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The talk was held along with a vertical tasting of Irish Single Malts sponsored by Knappogue Castle Co.

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A History of Whiskey and Distilling in Ireland

The general history of Ireland in all respects has been as full of highs and lows as are the mountains of Connemara.

The history of whisky production in Ireland is certainly no exception to this pattern.

Most of this often rough ride has taken place over the last 200 years.

But far before that is where we shall begin our journey tonight.

Can I assume that most of you have been to Ireland? I truly hope that if you have, your travels have taken you away from Dublin or Waterford or Galway City and into what I think of, as 'real' Ireland.

I am referring to parts of the island that still echo with the same mystery and raw beauty that it has for thousands of years. A land of breath-taking geography and range of climate from the harshest sea beaten skellings to the gentlest of green meadows.

A land of contrast and artistry.

A land of endless inspiration born of necessity.

ORIGINS

For those of us lost in the world of whisky the debate over the origin of whisky distillation is an ongoing one. As deeply as we search for evidence to support the *origin* of whiskey in the first millenium, despite the overwhelming amount of lore and conjecture, nothing definitive has been found. Irish monks made a massive contribution to the written documentation of pre medieval and medieval history. Unfortunately, none of these records have yet revealed references *specific to the distillation of grain* prior to the 14th C in Ireland. So far, the earliest concrete reference (T. Morewood, 1835) involves the possible discovery of whiskey in Ireland by some of King Henry II's men who found the Irish drinking a distilled grain spirit in 1172 that was called uisge beatha in Gaelic or in English, the water of life. Following this, there is reference to Elizabeth the 1st enjoying a gift of whiskey sent to her by an Irish nobleman, possibly her governing lord for the island (some references say a bishop) in the late 1500's. The Virgin Queen's positive response to the gift is well documented at court.

But based on extensive lore rather than hard fact for purposes of discussion, the consensus is that distillation of grain spirit was occurring in Ireland from roughly 1000 A.D., fully 450 years before recorded record of Scottish distillation exists.

The hope of people like myself who spend far too many hours pouring over the inventories of ancient monasteries, is that there will be a solid reference uncovered that supports the following; that the monks in Ireland began distillation of barley as early as the 7th C after learning the secrets of distillation of perfume from their travels to the Middle East and from the trade routes of Spain.

It is well known that St. Columba left Ireland, as did many monks, in the middle of the first millennium, to establish orders in other lands . Columba himself set up an extremely well documented settlement at Iona in the Western Hebrides. It is

documented that people inhabiting the northeastern shores of Ireland often made the journey, rowing across remarkably dangerous North Channel waters, to attend Sunday service with the holy men who were settled on the many islands of westernmost Scotland. Could these people have contributed to an exchange of whisky making information? The ability to work metals and build the equipment necessary for distilling was available in 8th century Ireland brought by Norse invaders. Clearly, as people traded knowledge and skills, these crafts must have been introduced into Scotland by the traveling Irish.

It is not thought of as just a coincidence that this western most part of Scotland, settled in part by a good many emigrating Irish, is home to a remarkable concentration of malt barley distilleries to this day. Some whisky researchers feel that the lore strongly supports the bringing of the knowledge of distillation to Scotland early on through the avenue of these holy men and their followers.

We know for certain that beers were a major part of the diet of these people through monastery records and archeological finds. The Celts brought the wonders of beer along from middle Europe as they conquered their way into the British Isles. As you will see when we discuss the process of making whisky that it is , to put it simply, beer taken to it's next step. When the knowledge of distilling of perfumes became available, it was a logical step that in the production of medicines as well as beverages, people were experimenting with distilling. Distillation had already been done with wine for the production of brandies in middle Europe. And early brandies were distilled in copper pot stills, as better whiskies are to this day. It would seem that distilling beer which was so plentiful in Ireland, would be a logical next step.

Let's take a bit of a jaunt backward in time for the next few moments-

Imagine for a moment the living conditions of the monks and the tribal families (Tuatha) in Ireland in roughly 700-1000 A.D. Undertake the most extreme

contrast..from March of 1999 in New York City sitting in this lovely heated room, barely aware of the comfort of your finely made clothes and full belly to the coast of Connemara or Donegal a thousand years ago.

