

AGAINST THE GRAIN

One man on a mission is rethinking single malt whisky – in Ireland

Words Graham Scott

The story begins with our hero standing outside the gates of a whisky distillery. Mark Reynier is on a cycling holiday and he wants to have a look round, because he is a huge fan of the whisky made by the Bruichladdich distillery on Islay, one of Scotland's Hebridean islands. But the gates are locked, and a caretaker tells him, in no uncertain terms, to get lost.

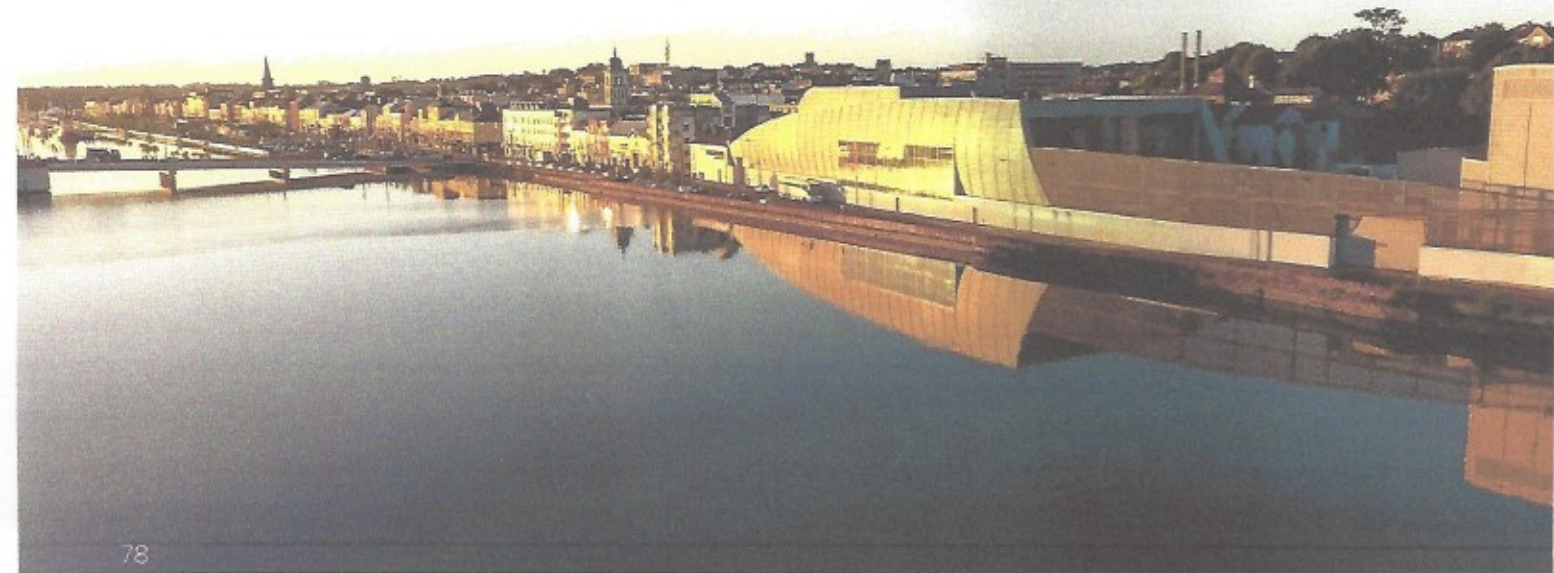
You could argue that everything that has happened to Mark since then is down to that moment. Before then he had worked blamelessly in the wine trade, running wine bars and wine shops in London, a noted and knowledgeable fan of the great burgundies and clarets. He led a pleasant life with his wife, who ran a successful media business.

