

SPIRITS BASICS: IRISH WHISKEY



NEW ENGLAND
WINE ACADEMY

What exactly is Irish Whiskey and how is it different from other whiskies?

Irish whiskey (with the E), is a whiskey from Ireland, and the Irish are generally credited with inventing modern whiskey...

- The name Whiskey is from the original Gaelic words “Uisce beatha / aisé beatha”, and refers to the “water of life”.
- Irish whiskey was one of the earliest distilled spirits in Europe, dating to the 12th Century
- The main distinction from whiskies such as Scotch is that most Irish whiskey is distilled 3 times – making it smoother in style, and does not use peat in the kilning process. This means there is no smoke or “peated” aromas. Exceptions to these rules do exist.
- At one time (around 1900), Irish whiskey was the most popular whiskey in the world
- Ireland’s fight for independence from Britain, World War I, and Prohibition in US, led to a mass decline in demand, and therefore production.
- Things declined so much so that by the 1960s, remaining brands had to consolidate in order to survive. By the 1970s, there were only two distilleries in Ireland: Midleton in County Cork (south), and Bushmills in Antrim (north).
- Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, Irish Whiskey has made a steady return to sales and popularity. The number of new and recommissioned distilleries has followed suit.
- Today, production levels are increasing steadily and the market is clearly growing – new distilleries are opening with many more planned in the coming years.

Defining Irish Whiskey, today:

There are four categories of labeling terms related to the production of Irish Whiskey. These terms have been more clearly defined over the years, and are in line with the EU regulations of protected status you might find with other whiskey, wine and similar products.

Some of the basic production requirements include:

- Must be made on the Island of Ireland, and includes both the Republic and Northern Ireland
- Minimum 40% abv
- Three years aging in oak barrels, with certain size limits imposed on those barrels
- Limits on the grains used as well as other ingredients, very similar to Scotch regulations

The four categories of Irish Whiskey are:

- **Blended Irish Whiskey** – this is the most common style of whiskey, and is a blend of Grain and/or Pot Still whiskies, and can be from more than one distillery. Many larger brand productions are often of this style, ie: Jameson, Tullamore Dew, Powers, Black Bush
- **Grain / Single Grain** – distilled in a column still and made either from a mix of grains, or from one single grain (the grains though would be a combination of malted and raw grains).
- **Single Pot Still** – distilled in a single distillery, and in pot stills, only. Look for Yellow Spot 12y and Redbreast 15y as classic examples.
- **Single Malt** – distilled in a single distillery, and only from malted barley.

Tasting Irish Whiskey: What is important to look for when tasting the Irish?

Traditionally the most distinguishing characteristic of Irish Whiskey would be - Balance. Often the aspect defining the style of Irish whiskey is the fact that it is triple distilled. This is not a legal requirement, but it is a technique used to create a smooth and elegant whiskey – different from Scotch and American whiskey styles.

When tasting Irish Whiskey, refer back to the label and check the category. Blended whiskeys will have a lighter, more delicate feel on the palate (contributing to their popularity), while Single Pot Stilled and Single Malt styles will be more unique and reflect the region and distillery characteristics, essentially making a richer and deeper flavored whiskey.

Nose: Fruity. Typically, highly scented, with apple and herbs, delicate grain and wood tones and an underlying honey character.

Palate: Smooth. In your mouth, Irish whiskey should be soft, smooth at first and then drying on the finish. Sweet grainy flavors will evolve to slightly more spice tones.

Finish: Balanced. Flavors of vanilla and sweet spice should follow to the finish. Often caramel, cumin and balsa wood.

Conclusion: At their core these whiskeys should be balanced and aromatic. Blends that include Pot Stilled distillate will be the most robust and aromatic. Longer aged whiskey will build deeper character and flavors, showing rich caramel and wood tones, and very smooth texture.

What about Peat?

Unlike Scotch Whisky, Irish Whiskey typically does not involve the use of Peat, and as such it is rare to come across a Peated style – although they do exist. Look for Coonemara Peated Pot Still as the most widely available of this style.

What about wood and finishing?

Oak barrels from the Sherry and Port Regions were common vessels for storage, aging and transport throughout much of the history of Irish Whiskey and whiskey in general. Today, most Irish whiskey will be aged initially in used Bourbon barrels, with some being aged and/or finished in ex-Sherry, Marsala and Madeira casks. Each of these styles will impart a unique aspect to the spirit. Look for the Spots whiskeys by Mitchell & Sons, and taste side by side, as these are done in a variety of barrels.

What about Aged Whiskey Statements?

Similar to other regional age statements on whiskey, Irish Whiskey with an age statement means that no part of the blend or bottling may be younger than the age expressed on the label. Some of the better examples to look for will be: Bushmills 16y, Kilbeggan 15y, Jameson 18y, Powers 12y. Some of these whiskeys are becoming short in supply as older stocks run low, but time will allow for them to catch up.

Currently, there are 24 distilleries in Ireland in operation or under construction with an additional 40 or more in the planning stages - there were only 2 in 1966!