Wake up again to another day of bone chilling cold and driving sleet and sea spray. Your fingers so chilled and stiff (at age 25!) that you are barely able to stir the tiny fire (if you are lucky enough to have had anything, be it peat or driftwood, dry enough to burn). Imagine a day spent huddling in your tiny damp stone and mud shelter pursuing whatever small task you undertook to keep body and soul and family alive. Imagine tramping over the rocks and bog to find the fish or seaweed or whatever it was you might be lucky enough to gather to feed yourself and your children. And if you were a monk, imagine the unbearable ache of hours on your knees in prayer or spent grinding precious grain between massive millstones for bread or copying endlessly onto parchment by dim candlelight with frozen fingers.

Then imagine the incredible relief that a dram of whiskey could bring under those conditions, simply to make life bearable. And imagine the soothing quality that same spirit could offer as a medicine or a liniment. And then, tell me the Irish weren't motivated to discover whisky distillation!!

Brian Townsend sums it up well in his book, *The Lost Distilleries of Ireland*..."one can reason that the Irish, who lived amid great poverty in a land of near unrelenting rain, needed something in addition to faith to keep out the cold and wet:...or that their fierce independence and creativity of mind demanded something that would stoke the brains creative furnace on long bleak winter nights..."

Although I must turn this talk to the practical and commercial side of whisky history, I will say this before I go there-

The Irish, as all of you know without question, are a people of great creative and artistic ability. Out of despair as well as joy, some of history's greatest poetry and music have come to life on this small island. There is restlessness and a need to carry on and beautify in the face of all impediments that few who carry Irish blood in their veins do not feel some connection to.

The arts of Ireland and the Celts in general cover a vast repertoire. And within this list of artistic medium, I include the making of whiskey. Although there has been much spirit produced simply to warm the mind and belly, fine whiskey making is no less an art than the creation of a fine wine or the enchantments spun by a master chef. An art that requires passion and time and experience; as well as openness to new ideas and experimentation.

For many reasons that we will go into shortly, the Irish have not had the extended luxury to pursue the honing of this art...until this century.

We will look now at the rise and fall of the Irish whiskey making industry, and see it from a position that believes that this is the time for it to rise again. Not just to rise but to gain new found respect through the production of truly high quality spirit that can only be born of a stable country with a positive growth economy , an open mind to new ideas and a belief in it's own right to succeed.

The History

Since 1171 when Henry II annexed Ireland and especially since the later reign of Henry VIII, monarchs and government bodies have striven to unite the peoples of the

scattered British Isles under the authority of a central crown and government.

Ireland, through many years, *as she had done well prior to* organized British intervention, has sought to gain and regain her independence. In the process, great injustices have often been done, great suffering endured and many institutions and industries, from native language to whiskey distilling heavily damaged and almost driven to extinction.

Unlike the rare countries that see spirit as an essential part of their populaces diet, and therefore a non taxable commodity (ie France) ,the British government saw the taxation of distilled spirits as a way to raise enormous revenue.

The history of devastating taxation began during the reign of Charles the 2nd, 1660-1685. On Christmas Day of 1661 a levy of 4 pence per spirit gallon was levied against English distillers. Shortly thereafter, this tax was applied to Irish as well as Scottish distillers of whisky.

The backfiring effect of these taxes was to drive people to distill illegally and to begin to deal whisky in the black market. Upwards of 2000 illegal distilleries came to life in Ireland over the next 100 years. It would seem that the disease that blinds governments to the obvious was as alive and well back then as it is today. They carried on with increasing taxes, failing to observe that it was the tax itself that was the source of the growing illegal distilling trade. More and more money and men were spent trying to control the renegades. This was by no means a peaceful or safe process. Perhaps if you think of the atmosphere of the gun toting American wild west, or the moon shiners of the deep south you can get some sense of the dangers involved. Even the legitimate distillers cheated by producing unreported spirit to avoid excise.

The London Parliament responded with more and more legislation. Some distilleries were saddled with up to a dozen resident excisemen. Each distiller was required by law to provide both work and living space for all these men.

As additional insult, in an attempt to gain revenue from grain intended for distilling, levies were placed against malted barley, the essential ingredient for whiskey. This was a government that truly knew how to double dip.

