

# Meet the New Producers Redefining Irish Whiskey

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During the heyday of Irish whiskey in the mid-1800s, nearly 90 licensed distilleries dotted Ireland's countryside, according to the trade group Irish Whiskey Association (IWA). Most were independent operations.

But those numbers whittled steadily over time, thanks to a range of political, social and economic factors. First, Ireland's independence cut off the British Empire's market. Then, Prohibition in America further cooled demand for Irish whiskey, and unlike some nations, Ireland refused to play ball with bootleggers.

By the mid-1900s, Ireland's weak economy and an isolationist policy, which led to an export ban as well as high domestic taxes, had only made things worse. The country's distilleries shuttered in vast numbers, and those that survived did so by consolidation. In 1975, only three Irish distilling entities remained.

Since then, and particularly in the last decade, Irish whiskey has had a comeback. Driven in part by a worldwide whiskey boom and the success of legacy brand Jameson, the energy behind what once made the category exciting has returned. And, as of January, the IWA counted 21 operational facilities, with another 26 in various stages of planning to open in the near future.

These producers are eager to make their mark on the country's signature spirit. Since good whiskey takes time to make and age, many upstarts work with at least some distillate made elsewhere to blend whiskeys or add unique finishes. Yet, each pushes Irish whiskey forward in their own way.

Discover five of the innovative distilleries shaping the way Irish whiskey looks today, and what it may become in the future.



Darryl McNally, master distiller at The Dublin Liberties Distillery / Photo by Meg Baggott

## Darryl McNally

### Master Distiller, The Dublin Liberties Distillery

Some distillers would be content to forge distinguished careers in the service of others. McNally, whose résumé includes an almost-17-year stint with Irish whiskey giant Bushmills, is not one of them.

“As a master distiller, it was hard for me to put my own stamp on [the whiskey],” says McNally. “I was a keeper and had to hand it to the next master distiller the same as I inherited it.” Dublin Liberties represented an opportunity to focus on innovation, rather than to preserve heritage.

So he built a new distillery, which officially opened in February 2019.

The brand's first release was The Dubliner Irish Whiskey, a Bourbon barrel-aged blend of grain and malt whiskeys which came to market in 2015. Three years later, the distillery released a private label collaboration with The Dead Rabbit, the New York City cocktail bar owned by Irishmen Sean Muldoon and Jack McGarry. It's an Irish whiskey aged in virgin American oak, which McNally describes as an homage to Irish immigrants to the U.S. during the 1800s.

"It's mostly Irish, but a little hint of American at the end," he says.

## **Pour It**

### **The Dead Rabbit Irish Whiskey**

Sip or mix this cocktail-friendly whiskey. Aged in virgin American oak for extra-bold vanilla tones, it's a great bridge for Bourbon lovers.

The next releases include Copper Alley, a 10-year-old single malt finished in Sherry casks; Keeper's Coin, a 13-year-old whiskey finished in Tokaj casks; and King of Hell, a 27-year-old whiskey finished in barrels that previously held premier cru Bordeaux.

"A 27-year-old is unheard of in the Irish whiskey world," says McNally. "You seldom get anything over 20 years old. I can tell you there's no aged liquid in Ireland left. It's all gone."

McNally's vast experience provides a deep list of contacts with distilleries and cask brokers, something that has allowed him opportunities to source whiskeys to blend and bottle as he waits for his own creations to be ready.

It's also something that, finally, gives him freedom to innovate.

"Within the laws and legalities of making Irish whiskey, I can be creative," he says. "I want to be that mad scientist."





Michael Walsh, head distiller at The Dingle Whiskey Distillery / Photo by Meg Baggott

## Michael Walsh

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### Head Distiller, The Dingle Whiskey Distillery

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As a native of the scenic Dingle Peninsula, Walsh didn't have to go very far to land a job at the namesake distillery. "It opened on my doorstep," he says.

Following college graduation, Walsh returned home for a Christmas visit with plans to immigrate to Australia soon thereafter. But when he learned about the opening of the distillery, his path changed direction.

