irish whiskey's status as the world's favourite spirit at the beginning of the twentieth century was but a hazy memory. The disruption wrought by the War of Independence, prohibition in the US and the economic war with Britain - which also cut off markets in its overseas territories - left Irish whiskey with a 60-year hangover. In 1900, Ireland produced 12 million cases of whiskey a year. By the early 1970s, when the remnants of the industry came together to form Irish Distillers, production had fallen to less than 500,000 cases a year. The renaissance began with the purchase of Irish Distillers by Pernod Ricard in 1988, which threw the weight of one of the world's most powerful drinks companies behind the Irish whiskey brand. This rebirth has proliferated over the past decade, with 10 new entrants to the market and growth averaging about 20% a year, making Irish whiskey the fastest-growing spirit category in the world. Ireland now produces about seven million cases of whiskey a year. To put that in context, though, Scotland produces 90 million.

Reynier's Irish distillery operates out of a brewery in Waterford City, built by Guinness in 2004 at a cost of €40 million but sold on due to an overcapacity in production. The state-of-the-art facility lacks the romantic Hebridean setting of Bruichladdich, but offers Reynier a degree of precision and quality control in the distillation of malted barley unthinkable in the comparatively primitive column stills at Bruichladdich.

The facility is key in creating the exacting standard for the terroir of the barley used. Attempts by Reynier to introduce the concept into whisky-making on Islay met with resistance among the traditionalists. The move to Waterford not only gives him a clean slate in a dynamic region of the global whiskey industry, where the rule book is being rewritten on the hoof, but it also gives him ready access to some of the finest barley in the world.

The Waterford distillery is an unprecedented logistical operation, allowing the company to distill using barley, farm by farm, with total traceability. The facility is exploring 19 different soil types and the effects of microclimates on

barley and on the resultant spirits. For Reynier, just as a vineyard's terroir allows different and distinct wines to be made - even from the same grape variety - these specific farms, selected by soil type and environmental situation, allow Waterford to distill highly distinctive spirits.

Like a vine, barley has roots nourished by minerals in the soil, deriving from the bedrock itself after millennia of erosion. Different types, from sandy loam to organic peat-based soils, and their associated minerals and consistencies influence the grain as they do the grape. Minerals enter plants mostly through the root hairs, making the composition of the soil critical to the finished product. So too does the texture. Stony soils radiate extra heat making the barley ripen quicker.

Each of Reynier's selected farms is issued a passport, documenting the variety of barley, nutrient management, the rainfall and the yield. It is this attention to detail at the earliest stage of the production process that is a game-changer for the industry, where barley is often a mere commodity purchased on global markets governed exclusively by price. For these mass producers, the industry norms of continuity and conformity are key, terroir is irrelevant and barley is just barley.

Reynier plans to replicate the Oregon University study with his Irish farmers to prove beyond question what he has privately believed for decades - that variety, microclimate and soil do influence barley and the spirit produced from it. While not a scientific trial, I was lucky enough to sample some early batches and even with the youthful spirit produced to date, the nuances in taste produced by the barleys from different farms is striking to the palate. It will be some time, however, before any of this spirit reaches the market as it will be casked and aged for a minimum of five years.

In the meantime, the terroir of Irish whiskey is a story Reynier is telling to whet tongues for that first glass.

*Teresa Crowley is director of the Molesworth Gallery.

Not long ago Irish craft brewing was going extinct, but now the sector is a leading tastemaker, writes Emmet Ryan.

Small beer in a big world

For most of its five years on the go, Metalman Brewing Co in Waterford had only one beer, a pale ale that was only available on taps. Fortunately, it is a much-loved and highly respected pale ale, so when the brewery finally set up its canning operation it had the room to go crazy.

In the past two years Metalman has brought out more than a half-dozen new beers between its core range and specials, but nothing compares to Elevation. That's the name of its wheat lager, which combines the best parts of a wheat beer and a regular lager and mixes them into a brew that is arguably the best session beer on the market today. That's anywhere, not just Ireland.

That kind of progress in Ireland is proving a boon to other parts of Europe where the craft brewing game is at a similar stage of development as here in 2011. Barcelona, for instance, is an unlikely creative hub for brewers while Berlin, which was particularly late to the party, is catching up at an extraordinary pace with over 90 breweries or brew projects going in the city right now.

How did we get here? The turn of the century was brutal for beer. The apparent renaissance of Irish beer looked over before it had a chance to begin. Where once stood 11 craft breweries, only three remained: the Porter House in Dublin, Carlow Brewing (known for the O'Hara's brand), and the Franciscan Well in Cork.

Two of those three were dependent on pubs to keep everything together and Carlow was struggling to even make a splash in its local market. It was going to take something, or rather some people, who were a little bit crazy, to turn the tide.

The financial crisis was a nightmare for the global economy, but ironically it proved the salvation of Irish brewing. Redundancies and a general lack of opportunities in tech firms ended up starting the second wave. Trouble Brewing in Kildare, Metalman and Dungarvan in Waterford, and so many

more breweries across the country owe part of their origin to people getting out of the IT sector and into beer. In that light, the line from Ireland to Barcelona and Berlin starts to make more sense.