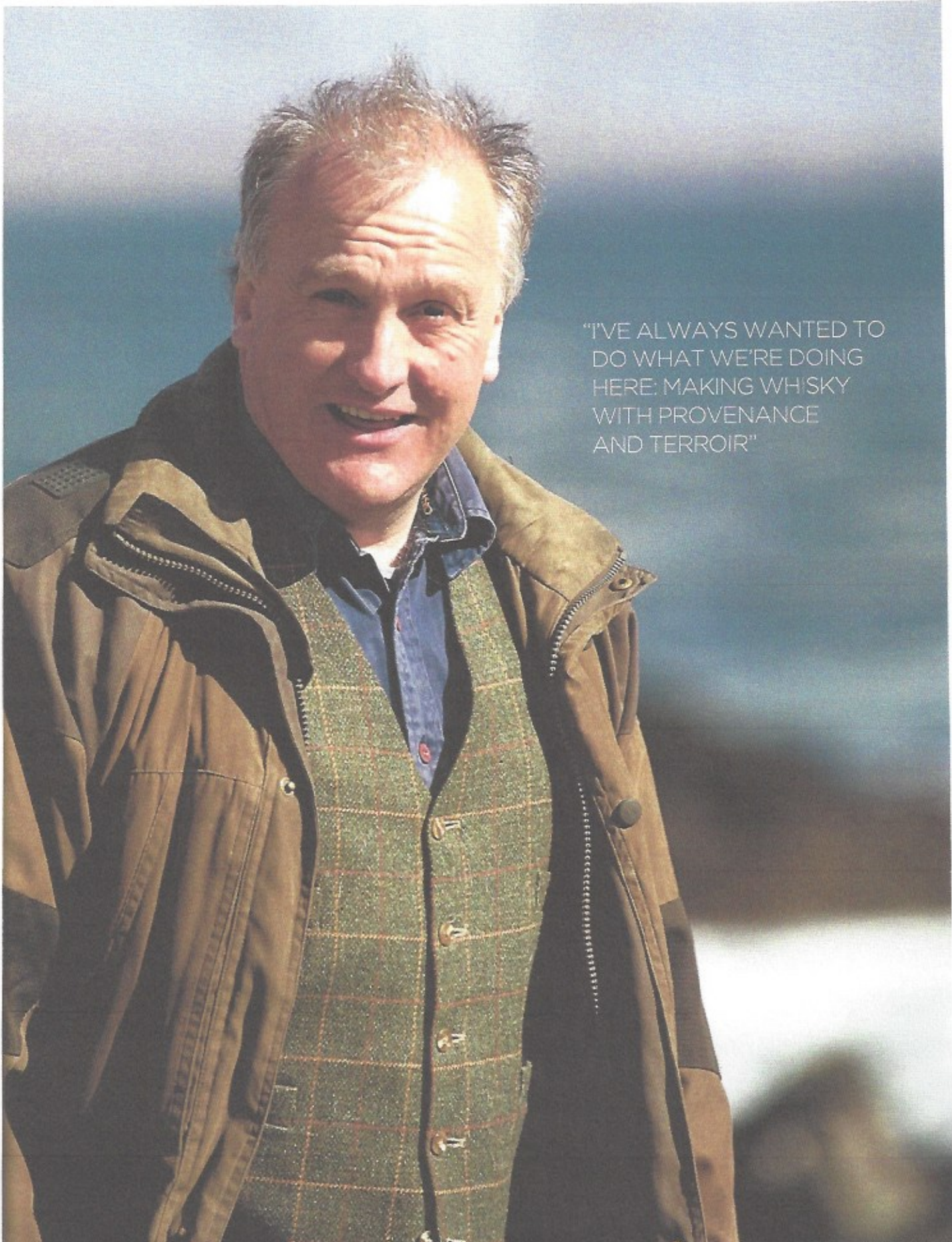
But the knock-back at the gates of the Bruichladdich distillery seems to have brought out a different side to Mark. Before long he was its owner, a maverick in a business ripe for his style of disruption. But disruptions cut both ways, and Mark is now embarking on another grand launch after spending some years "sulking and licking wounds". This next

launch will be the biggest so far – but it may not be the biggest he will make.

