



Meet *the* Blender

While most of us can only dream of sniffing whiskey for a living, there is much more to being a blender at a distillery than meets the eye. Rising star Deirdre O'Carroll from Irish Distillers gives *Dream Escape* some exclusive insights into how she became a blender of one of the world's most-awarded whiskies, and why Irish whiskey is having a renaissance...

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While Irish whiskey has been one of the fastest-growing spirits in the world, it's not a plaudit that can be taken for granted in the competitive drinks industry. All the more reason for companies to carefully scrutinise and select their distillery talent, and the spotlight shone brightly on Deirdre O'Carroll in 2021 when she was appointed blender at Ireland's Midleton Distillery, having risen through the ranks since joining Irish Distillers in 2012. Apart from being responsible for the quality of current whiskies (which include big names, such as Jameson), she's at the forefront of developing new ones, creating Irish Distillers' impressive portfolio of whiskies for a global market.

We managed to lure Deirdre away from the pot stills and maturing casks for an exclusive chat to ask her about what seems to be the dream job: working with the flavours and aromas of whiskey all day.

Deirdre, when did you realise that you wanted to work in the drinks industry? Were you always a fan of whiskey? Whiskey has always been in my household, especially for special occasions, which is why I've always associated

it with good times. It wasn't until years later, when I discovered the level of detail, time and moving parts involved in making whiskey, that I could really start to appreciate it.

While I was studying Food Science and Technology (at University College Cork), I took on a module called Cereals and Related Beverages and I quickly became intrigued by the intricacies of the whiskey-making process and all it entailed. I began carrying out more and more research and realised that the Jameson Distillery had just launched a Graduate Engineering Programme, which just so happened to be only 20 minutes down the road. So, I applied and was thankfully successful.

That's wonderful. How did you then come to be a Blender for Irish Distillers?

Starting out on the Jameson Engineering Graduate programme, my specific role was commissioning of the new pot stills and column stills (apparatus used in distilling). And after this, I spent an additional two years in distillation, but remained fascinated by maturation. This led me to take on the role of a Bond Supervisor, which involved ensuring the casks we receive from all around the world are of the absolute best quality, and →



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overseeing the filling and emptying of our 1.9 million casks. During my eight years here, I was also part of the sensory panel on-site, allowing me to constantly learn and develop my skills.

Fast forward to 2021, a role in blending became available and, as you can imagine, I jumped at the chance. I was fortunate that I'd had the opportunity to hone my craft whilst also gaining valuable experience in distillation and maturation.

Many travellers to Ireland would associate Irish whiskey with the name 'Jameson', visiting either Dublin or Cork for the wonderful whiskey tours at those distilleries. But Jameson is just one of many whiskeys that you work with at Irish Distillers, I believe?

I work closely with Master Blender, Billy Leighton, to develop new and existing blends, which ultimately create a palette of tastes that make up Irish Distillers' portfolio of Irish whiskeys.

Within the portfolio, we've got seven main brands. As you rightly pointed out,

we've got Jameson, a triple-distilled blend, which we're proud to say is the world's most awarded Irish whiskey. Next up, we have a range of single pot still Irish whiskeys, including Redbreast, Powers and the Spot family, while Knappogue Castle is a range of single-malt Irish whiskeys. Heading up our more premium expressions, we have Midleton Very Rare, the pinnacle of luxury, and our METHOD AND MADNESS range, born out of our on-site innovation hub, the Micro Distillery, which aims to push the boundaries with innovative launches, including our recent Japanese Trilogy and the first rye-forward whiskey to be produced at Midleton in a very long time.

While I'm lucky enough to work across all of our iconic brands, my work at Midleton is mainly focused on producing Jameson and Midleton Very Rare.



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Can you tell us what a typical day at work looks like for you?

My day tends to start off by nosing the distillate that was made overnight and making sure it is within the parameters of our whiskey profile, as our primary job is keeping the products we know and love consistent year on year.

That said, at Irish Distillers we don't see consistency and innovation to be mutually exclusive, which means a large part of my day will be spent experimenting with different elements, such as the wood type we age whiskeys in, to create exciting new releases.

In the afternoon we will look at new product samples to see how they are progressing. When it comes to blending, you need to be extremely aware of your stock positions, as this helps you see where you may have potential 'tight spots' in the coming years and why we project 40 years into the future, which tends to dominate the latter part of the day.

What defines a great whiskey?

Every whiskey has a unique DNA, designed to suit different drinking occasions and appeal to individual flavour preferences. But, for me, a great whiskey consists of three key components: great taste, skilled craftsmanship and rich heritage, which every bottle of whiskey created at Midleton Distillery has in abundance.

Would you say that Irish whiskey is having a bit of a renaissance? Could you tell us about some of the exciting new releases that you are working on?

Absolutely, and particularly over the past decade, which has been one of extraordinary growth for Irish whiskey. Today, Irish whiskey is one of the fastest-growing spirits worldwide, and we're very excited to continue driving its popularity through innovation and experimentation.