But why beer? Well, the job of a brewer seems appealing from the outside - you get to make beer, after all - but the grind can really test the stamina. After all, winning over a market used to just lager, stout, and the mildest of reds is anything but easy.

The late Oliver Hughes, founder of the Porter House, had to spend his early days driving to Belgium to bring back crates of whatever he could find and then explain that the funny flavour his customers were tasting was hops.

Shane Long, founder of Franciscan Well, was more of an accountant than brewer for his first 15 or so years on the job. Prior to being bought out by Molson Coors, he estimated that he spent 60 per cent of his time working the books. He would tell you himself that it was no coincidence his second child was born just over nine months after the deal was closed. Now he does what everyone who gets into the game wants to do - make beer.

The styles in Ireland have grown from the initial standard trio of pale ale, porter and proper red, to encompass all kinds of flavours.

Mitchelstown houses the maddest of the lot for experimentation, a result of two backpackers meeting in Dublin and deciding to go into business together. Cam Wallace, an Aussie, and Kiwi Scott Baigent paired up and have turned 8 Degrees brewery into the most creative on the island. Now, the likes of 8 Degrees have plenty of competition around them. At the end of 2011 there were just over 20 breweries in Ireland. Now there are over 100. For most the model is simple: secure the local market with the core range and look to attract a wider audience with more creative options.



With Ireland playing catch-up on the global craft brewing trend, external influences have been crucial to developing flavours here. While the UK is a natural and significant influencer, the sheer breadth of craft breweries across the United States has made that market more of an inspiration.

Double IPAs were the first big step. When Carlow Brewing launched its first, it was near impossible to find the style in Ireland. As a nation of drinkers, we were years behind the likes of Sierra Nevada, Stone, and Russian River in the US.

The growth of breweries across Ireland has seen the pace of adjustment rise with it. Within six months of Coisbo, a Danish brewery, bringing their Russian imperial stout to Dublin in 2014 there were multiple Irish attempts at the style.

That willingness to embrace inputs from overseas is only growing. Trouble Brewing, for years a brewery that relied on its regular beers, is making some of the most creative beers out there. It was the first Irish brewery of note to try a Triple IPA (it was strong, very strong) and the brewery's grapefruit double IPA opened the market to trying out more refreshing fruit styles in beer. Where bitterness and high hops were seen as incompatible with summer fruits, suddenly beers with peach were appearing on shelves.

Regionally, brewers are looking to find ways to stand out. Pokertree, a County Tyrone brewery founded by Nirvana fans and heavily influenced by the founders' collective love of grunge music, was the first and remains the only Irish brewer making a treacle oat stout.

Those kinds of freaky flavours are now becoming more influenced by international exposure, but home brewing remains a key contributor to the Irish beer sector. With only a handful of exceptions, every Irish brewery was started by homebrewers.

For some it was passion, for others it was a way of saving money. (My own efforts at pale ale were timid, although my extremely fruity merlot Chateau Yeah packed a whopping punch.) Homebrewers even made coffee in porter popular in Ireland, with Dungarvan being the first to hit the shelves with a dedicated coffee and oatmeal stout after essentially being begged by homebrewers to make one.

The White Hag in Sligo is proving to be a homebrewer's fantasy in this regard, making a range of high ABV beers with wild flavours like oatmeal milk chocolate stout and its imperial Black Boar. The Sligo brewery, however, is part of a swing back towards lower alcohol beers that has hit the market in recent years.

With more beers on the market, drinkers want to be able to try more on a given night. Anyone with a semblance of responsibility is limited in quantity when focusing on beers that are 6%-plus all the time, never mind the 9% or 10% specials that are out there.



The financial crisis was a nightmare for the global economy, but the salvation of Irish brewing. So many breweries owe their origin to people getting out of the IT sector.

This swing back to the session market has seen the one beer that most breweries ignored for years make a comeback at craft level. While lager is massively popular with mainstream drinkers, it has been generally eschewed by craft brewers due to the high labour, low reward trade-off compared to other styles. Having built up a big stock of styles at high alcohol levels, though, Irish brewers are now turning their focus to the style they avoided for so long, with the more eccentric breweries like Metalman making the most of it.

That growth is a positive sign for Irish beer drinkers and brewers alike. As more regions grow, more opportunities to collaborate spring up. Moreover, overall market growth has helped more Irish breweries make an impact overseas. And the more Irish beer travels, the more ideas Irish brewers get, the more new styles drinkers get to try.

Carlow Brewing is the quintessential example. The brewery was technically 20 years old last month. Being a brewery, it has decided to make it a year-long celebration with an imperial stout. Carlow is a grandparent in the sector at this stage, but one that still has plenty to learn from its descendants.

*Emmet Ryan (@action81) is the editor of Connected, the Sunday Business Post's technology magazine. He is a two-time winner of the UCD Smurfit School Business Journalist Awards.

The best stories come from the tip of the tongue, as Jon Ihle discovered when he tried to roast his own locally sourced coffee.