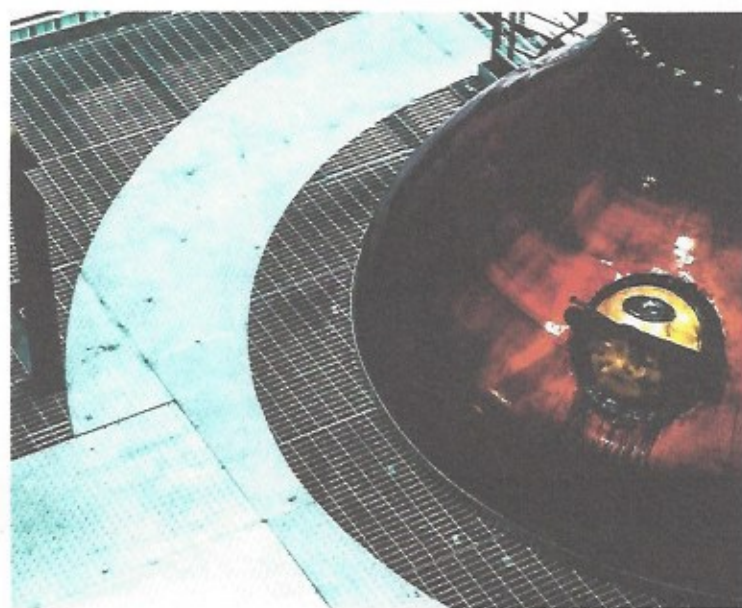
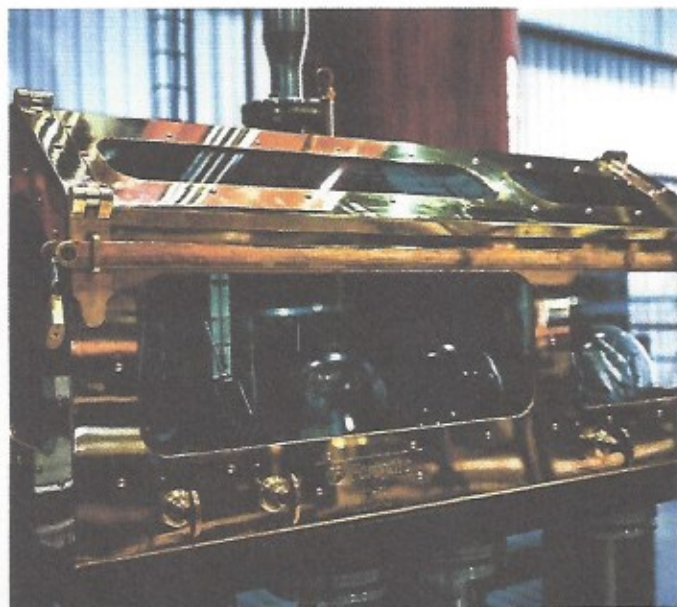
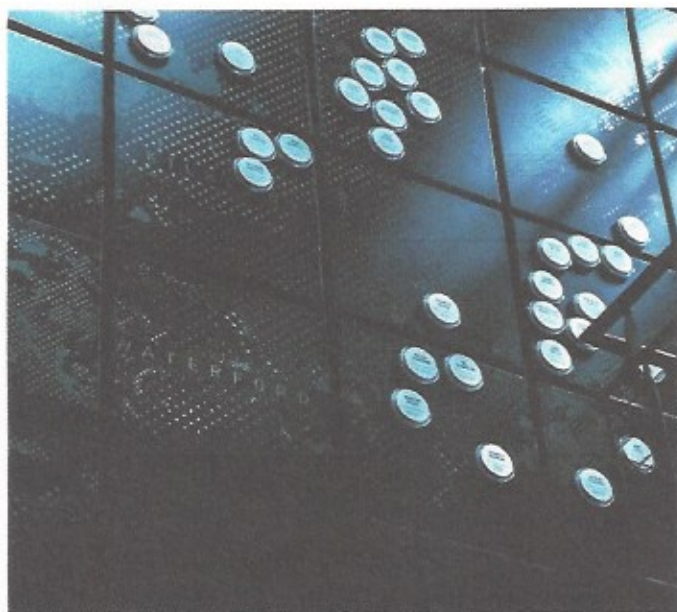
For every hero there must be a villain, and for our story it's the big multinational drinks conglomerates that control much of the whisky business, since most of the small Scottish distilleries sold up to the Diageo and Pernod Ricard and others long ago. It's fair to say that profit is more important to them than provenance. If, for example, distillers use cheap barrels and their whisky doesn't absorb colour and flavour, they add caramel and tell you that dark brown whisky is best. If the whisky goes cloudy when you add ice, then they chill-filter it to remove the oily compounds that cause it and claim the process has no effect on flavour.

All of this, it is fair to say, sends Mark Reynier into a condition close to apoplexy. Much like being told to 'eff off' by a surly caretaker at the gate of a distillery that had been mothballed by, yes, a giant drinks conglomerate. Mark brought with him a reverence for the great chateaux of Burgundy and the way they made their wine, which focuses tightly on terroir, provenance and the quality of the ingredients. He





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technology and
distillation: views
of the distillery.
local barley.
previous pages:
Mark Reynier,
and a view of
the distillery's
rear-front site
in Waterford.

wanted to make whisky in the same way. Anyone who has tried a Bruichladdich whisky – whether a limited-edition Port Charlotte or the Octomore, officially the peatiest whisky in the world – will know that Mark Reynier and his small band succeeded magnificently. These are pure, rare whiskies of immense stature. To this day, there is no computing power used in the entire distilling process at Bruichladdich, it's all done by experienced hands and palates, some of it in old stills and other kit that came from a disused distillery in mainland Scotland; Mark had it shipped across to Islay on barges.

Mark, the board and the shareholders were on a mission. They had a plan to go through until 2014, and by 2012 it was starting to work: the stone they'd been pushing uphill was rolling. They now had over a dozen local farmers growing the barley so it was truly an Islay whisky, distilled, casked and bottled on the island. And then the conglomerates made their move. Rémy Cointreau made a huge offer, around £58m, for Bruichladdich. Mark was vehemently opposed, but the board decided otherwise, and Mark saw Bruichladdich sold to the French conglomerate and taken out of his hands. He left. He was rich, but he'd never been happier. Five years later he can see why the other board members did what they did, and he can see that Rémy Cointreau has been very good for Bruichladdich, but the takeover obviously still rankles.

