

WORDS
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Spirit of the ANZACS

The tale of the trio reviving a lost craft

It's an unlikely tale; a trio of Tasmanian country boys in their thirties reviving a century-old whisky industry in New Zealand. But it's exactly what they are doing.

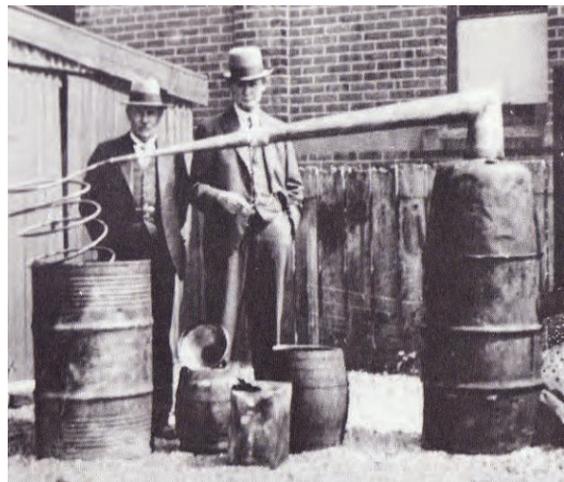
"Sometimes we scratch our heads and wonder the best way forward," explains Tom Holder, from Tasmania's tiny hamlet of Fingal. He came on board in 2009 when Australian investors bought the last remnants of Dunedin's once enormous whisky industry, creating the New Zealand Whisky Company.

"But between the expertise in Tasmania's booming whisky scene, coupled with our partners on the South Island, we seem to be keeping good momentum in taking New Zealand's whisky to the world," he adds.

To understand where New Zealand whisky is going, you have to understand where it's been. There sat 75,000 litres of cask-strength whisky in a colonial seaside warehouse in Oamaru, the last golden drops of a rich distilling heritage. This whisky hailed from the iconic Dunedin Distillery, a large facility built up by Canada's mighty Seagrams spirits empire, before its unexplained shutdown and laying off of all staff, by new owners Fosters, in 1997.

In doing so, it signaled the closure of New Zealand's last distillery. "We've still got no idea why Fosters bought the business and so quickly shut-up-shop. They were making a world-class whisky, and had a key tourist attraction in the middle of Dunedin then all of a sudden, the doors were closed," explains company CEO Greg Ramsay from Hobart, as he noses a honey-coloured dram that made it into the barrel before the stills were turned off. 





A whisky legacy, dating back to the Scottish settlers of the 1830s, had seemingly come to an end in New Zealand, just as 'New World' whisky was finding favour; with Japanese, Irish and Tasmanian whiskies growing their market share around the world.

It wasn't the first time NZ whisky had receded. Scottish banks agreed to fund the country's railway expansions in the 1870s, conditional on the government legislating against local distilling. But the clever Kiwis just let their stocks mature, and were whisky making again soon after the locomotives were in place.

Having cut-his-teeth during two years working in Scotland, Ramsay first established his reputation in the business of golf; leasing 3km of coastline as a 23 year old and developing the acclaimed Barnboughle Dunes golf course. His golf passion is unsurprising considering he grew up on Ratho Farm which features Australia's oldest golf course, near Bothwell in Tasmania's highlands region.

Then he turned his hand to other skills he learned in Scotland; proposing

and project managing the beautiful Nant Distillery on the adjoining farm, before teaming up with two different friends from his time living in Scotland, to create the Journeyman Distillery in Michigan and the new Kingsbarns Distillery in Fife as well.

Ramsay heard of these 443 barrels of mature-aged NZ whisky in 2009, and knew he had an opportunity to start with something that none of his previous distillery developments had; market-ready product and immediate income to boot.

"The hard thing with whisky, when compared with brewing beer or even vodka and gin distilleries, is that you have to sit on your capital investment, your operating costs and your product for so many years before it'll give you back a dollar. Many distilleries have produced next-day sale items like liqueurs, gin, vodka and schnapps to generate revenue," he explains.