For example, we recently launched Midleton Very Rare Dair Ghaelach Kylebeg Wood, the fourth release within the series, which saw us work alongside the guardians of Kylebeg Wood to carefully select seven native Irish oak trees to fell and turn into barrels for maturation. This partnership demonstrates how we are collaborating with Ireland's forestry custodians to create a more sustainable future for whiskey-making, with each bottling traceable to a single tree.

This year we launched The Jameson Anthology, a curated collection of unique limited-edition Irish whiskeys which draw inspiration from the past as well as imagining new possibilities. The first release was Jameson Remastered, a 15-year-old single pot still, which was last produced in 2000. The liquid is composed of three exceptional whiskey styles, spanning 15 to 17 years of maturation in carefully selected American bourbon barrels and Oloroso sherry butts. We were delighted to see that it won a gold medal at the International Wine and Spirits Competition.

The second volume, entitled Jameson Remixed, will explore and experiment with new innovations from Jameson, which we hope will be music to whiskey fans' ears.

These new releases showcase our ambition to create delicious, boundary-pushing whiskeys and, while we can't reveal too much, rest assured we have several innovative projects in the pipeline. →



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Sounds intriguing! You just touched on whiskey-making's sustainable future. I understand that Jameson 18 Years has undergone a sustainable packaging revamp recently? Can you tell us a bit about this and Irish Distillers' overall commitment to sustainability?

We're constantly developing sustainable practices and working to improve efficiencies to reduce the environmental impact of Midleton Distillery. A key part of this is through packaging redesign, which minimises our environmental impact while maintaining the overall experience of our whiskey. One of the first whiskeys in the portfolio to undergo a packaging redesign is Jameson 18 Years, which is now presented in lightweight packaging made from fully recyclable cardboard, making it much less carbon intensive to produce and transport.

On a larger scale, we've recently finalised our carbon-neutral roadmap, outlining a plan to transform Midleton Distillery into a carbon-neutral operation by the end of 2026. This is a really exciting achievement for us after investing an incredible £50 million to become Ireland's first carbon-neutral distillery and, once again, has been largely led by innovation.

What do you think are the ideal foods to pair with whiskey?

This is a hard one, as Irish whiskey is so versatile, meaning it can be paired with a lot of different food groups. Personally, I love whiskey with cheese, as it cuts through the creaminess.

A lot of our whiskies have dairy fudge, vanilla, roasted-coffee-bean notes associated with them, meaning they can be paired wonderfully with a chocolate dessert or a crème brûlée.

Sounds delicious. What advice do you have for people who want to work in the distilling industry?

I am surrounded by people who have entered the industry from many different avenues. I would say the common denominator between us is that we are passionate about whiskey, curious about the process and have a gratitude to the women and men who have gone before us, passing down their skills and techniques from generation to generation.

For first-time visitors to Ireland, what would be your pick of must-do experiences in the country?

I'd recommend visiting the Great Blasket Island and staying the night there. It's an island steeped in an equal amount of literary history and natural beauty. Staying in one of the guest houses is the perfect remedy to completely switch off – with no electricity, it's very reminiscent of an Ireland gone by.

If you're a foodie, take advantage of the fact that Ireland is renowned for its fertile soil, meaning we have excellent home-grown produce. One of the best spots for this would have to be Ballymaloe House – please visit for the meal of your life, great atmosphere, and attention to detail.

And of course, I would recommend a trip to Jameson Distillery in Midleton, Cork, where you can tour our distillery, see behind the scenes and taste our wonderful whiskeys.

And finally, how do you like to relax on your days off?

It would have to be going for a long walk in the Irish countryside with my dog. ☺



Find out more

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David Tobin, Owner and Director

“There is nothing more relaxing than a wee dram of smooth Irish whiskey on an autumn's day, in fact any day! The private experiences that we offer are particularly special, whether you like whiskey or not. It is always a fascinating visit to meet the makers who will leave you enlightened and excited to sample this remarkable drink.”

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Dream Escape Loves...

There are many reasons to visit Ireland, but its whiskey industry is one of the best. Discover some of our other favourite Irish whiskey distilleries to include as part of your dream escape:

Hinch Distillery – Located in the gorgeous Killaney Estate in Co Down, Northern Ireland, Hinch had a £15 million investment in a new distillery and visitor centre that opened in 2021.

Bushmills – A popular stop in Northern Ireland's Co Antrim, Bushmills is the oldest licensed distillery in the world, where everything is made, matured and bottled on-site.

Titanic Distillers – Premium Irish whiskey and vodka are on offer at this new distillery in Belfast on the Maritime Mile, where the *Titanic* once docked (hence the name).

Tullamore Dew – From the Irish Coffee welcome drink on arrival to a chance to sip triple-distilled Tullamore D.E.W, visits to the secret warehouse snug at this distillery in Co Offaly should not be missed.

Pearse Lyons Distillery – This independent family-owned distillery in Dublin opened in 2017 and has several fascinating distillery experiences (including cocktails and food-pairing), in addition to a gin school.

Roe and Co – Open since 2019, this distillery in the old Guinness Power Station in the heart of Dublin intends to spearhead the rejuvenated face of whiskey in Ireland, with cocktail workshops, food pop-ups, blending experiences and tours.