Speaking of taste



Once I nearly set fire to my kitchen because I wanted to drink coffee like an Ethiopian. I didn't actually know much about how Ethiopians actually drank their coffee - or, rather, I knew just enough to be dangerous - but I had heard a captivating story about the Ethiopian coffee ceremony that made me want to try it out myself.

It goes like this. The Ethiopian coffee ceremony is an elaborate social ritual in Ethiopian life. When welcoming visitors, or celebrating a festival or special occasion, the host will roast a big iron pan full of green coffee beans - everybody has these, apparently - crush them into grounds, boil them in a distinctive pot, and then decant the brew into multiple cups in one graceful pour. Then everyone drinks together. Repeat three times, just to be sure. Every culture has its own special way of serving hot drinks - always declining the first offer of a cup of tea in Ireland, for instance - but the worshipful formality of the coffee ceremony seems to elevate the Ethiopian way to something like gospel. The devotion was enchanting and irresistible.

I heard all this from my sister-in-law, who had been working with an aid agency on the Ethiopian border with Somalia, trying to feed, clothe and house refugees fleeing the civil war there. That was one story. She had other stories, too, about gelada baboons in the mountains, about the inhospitable hellscape of the Danakil Depression, and about the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. None of them excited me quite so much as the story of the coffee ceremony, though. Perhaps because Ethiopia is the agricultural origin of the coffee plant, the source of all the other beans in the world. Perhaps because I'd always liked the rich, smooth, mineral taste of the Ethiopian beans I'd bought. Or perhaps because I'm just a sucker.

Even people who haven't read Proust know what a Proustian moment is - it is an instance, a sensory prompt that calls up an involuntary memory. For Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* it was the famous madeleine episode, in which the taste of a spoonful of tea in which he had dunked one of the sweet cakes - "in the tiny and almost

impalpable drop of their essence” - evokes a cascade of memories from his childhood. It also prompted one of the most famous passages in modern European literature.

I was pretty sure something like this was going to happen to me with the Ethiopian coffee. I came late in life to coffee when a friend tried to help me through a tough writing assignment by offering me a caffè mocha - in the words of a surly Italian barista I later met, “a coffee for little girls” - which made me feel so wonderful for about half an hour that I haven’t stopped drinking coffee since in a doomed effort recover that original high. The story I tell myself about that first cup propels me forward, in search of lost time, as it were.

So when the green, unroasted beans arrived from Addis Ababa in a rough paper package, I couldn’t wait to get started. I was home alone and not expecting company, but I didn’t need an excuse. What really enticed me was the prospect of roasting the beans myself and having the freshest, most flavourful cup of coffee I’d ever tasted. That was occasion enough. It was going to be great. Also, I was going to tell everyone about it.

Having never been to Ethiopia, let alone an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, I had to improvise both my equipment and technique. Commercial roasters have special equipment - big roasting drums that keep the beans moving and distribute heat evenly to get a uniform colour and flavour, and to protect the coffee from amateur enthusiasm. Pan roasting is a standard method of roasting at home. It’s cheap and simple, but not so easy, as it turns out.

After some perfunctory research online, I got started with a heavy-bottomed stainless steel pan and enough beans to cover the surface, fired up the stove and got to work. I kept the beans moving with a wooden spoon and some judicious shaking, gently trying to coax the taste to life. Everything seemed to be going fine through the first crack: the beans changed first into sandy pebbles and then through cinnamon and nutty hues. And the aroma was magical. I was going for a darker roast, however, which meant I had to keep the heat going at this stage. But I hadn’t anticipated chaff.

It turns out that each coffee bean comes individually wrapped in a light, papery husk that detaches from the bean during roasting. Because I was roasting over an open flame, this presented a problem once the chaff started to become airborne on the warm updrafts created by the hot pan. And if you jiggle your pan at just the right angle to get the chaff to spill over the rim, you can make coffee flambé. I know because that’s exactly what I did.

Unlike a real flambé, however, the fire I started didn’t burn out like the quick fuel from a dash of spirits. This was a ferocious blaze made more terrifying by the tiny explosions of the beans going through their second crack at high heat and sending a shower of sparks throughout the kitchen. Only by tossing the flaming pan out the back door was I able to avert a deadly inferno, but not before burning holes in my oven mitt and blackening my extractor fan with arabica soot. That was the end of the experiment.



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My sister-in-law brought more green coffee home that Christmas, having heard nothing of my earlier catastrophe. I eventually worked up the courage - and devised a chaff-extraction method - to try home-roasting one more time. It worked, more or less, and made for several cups of very good coffee. But nothing much worth talking about.

*Jon Ihle is Head of Communications at Goodbody.

**Dublin**

Ballsbridge Park,
Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

T +353 1 667 0400

www.goodbody.ie

London

23 Hanover Square,
London W1S 1JB

T +44 20 3705 8851

Wealth Management | Investment Banking | Asset Management

Cork

City Quarter,
Lapps Quay, Cork

T +353 21 427 9266

Galway

Unit 4, Dockgate,
Dock Road, Galway

T +353 91 569 744

Kerry

13 Denny Street,
Tralee

T +353 66 710 2752

November 2016

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