The most remarkable legislation to come along yet was the Distilling Act of 1779. In this brainchild of the despicable bureaucrat, Lord North, a steep levy was imposed on the potstills themselves according to their capacity and theoretical output. This of course was intended to keep legal distillers from benefiting when producing unreported spirit. If one taxed the still then the amount produced became less relevant to the government. They won either way.

Once again, the consequences of the Act backfired onto the government. Distillers began utilizing comparatively tiny stills that could be charged, boiled, emptied cleaned and refilled and run on 24 hour cycles. The resulting whisky was horrendous due to the rapid distillation. The legal distillers simply interpreted the law as they saw fit and as a result the industry continued on it's downward spiral.

Prior to the enforcement of the Act of 1779 legal distillers could hold their own against the moonshiners. By virtue of larger stills and greater marketing abilities they maintained a strong industry. But after the Act was passed, they were little better off than any farmer with a still hidden out in the bog. The legal distillers had to deal with not only the production restrictions but with overhead, employees taxes and so forth. The quality of the spirit was dropping due to the new rapid distillation processes. Many customers turned to easily attainable illegal spirits for better taste.

Over the next half century hundreds of legal distilleries all over the British Isles failed. Between 1780 and 1822 the number of legitimate distilleries in Ireland went from several hundred down to forty. Interestingly enough, the companies (Jameson's, Power's, Cork) that were to survive and become the major whiskey power in Ireland in this century, had their early start during these difficult times.

In the late 1700's through early 1800's, thousands of pounds per year were spent arresting, charging and trying illegal distillers. The figures for money spent this way in Co Donegal alone exceeded the total for the rest of Ireland!

In the 1790's a string of harsh wet summers and rain ruined successive harvests. On a few occasions, the London government had to ban distilling to preserve grain supplies for bread. At one Edinborough distillery which was rumoured to be hoarding grain, riots erupted.

In the shadow of these events, the Corn Laws of 1805 were enacted. At the time, these laws were portrayed as protection for farmers in the British Isles from cheap North American grain imports. Forty years later, when Ireland was starving to death, these laws were to add to the hellish situation that existed.

These days we may hear often hear a folk tune romanticizing the wars between the moonshiners and the authorities. But in fact, this was no romantic period by any stretch of the imagination. It was *truly war*. Ugly and violent and one from which neither side emerged with a positive face. The gaugers would confiscate malt barley and spirit and smash stills. Actions on both sides were harsh and brutal. Authorities were entitled to fine an entire village when an illegal still was found in its midst. These fines were unbelievably extreme given the financial state of the average man of the day. When arrested, illegal distillers were often beaten and mauled on their

way to prison or courts. On the other side, many government men were ambushed and killed or violently beaten in warning. In some areas, police began to turn a blind eye in the name of self preservation. Spirit was sold openly in the streets to avoid the cycle of violence and retribution.

Illegal distilling was a great distance from being a romantic life. It consisted of living out in isolated bog, constantly on guard in a situation where even the smallest column of arming fire smoke could reveal one to the brutal authorities. Some have equivocated this existence to that of the heroin producers in Burma or the cocaine tradesmen in South America.

AENEAS COFFEY and MODERN DISTILLATION

Matters reached a peak in 1818 when the Rev. Edward Chichester of North Donegal published a pamphlet in London entitled 'Oppressions and Cruelties of Revenue Officers in Ireland'.

Aeneas Coffey, then the senior excise officer in County Donegal and soon to become Inspector General of Excise in Ireland, wrote a strongly worded statement of reply. He outlined the amounts of illegally distilled spirit (more than 2 millions gallons in the previous year), much of it in Co. Donegal. He claimed that in Innishowen alone there were more than 800 illegal stills shipping spirit as far away as Scotland. He wrote that the lives of excisemen were in constant danger. He himself had been attacked on the road and had his skull cracked by a band of moonshiners. He was then pinned to the ground with a bayonet through his thigh. His life was only spared with the belated arrival of his armed party. He condemned the police, magistrates and judges for failing to prosecute countless wrongdoers.

But Coffey did take some of Chichester's points to heart. When he became inspector General of Ireland two years later, he improved the revenue organization in many ways. In 1823, the Exise Act that passed was thought to be heavily influenced by

him. It swept away many of the absurdities of the Distilling Act and made legal distilling a viable trade once more.

There did continue to be problems though. The Corn Laws restricted the availability of grain and kept prices artificially high. There continued to be many tax disadvantages to Irish distillers and variances between their requirements and those of the Scots and English.