"For us, getting the thumbs up and a national distribution through Dan Murphy's across Australia almost before we'd even settled on the purchase, gave

us immediate income and a proven platform of demand, upon which to grow the business," he continues.

"To me it made perfect sense," explains Ramsay, "Tasmania has nine distilleries selling all the whisky that they can make. New Zealand has five times the number of tourists and ten times Tasmania's population, so if it's worked here of course we can make it work in New Zealand. My Gran was a proud Kiwi from Nelson, whose people came out as brewers and hop-farmers; my family has always been proud of our NZ heritage."

With Tasmania now considered a centre for excellence in craft distilling, it appears New Zealand's last barrels are in safe hands.

Ramsay is inspired by Bill and Lyn Lark, coined the architects of Australia's emerging whisky scene. "I collaborate with them as much as possible. I'm not sure if Bill's more excited by New Zealand whisky or its trout rivers; but it's very reassuring and always fun to have Lyn and Bill involved."

Bill thinks very highly of the whiskies,

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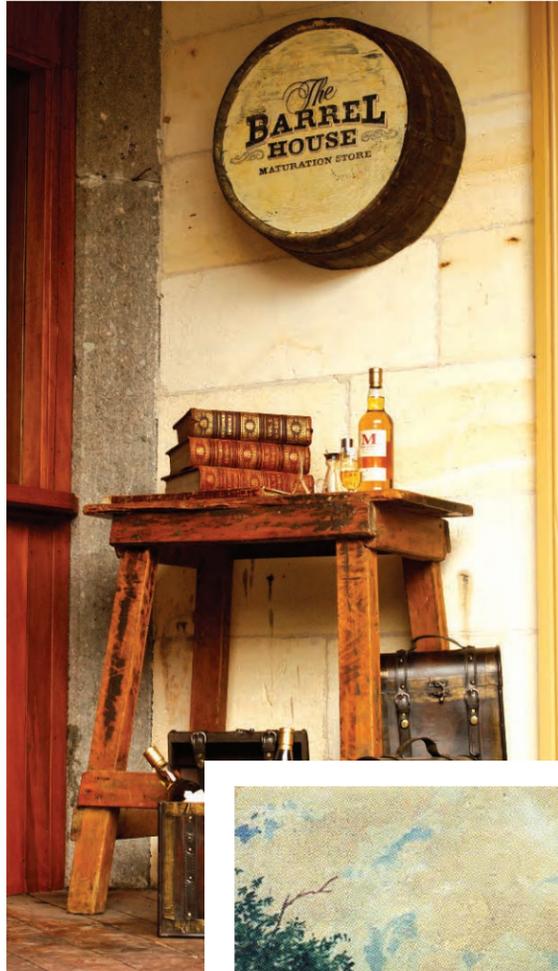
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describing the Dunedin DoubleWood as having, “a beautiful explosion of creamy malt and subtle vanillas up front, building across the palate revealing notes of dried fruit and soft nuts.”

With Ramsay’s strong business sense, drive and entrepreneurial spirit on its side, it was time for him to call on two Tassie mates to revitalise the branding, forge new export channels and re-launch New Zealand whisky to the world.

It took little time for designer Tom Holder to reinvigorate the bottles with fresh, modern packaging. “I found a great 1800s oil painting of the original Dunedin Distillery and put that on the inside of the back label, so the golden whisky liquid brings colour to a three-dimensional view of the distillery.”

Meanwhile Benalla-boy Troy Trewin, relocated from London to setup operations in Oamaru, and is now in Hobart as General Manager, and sought channels that today see the whisky collection available across Canada, Australia, the UK, EU and the US.

