

PROFILE

FEATURING // MARK REYNIER, FOUNDER, WATERFORD DISTILLERY

HONEST AMBITIONS

MARK REYNIER IS NO FAN OF MARKETING SPEAK – HE’S ALL ABOUT THE TRUTH BEHIND THE PRODUCT. HE TALKS TO **MARTIN GREEN** ABOUT HIS PLANS TO MAKE THE MOST COMPELLING WHISKY IN IRELAND

The man who revitalised Bruichladdich is now bidding to breathe new life into the whisky industry after embarking upon an ambitious project in Ireland. Mark Reynier snapped up a former Guinness brewery in Waterford in 2014 and set about making the world’s most profound single malt. It is a lofty goal, but Reynier believes his relentless focus on high-quality barley leaves Waterford well positioned to take the industry by storm.

The distillery released its first batch this summer and sold out within three hours. Reynier says demand for the initial bottlings is “emblematic of the fact that curious, inquisitive folk are bored of what is being offered to them”. He feels that there is considerable disillusionment among single malt whisky drinkers. “People are now saying, where’s the flavoursome whisky, where’s the honest whisky, where’s it gone?”

Reynier spearheaded a consortium that bought the abandoned Bruichladdich distillery on Islay for £6m in 2000. He turned it into one of the most intriguing, disruptive producers in the industry, and then watched in dismay as his partners voted to sell it for £58m to Rémy Cointreau 12 years later. He says it hurt to see his “baby taken away”, but he is now extremely

passionate about a project focused on terroir, transparency and traceability in southeast Ireland.

Reynier is an outrageously entertaining interviewee, firing out caustic soundbites with gleeful abandon. He is especially disparaging of the current trend for finishing whisky in various barrels. “We’re now getting lipstick on a pig, with all this finishing,” he says. “They’re literally scraping the barrel, with any old stock that there is. It’s pretty bad, but the prices are astronomically high, so the more you spend, the worse the whisky is.”

He laments “an awful, catastrophic era” that saw distillers recycle wood instead of using new wood, while propagating barley varieties for yield as opposed to flavour. “We are dealing with both of those legacies now, which is why you have got this mad finishing,” he says. “It has become a verb with whisky – what’s it finished in,

IF WE ARE TALKING ABOUT PROVENANCE, YOU’VE GOT TO HAVE TERROIR, TRANSPARENCY AND TRACEABILITY. ONE WITHOUT THE OTHERS DOESN’T WORK



what’s it finished in? It should start in decent wood in the first place.”

In the early days at Bruichladdich, his team initially cut the budget for wood. “What a mistake that was,” he said. “We then spent the next two years catching up, decanting everything into proper wood. We embarked on a big wood programme, because we realised that the majority of the stocks that were distilled in the 1970s and 1980s were substandard.

“We introduced French oak, for which we were ridiculed at the time by all the usual talking heads, but now they’re all at it, because they see that it’s their get out of jail card. They see a reflected glory by whacking some fancy château name on the label. Aren’t we sophisticated? Another SKU to bamboozle the consumer.

“You can see with alacrity they have jumped at this methodology of actually putting some life into their dull maturing stock. But of course what none of these buggers ever talk about at all is where that bloody flavour comes from in the first place, which is the barley. It’s the primary raw ingredient, but no one’s prepared to talk about it, which is astonishing.”

Reynier did not head to Ireland with a burning desire to make waves in the Irish whiskey industry. In fact, Waterford does not even put an “e” in its whisky. He went there seeking the best barley he could possibly find. “Colleagues at Bruichladdich regularly used to tell me that the best barley they ever saw came from Ireland,” he said. “Diageo had shut down a brewery in Waterford to consolidate production into Dublin. Here was a brewery built in 2004, for €40m, and shut down a decade later, so it was full of all the latest equipment. If you could do it simply, Diageo will double it. It’s just the most extravagant installation you’ve ever seen.

“Of course, brewing is two-thirds of distilling anyhow. Stainless steel is the brewing bit, and I can bring



the copper bit, the stills that we stole from Allied Distillers when we dismantled the Inverleven Distillery from under its nose.

“At Waterford we have stainless steel, thermo regulation, a mash filter, a hydro mill, a combination that does not exist anywhere else in the world. And above all, we have data, thanks to Diageo. It put in all these sensors all over the place, so we actually know what’s happening in real time. Like modern winemakers, we can intervene.”

CATHEDRAL OF BARLEY

The team at Waterford gathers barley from hundreds of farms in the area and stores it separately in a warehouse called the Cathedral of Barley. Reynier enjoys waxing lyrical about the concept of terroir, as he spent 20 years working in the wine industry before moving to spirits.

“The single farm origins are the little farm wines, and we will assemble them to make the big wine, the grand cuvée,” he says. “Just like Château Latour. Our individual terroirs have their own identity. If you take a bit of each single farm origin, you can smell and taste the differences. If you put a bit of each into a glass, you have created something even more compelling. The goal is to create a most compelling, profound experience. That is the aim of the project.”

He regularly breaks away from these poetic descriptions of barley’s potential to savage the whisky industry at large. “The talking heads, these great personages that go round the world telling everyone about their brands, master distiller this, well they’re not, they haven’t distilled anything for years,” he says. “They’re entertainers, they’re marketing guys. They did a great job back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but they’re so behind the curve. We at Bruichladdich have been educating everybody. You now have a much more enlightened market. You can’t just keep pulling the wool over their eyes.

“Now everybody’s got a smart phone and they know you’re lying. You know all the disinformation and excuses, making things up because it sounds good. You know, 80% of a whisky’s flavour comes from the wood. Bollocks. People are fed up of big marketing, conformity, homogenisation. They want to know where the food comes from. They want to know that there’s a real farm, not just a pretend farm.

“If we are talking about real provenance, you’ve got to have terroir, transparency and traceability. One without the others doesn’t work. All the big guys are going to do their utmost to undermine what we’re doing, because it doesn’t conform with what they’re doing.

“Within five years they will all be talking about barley. I’d have a wager

Reynier (right) with head distiller Ned Gahan

with you on that. You’ll see iconography of barley fields, like the opening scenes in *Gladiator*, and lots of farmers, and it will all be complete and utter propaganda. They won’t do anything different. The barley will still come from Ukraine, from eastern Europe, it still won’t come from Scotland. It’s so obvious. The word terroir will be corrupted beyond belief by people who will exploit it because of its loose connotation, and it will just be bandied around by people as a sign of, aren’t I clever, and they won’t do anything about it.”

In the meantime, Reynier will continue pursuing his ambition of making profound malt whisky in increasingly large volumes, with listings at The Whisky Exchange and various others. “We are not playing at this,” he says. “This may be a highly artisanal approach, but we are distilling 200 farms. We aim to distil around a million litres of pure spirit a year. It’s harvest dependent. Last year we only managed 900,000, but the aim is a million. This is single malt whisky that happens to be made in Ireland. The enthusiasm to help me do this project in Ireland was such a difference to Scotland. I received a very warm welcome and I’ve enjoyed every single minute of it. Nothing is impossible. It’s glass half full. It has been a complete revelation to be. It has been marvellous.”