But, it did become more profitable to distill legally. Although some illegal distilling continued for another 100 years, it was no longer a major problem.

Then the most interesting thing happened.. Coffey resigned from his position as head of excise and became a distiller himself! To top that surprise, he had an invention up his sleeve that was to change the face of distilling for all time. Unfortunately, Coffey was an Irishman with a great vision that was to be largely rejected by his own people to their later economic detriment.

This great invention was the patent or Coffey still, also referred to as a column still or continuous still. The concept was in large part Coffeys although aspects of it had been borrowed from a few other inventors. He managed to make significant improvement on their ideas over time and to secure a patent on his final still. The Coffey still can be found today in almost every country on earth. He patented it in 1830 and the Scots and English who saw it's potential, bought and installed it in large numbers. With a very few exceptions, the Irish distillers turned their backs on Coffey claiming that his still produced inferior spirit and even claiming that it was bad for one's health!

How and why did Coffey's still come about? Coffey was well aware of the inefficiencies of the commonly used pot still. Pot stills need to be filled with wash, the

fire lit and the spirit simmered off. The stills need frequent cleaning and refilling and fuel waste was extreme. There was a great deal of 'down time' involved in the process and the resultant pot ale from the process caused many men who cleaned the stills to become seriously ill from its fumes. Although Coffey's early efforts had not gone well, his final design produced a highly efficient machine. It was more expensive to purchase than the pot stills, but its output was extraordinary, its fuel usage minimal and the issue of toxic fumes almost entirely negated. The chances of scorching were gone due to a steam heat process. To boot, the resulting remains from the distillation process could be dried and bagged for sale as animal feed!

Why did the Irish distillers reject Coffey's still? The standard answer is that the distillate was not as strongly flavoured as pot still whiskey. Some claimed that the drinker had no way of knowing what grains or other fermentables had been used in the mash and this was a health risk. Others claimed this spirit lacked the 'wholesome quality' of traditional Irish whiskies.

In my opinion, and that of several respected writers on the topic, other factors were at play here. Factors of temperament, psychology, outlook and tradition; things which have been seen as both the bane and the blessing of Ireland. As stated by Townsend "Coffey's still was enclosed, novel, high tech, complex and ...(therefore)..untrustworthy".

In Britain, Coffey's patent still changed the industry. Grain whiskies could be made in huge quantities. At first consistency was an issue, but over time, with the development of vatting of whisky to find the right flavour mix and bottling of whiskies (rather than cask sales) to prevent merchants doing their own blending, this was overcome. Irish whiskey, which had been by far prior to this new method, the world's preferred spirit and one sold internationally with great success, began to take

a back seat to the mass produced far cheaper blends of Scotland. These column stills could also be used to produce gin which was a tremendous revenue generator for the British distillers and supported their efforts to experiment with and achieve new successes with whiskies.

In the minds of most Irish distillers, the stuff that was flowing from these stills was a tasteless horror. Only a few were willing to consider utilizing the cheaper corn into their whiskies or changing to Coffey stills. Meanwhile, as the Scots sold their whiskey bottled, the Irish continued to sell it directly from the distillery to merchants and public houses in casks allowing more and more blending and bastardization of their products. Whiskies that may have been only 1% Irish pot still were marketed as Irish whiskey at a great profit to the merchants. Grain spirits had no aging requirements, unlike barley whiskies, so very raw spirit was frequently blended fresh from the still in with aged, quality spirit. Who knew what this could taste like? Buying a branded bottle of Johnny Walker Scotch Whisky guaranteed that you at least know what you were getting every time you bought that brand! And, it was cheap and readily available in many countries.

Meanwhile, at home in Ireland, the temperance crusade begun by the Capuchin Father Mathew in 1838 had closed down ten thousand drinking establishments in less than 10 years. Many distilleries were unable to find public houses to buy their whiskey and went under.

The Irish went about their way defiantly, many installing huge capacity potstills after the new act of 1823 lifted the restrictions on still size. Unfortunately, by the 1890's, Scotch blends had become so popular and cheap and Irish whiskey so unreliable by the time it went into a bottle or a glass, that the market once dominated by the Irish, fell crashing into a quagmire born of shortsightedness and provincial views.