He still owns a house a mile or two down the road from the Bruichladdich distillery on Islay. The island has got into his soul, and the family frequently goes back there for holidays. To get to it you have to drive past

THE DISTILLERY COULD MAKE ABOUT EIGHT MILLION LITRES A YEAR. THE ACTUAL FIGURE WILL BE ONE MILLION

the distillery. He never stops. He spent three years licking his wounds. "It really hurt," he says now, and you can see it still does. Some might have become bitter, and tried to console themselves with the money they'd made. Mark decided to follow the barley.

He'd been hearing for years that they had the best barley over the water in Ireland. Then he heard about another opportunity, brought about by another move that a conglomerate had made. This one had invested millions in a brewery in Waterford, the oldest town in Ireland, and then closed it. Mark raised money from investors and bought it in 2014. His Waterford distillery is now making single malt whisky. So is this history repeating itself? His new distillery could hardly be more different from the old one on Islay.

"Here in Waterford it's exactly the opposite. It's totally different here," says Mark. His view is based on how easy he's finding it compared to Islay. The Waterford distillery is very modern, with computing power everywhere and, as Mark puts it, "more stainless steel than you can shake a stick at". At Bruichladdich it's all brass and Victorian dials and levers that haven't moved for decades because that's where the lever is set. In Waterford they can try anything, and then measure the results easily. Mark talks about it like a child let loose in a toy shop, pressing buttons, pulling levers and watching displays light up. Where the Bruichladdich distillery has charm, the new one has efficiency.

His 14 staff, many of whom worked at the site when it was a brewery, are focused and enthusiastic, and





Above left: barrels and barcodes. Right: inside the 'barley cathedral'.



they've clearly bought into Mark's view that what they are doing is making the best possible single malt. And that takes time. People used to trying to maximise through-put now find themselves trying to see how slowly they can make all this high-tech machinery work. The plant is capable of producing about eight million litres a year. The actual figure is liable to be about one million.

For Mark, the passion hasn't changed. He's not hung up on whether he's in Ireland or on a Scottish island, what he's doing is quite simple: "We're making a single malt and it happens that we're making it in Ireland." By keeping it simple and pure, he suggests, "we're going back to an age of innocence". The water comes from a volcanic aquifer within the distillery grounds – probably why there was a brewery there in the first place. It's pure, like the rest of the entire process.

He already has 46 farms supplying the crucial barley, which is stored in separate 100-ton silos in a huge barn known as 'the barley cathedral'. Here begins a computerised journey from silo to bottle – scan the barcode on any whisky barrel and you draw up a photo of the farmer who planted the barley it's made from, and a view of the field where it grew. This is what Mark means by terroir and provenance.

Waterford Distillery spends as much on wood for its barrels as it does on barley – something unheard of in more commercially-driven concerns, according to Mark – which are a combination of virgin American oak, used wine casks and more.

So when will we be able to sample a bottle of Waterford Distillery single malt? Mark smiles. "We thought it would take five years. We financed it for five years. But we've tried it, and it probably will be less time." In this case the "we" is the board and the investors, who include two ex-board members of Bruichladdich and the ex-CEO of Rémy Cointreau. Mark says that with a real laugh. They've all followed

him and believe in what he is doing.

So is this the big swansong, the great revenge, the final manifestation of his entrepreneurial passion? He smiles again. "I've always wanted to do what we're doing here in Ireland. Making whisky with originality, with provenance, with terroir, assembling the whisky like Chateau Latour, assembling the biggest thing ever.

"And they've always said you can't prove the effects of terroir." He pauses theatrically. "Until now. Oregon State University has just published its first paper on terroir; it's the first time it's been proven to exist. The first test has been done, with barley, in the US and we're going to bring over the same guy this year, and work with Oregon State University and the Irish government, to demonstrate that terroir matters and can be proven here."

He pauses again and there's a gleam in his eye. "And then there's rum. Rum's a disaster, an industry full of deceit and deception – the same players! They're using molasses, it's disreputable and there must be more to it than sticking bongo drums on a label."

He fumes at the rum industry just as he fumes at the whisky industry. Is he going to do anything about it? "Well, I've got 35,000 sugar cane plants growing on proper soil in Grenada in the Caribbean. It's a challenge."

He leans back. "What I'm doing here in Waterford is the distillation of everything I've learned and I'm taking that forward. I'm still going against conformity. It feels like my whole life I'm always going against the grain." We'll drink to that.

THEY ADD CARAMEL AND SAY DARK BROWN WHISKY IS BEST. THEY CHILL-FILTER. THIS MAKES MARK APOPLECTIC