"I took a chance, just over six years ago, on what might have been the first day of production, in 2012," he says.

Today, in addition to crafting vodka and gin, Walsh makes Irish whiskey with maritime flavor, thanks to the distillery's position at the rugged water's edge of the peninsula, one of the westernmost places in Europe.

The distillery grew out of The Porterhouse Brewing Company, which opened Ireland's first brewpub in Dublin in 1996 and spearheaded the country's now-thriving craft beer scene. John McDougall, a veteran producer of Scotch whiskey, helped launch the project, and crowdfunding initiatives raised capital that ultimately ensured the facility's independence.

## **Pour It**

### **Dingle Batch #4 Single Malt Irish Whiskey**

This smooth, small-batch sipper offers baked pear flavors drizzled with warming caramel.

"It has allowed us to be more unique, to play around," says Walsh.

The current whiskey style is deliberately sweet and robust. It focuses on single malts made in pot stills and finished in casks that once held Bourbon or fortified wine. It's a departure from the lighter blended whiskies for which Ireland has become known.

Only a handful of batches have been released and each includes slightly older whiskey than the last. This year's scheduled release, Batch Four, will include some six-year-old whiskey distilled on site and matured in warehouses on the fringe of Dingle Bay. The maritime influence lends a hint of sea breeze to the otherwise vanilla-rich aroma.

Walsh is grateful he stayed in Ireland to pursue his whiskey-making passion.

"I never made it to Australia," he says. "My gin, vodka and whiskey have made it to Australia, but not me. Not yet."





Ciarán “Rowdy” Rooney, distiller at Glendalough Distillery / Photo by Meg Baggott

## Ciarán “Rowdy” Rooney

### Distiller, Glendalough Distillery

After nearly two decades of work in the telecom industry, Rooney “bailed out of the rat race” and joined Glendalough. His childhood friend Kevin Keenan is one of the five founders of the distillery and currently serves as creative director.

“I was blown away with his infectious enthusiasm for the new venture,” says Rooney, who volunteered to lend a hand and helped pack whiskey bottles for export orders or fill other holes as needed. He never imagined that he would be making the spirit itself.

When the business began to pick up speed, however, Rooney was given the opportunity to give it a go, and immediately fell in love. He quickly took up training on the fundamentals of brewing and distilling, and soon started part-time at Glendalough. He made his first batch in late 2015. “I was never so proud of myself as I was sipping my first creation,” he says.

Now Glendalough’s full-time distiller, Rooney looks after products like the Double Barrel Irish Whiskey bottling, a “light and lively” grain whiskey that’s aged in American Bourbon and oloroso Sherry barrels. The finishing technique adds depth and complexity that he describes as “the

whiskey equivalent of ‘an old head on young shoulders.’ ”

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## **Pour It**

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### **Glendalough Black Pitts Single Malt Irish Whiskey 7**

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This seven-year-old whiskey is finished in Dublin’s Black Pitts Porter barrels. Each sip brims with moody dark chocolate, espresso, cookie dough and vanilla, and finishes with a snap of fresh pear.

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The brand’s wide range of innovative cask finishes, which includes use of an unusual Japanese oak, or *mizunara*, vessel, has attracted international attention.

Rooney also works on what he hopes to become Glendalough’s signature spirit: a pot-distilled whiskey, slated for a summertime release.

“We’re making it even more Irish by felling oak trees in the mountains around the distillery to make our casks,” he says. The barley, water and casks will come from Wicklow County, where Glendalough is located.

Another experiment started with a cask that was scheduled to age for about a year on a yacht at sea, to add a little saltiness to the finished whiskey. The boat and cask were abandoned during a storm in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and only rediscovered nine months later. The boat and cask are in process of being salvaged.

“We can’t help ourselves,” says Rooney of the drive to experiment. He believes that the Irish whiskey category needs more variety. “We even molded ‘stand apart’ onto our bottle as a reminder to keep trying different things.”