“New Zealanders love a success story

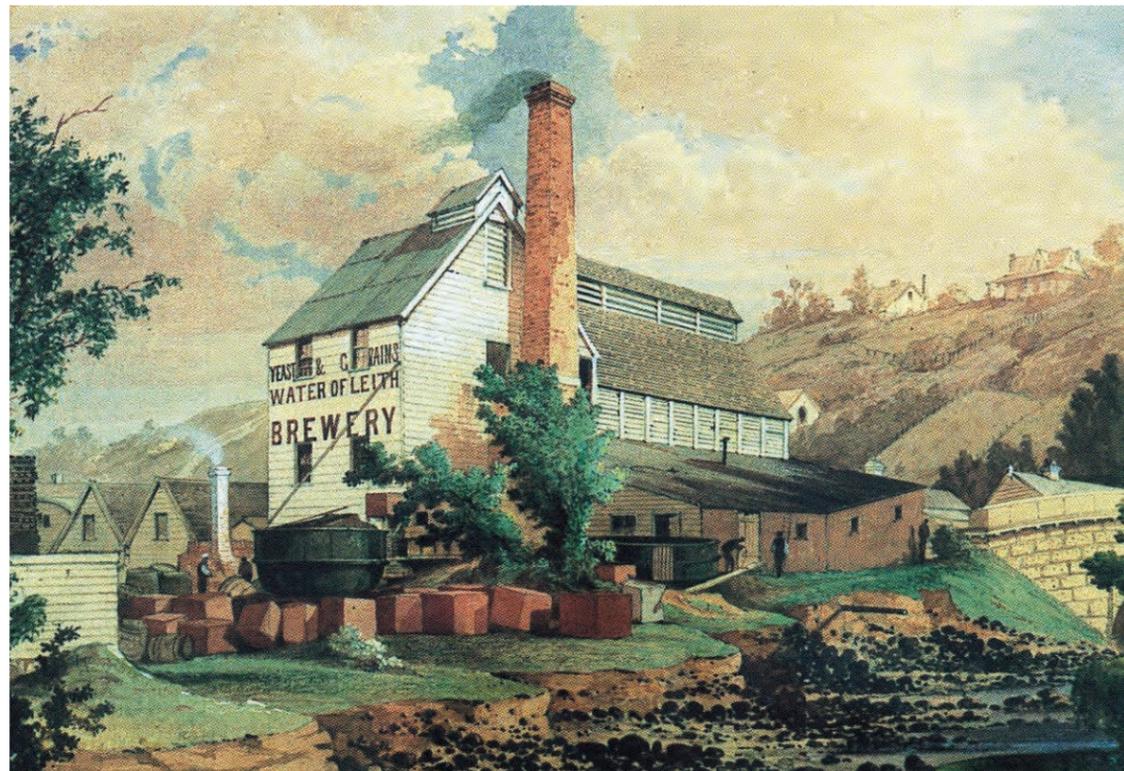
and are enjoying the revival of one of their old-time favourites,” says Oamaru Cellar Door Manager Debbie Preston.

“With Dunedin being the biggest university town in New Zealand, back in the day it was Wilsons Whisky that was their drink of choice.

“It was a big part of their formative years, but was sold quite young. Now it has the benefit of a decade of sweetening and softening in the barrel.”

It’s true; the New Zealand whisky industry has endured some roadblocks and bitter disappointments. But it remains a country that lends itself perfectly to the continued production of this fine drop.

“We’ve been assessing sites for recommencing distilling across New Zealand. We just can’t wait to cut the ribbon on the copper still and see the first new-make whisky, rolling into barrels again,” grins Greg. So the spirit of cooperation across ‘the ditch’ will hopefully yield once again, a delicious dram to lubricate the never-ending sporting rivalries and cooperation that has existed between the nations. ○



Opening pages:

The trio behind the New Zealand Whisky Company

Previous pages, left to right

The new bottle design, selecting samples, an old illicit still, once owned by the Canadians the Kiwis are now selling spirit back

This page, top to bottom:

A little whisky tableau, the Water of Leith brewery