



THE LOVE IRELAND GUIDE N. 008

Irish Whiskey

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The word "whiskey" comes from the Irish uisce beatha, meaning "water of life" - a phrase Irish monks likely borrowed from the Latin aqua vitae when they began distilling centuries ago. That extra "e" in "whiskey" is itself a marker of Irish (and most Irish-influenced) production, setting it apart from Scotch "whisky." From the smoothness of a triple-distilled pot still to the revival of dozens of new distilleries across the island, Irish whiskey has one of the great comeback stories in the drinks world. This is Guide 008 in The Love Ireland Guide series.

What Makes Irish Whiskey Irish

By law, Irish whiskey must be distilled and matured on the island of Ireland - this includes both the Republic and Northern Ireland - and aged in wooden casks for a minimum of three years. Beyond geography, the category is defined by its styles rather than a single method. The most distinctive is single pot still whiskey,

made from a mash of both malted and unmalted barley in a copper pot still, a style that is essentially unique to Ireland and gives a creamy, spicy character.

The other styles will be familiar to any whisky drinker: single malt (all malted barley from one distillery), grain whiskey (lighter, made in a column still), and blends that combine them. What Ireland does not require is peat. While a few Irish whiskeys are peated, the classic profile is unsmoked, which is a large part of why Irish whiskey reads as smoother and lighter to many palates.

The Triple-Distillation Question

Irish whiskey is widely associated with triple distillation, and the practice is real at several major producers - Midleton (home of Jameson and Redbreast) among them. Passing the spirit through the still three times rather than the more common two produces a lighter, cleaner distillate. It has become a signature talking point, and for good reason at the distilleries that use it.

That said, triple distillation is not a legal requirement and not universal. Some respected Irish distilleries distil twice, and a handful even experiment with other configurations. So while "triple-distilled" is a fair shorthand for the house style of the biggest names, it is a tradition and a choice rather than a rule that makes a whiskey Irish.

From Near-Death to Revival

It is easy to forget how close Irish whiskey came to disappearing. Once the dominant spirit on the world market in the 19th century, the industry was gutted in the 20th by a combination of the Irish War of Independence, a trade war with Britain, Prohibition in the United States, and the loss of Commonwealth markets. By the 1970s and 80s, the whole island was down to a tiny number of working distilleries, with production consolidated largely at Midleton and Bushmills.

The turnaround since the 2000s has been dramatic. Driven largely by the global success of Jameson, the category came roaring back, and the number of operating distilleries on the island has grown from a small handful to dozens. New and revived names - Teeling, Dingle, Waterford, and the reopened Tullamore among them - have brought single pot still and experimental whiskeys back into a market that had nearly written the category off.

Bushmills, Age, and Old Claims

The Old Bushmills Distillery in County Antrim holds a licence to distil dating to 1608, granted by King James I, and it markets itself on that basis. It is worth being precise, though: the 1608 date refers to the regional licence, while the Bushmills company itself was formally established in 1784. Both dates are genuine; they simply describe different things, and the "oldest" claim is a matter of how you count.

Age statements on the bottle refer to the youngest whiskey in that blend, not the average. A "12 Year Old" means every drop has spent at least twelve years in the cask, though older whiskeys may be included. Whiskey does not continue to age in glass, so a bottle you have kept for a decade is still whatever age it was

when it was filled.

How to Drink It

There is no single correct way, but a few practical points help. Tasting neat or with a few drops of water is the way to judge a whiskey's character - water can open up the aromas and take the edge off higher-strength bottlings. A tulip-shaped glass concentrates the aromas better than a wide tumbler, which is why distillery tastings rarely use the classic rocks glass.

Irish coffee, the famous pairing of hot coffee, sugar, whiskey, and lightly whipped cream, was popularised at Foynes in County Limerick in the 1940s, credited to chef Joe Sheridan serving cold transatlantic passengers. And if someone offers a toast, the traditional Irish sláinte (pronounced "slawn-cha") means "health" - the correct thing to say before the first sip.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: All Irish whiskey is triple-distilled. It is a genuine tradition at big producers like Midleton, but it is not required by law and several Irish distilleries distil twice. It is a house style, not a national rule.

Myth: Irish whiskey is smooth because of the barley, not the peat. The lighter profile comes largely from the absence of peat smoke in the classic style (plus, at many distilleries, lighter distillation). A few Irish whiskeys are in fact peated.

Myth: Whiskey keeps ageing in the bottle. Whiskey only matures in wood. Once bottled, it stops ageing - a 12-year-old bottle stored for twenty years is still a 12-year-old whiskey.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is Irish "whiskey" spelled with an "e"?

The spelling with an "e" is the Irish (and predominant American) convention, while Scotch, Japanese, and Canadian producers generally use "whisky" without it. Both derive from the Irish uisce beatha, "water of life." The extra letter is a handy quick tell of a whiskey's likely origin, though it is a convention rather than a strict law.

What is single pot still whiskey?

It is a style largely unique to Ireland, made from a mash of both malted and unmalted barley distilled in a copper pot still. The unmalted barley gives it a creamy texture and a spicy, slightly peppery character. Redbreast and the Green Spot range are among the best-known examples.

Is more expensive or older Irish whiskey always better?

Not necessarily. Age and price track scarcity and time in the cask, not a guarantee of a flavour you will prefer. Many drinkers rate mid-priced pot still and single malt bottlings very highly, and the best whiskey for you is genuinely the one you enjoy drinking - so it is worth tasting before committing to a costly bottle.