Jennifer Nickerson and Liam Ahearn, co-founders of Tipperary Boutique Distillery / Photo by Meg Baggott

## Stuart Nickerson, Jennifer Nickerson and Liam Ahearn

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### Co-founders, Tipperary Boutique Distillery

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Most Irish whiskey makers have roots planted firmly in Ireland. But Stuart and daughter Jennifer, two of Tipperary's co-founders, began their spirited journeys in Scotland, where Stuart managed multiple Scotch whisky distilleries.

At Tipperary, Stuart is the master distiller and blender. On-site distillation began early this year, but as the group waited for the distillery to be finalized, he selected the stocks that were blended into the current bottlings. They include the delicately fruity Watershed Single Malt and more robust, honeyed Knockmealdowns, named for a local mountain range.

Jennifer, a chartered accountant and tax advisor who formerly worked with global firm KPMG, oversees the daily management of the enterprise. Liam Ahearn is her husband, and he serves as chief agricultural consultant for the distillery. The Irish barley grown on his family's 200-year-old Ballindoney farm will be used to craft a true farm-to-bottle Irish whiskey.



## Pour It

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### Tipperary Watershed Single Malt Irish Whiskey

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Light on its feet, this shows notes of green apple and honeysuckle, plus a wisp of smoke on the elegant fade.

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One of the driving principles behind the distillery is frustration over the commoditization of barley. The grain is grown by farmers and often sold at low market prices, after which distillers buy it for a premium.

"Farmers assume all the risk," says Ahearn.

"There is no appreciation for the terroir of barley," says Jennifer, something the distillery hopes to change. She notes that respect for the grain's character is gaining some momentum, pointing to Ireland's [Waterford Distillery](#), which spent 2018 on the "[Whisky Terroir Project](#)," collaborating with scientists and analysts to uncover the effect of terroir on barley made for whiskey. Full results are expected to be published this fall.

By working exclusively with local barley, the team hopes to show the unique impact of the environment in the finished Tipperary whiskeys.



Alex Conyngham, co-founder of Slane Distillery / Photo by Meg Baggott

## Alex Conyngham

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### Co-founder, Slane Distillery

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Despite the picture painted by fairy tales, living in a castle doesn't equate to infinite leisure. For Conyngham, his family home, [Slane Castle](#), about an hour north of Dublin, presents looming responsibility to keep the estate going. To that end, in 1981, his father began to host rock concerts on the property.

"Over time, that's what put Slane on the map and provided the main source of income for the family and place," says Conyngham. Irish rock band [U2](#) even stayed at the castle and recorded its seminal album, *The Unforgettable Fire*, onsite.

Around 2009, however, the family recognized the need to diversify beyond live music. The eventual answer? Build a distillery.

"Whiskey and rock 'n' roll go well together," says Conyngham.

But it's more than just a gimmick. The estate offers two key components for whiskey production: ample barley fields and water from the River Boyne.

"People thought we were crazy to try and build a distillery, but to me, making whiskey is basically value-added farming," he says.

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## Pour It

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### Slane Irish Whiskey Blend

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A silky, easy sipper, with plenty of bold orchard fruit that winds into a cinnamon- and clove-spiked finish.

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The first efforts involved blending and aging sourced whiskey. The family hatched initial plans to construct the distillery in 2012, and it took two years to finish the design. It wasn't until they entered a partnership with liquor giant [Brown-Forman](#) in 2015 that the project finally broke ground.

The signature Slane Whiskey is an interesting blend. Its core whiskey is aged in a custom barrel made at Brown-Forman's Kentucky cooperage, which provides the product a rich, almost Bourbon like vanilla note. That whiskey is then blended with two others that have been finished in Tennessee whiskey barrels and oloroso Sherry casks.

The end result is deliberately robust, says Conyngham. "We're not interested in doing things that are too light. We want to deliver a fuller-flavored experience."

Looking back, he remembers the year split into two distinct seasons: Christmas time and concert time. "And that was just part of life at Slane," he says.

And looking forward, harvest time will now become part of that rhythm. "Whiskey is a natural process, and growing the barley is an extension of that," says Conyngham.

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