Still, the Dublin distillers thrived to a large degree. After all, outside of Ireland they had the whole of the British Empire in which to expand their market.

But then came the partition and civil war in Ireland between 1919 and 1922. With the formation of the Free State, the remaining Irish distillers found the international markets to be beyond their grasp. Trade embargoes confirmed this. But, they reasoned, there was still the very considerable and Irish whiskey loving U.S. market. Well, they would have been on safe ground if, in 1920 the U.S. had not begun a 13 year march into Prohibition. Then, as Prohibition ended, WW2 in Europe commenced and the grain sources the distillers were so dependent upon, disappeared.

Recovery after the war was slow and difficult. By the 1950's, the famous Comber, Tullamore and Kilbeggen distilleries had breathed their last breath. By 1966 the sorry handful of living distillers, the remains of what had once been over 2000 strong, decided on a path to ensure their survival. Jameson, Power and Cork Distillers, agreed to merge. A new distillery was built at Midleton in Cork. Only Bushmill in Ulster remained outside the group, but not for long. They joined forces in the early '70's .

Nowadays, in keeping with merger mania all over the corporate world, Irish Distillers is actually owned by Pernod Ricard the French company.

However, in 1989, an independent distillery appeared in Dundalk, known as Cooley Distillers. Led by an Irishman with a strong sprinkling of Harvard education, Cooley was rescued from takeover by Irish Distillers Group and by a business scheme partnered with the Irish government. Dr. John Teeling continues to operate Cooley and is joining the bandwagon of single malt popularity by producing both a peated and an unpeated single malt in addition to his line of Irish whiskies and blends.

Despite the government intervention Cooley was still in bad shape financially and only with the infusion of 1.6 million dollars worth of whiskey bought by Heaven Hill,

the American company, as an investment, they may not have made it this far. A few other major spirits companies have helped over the birthing pains of the past 10 years. In 1994 Cooley was actually without enough money to make whiskey that year, but at this point, (this paper being written in 1998) things are looking brighter. This upstart distillery seems to have breathed a bit of new fire into Irish Distillers and new brands and twists to present product lines seem to appear yearly. Once again, Ireland is sitting on a cusp of success vs. failure. With an attitude of exploration and innovation, the world of Irish whiskey is primed to explode into the world markets once again.

Definitions:

Blends- A mixture of whisky (be it malt, bourbon or rye) with grain whiskey

Vatting- mixing malt whiskies from more than one distillery

Irish whiskey-

Whiskey made in Ireland and aged for not less than 3 years made of a combination of malted and unmalted barley (Traditional Irish Whiskey definition, although any whiskey made in Ireland and aged 3 years can be termed as such legally)

Single Malt-

Whiskey made from malted barley in a potstill and the produce of only ONE distillery. The most unique whiskies.

Peated- Whisky that has had its flavour influenced by the halting of the malt germination process over a peat fueled fire in a kiln. The degree of influence can be controlled. Also, various peat from various regions have markedly different flavours. How the peat is cut can also influence outcome. Steeping of barley in bog water may also lend a peaty aspect even to non peat fired whiskies.

Finishes-Whiskies aged in casks from previous fills of other spirits such as sherry, madeira or port. This influences flavour to varying degrees.

Distillation: The application of heat to a fluid to extract alcohol. Because alcohol vaporizes more quickly than water, it can be collected during condensation.

Malted barley or Malt- Braley which has been soaked and allowed to germinate slightly to produce a maximum sugar content. Germination is arrested by drying in extreme heat .

Wash: Wort or mash that has had yeast added...known also as beer!

Wort: The sugary liquid produced in the mash tuns. Cooled, it goes into washbacks with yeast for fermentation.

Potstill- Copper (sometimes stainless ie Tormore whisky) container used for batch distillation.

Dram- a small glass of whisky

Ball of malt- Irish expression for a glass of whiskey

Cask Strength- whisky which has not been reduced by the addition of water to lower alcohol content and is bottled 'as is'. When drinking, add a bit of soft water to release the flavours and nose.

Coffey Still/Patent Still/ Column Still/ Continuous Still- Used in the process of continuous distillation. Cheaper, faster method than batch production pot stills. An upward thrust of steam meets alcoholic liquid through plates, stripping the alcohol as it passes.

Peat- turf which is cut and used as combustible fuel. Produces a smoke known as 'peat reek'.