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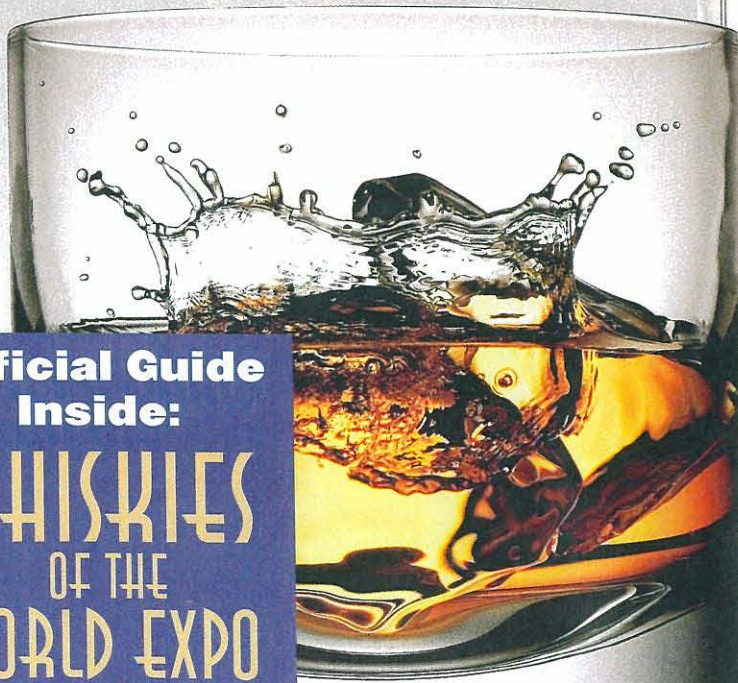
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Official Guide
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“Take Your **Writer** to **Work Day**”

Our own **Rob Gard** tours Cooley Distillery



Columnist Rob Gard samples some Cooley single malt directly from the cask.

A wise person would never ask the Cookie Monster to tour a bakery or Count Dracula to visit a blood bank. What then would possess Cooley Distillery managing director David Hynes to invite a whiskey fanatic on an all-day behind-the-scenes excursion of his base of operations in Ireland?

I was in Ireland for a little R&R and decided to call upon my old acquaintance to see if he had anything new and interesting going on at the distillery. His eager enthusiasm told me the answer.

Cooley Distillery sits on the picturesque Cooley Peninsula north of Dublin. David and I met for dinner at the Ghan House; a historic B&B in the charming coastal village of Carlingford. After Ghan House owner Paul deftly gave us his wine suggestions and the lovely Anna gave us her entree ideas, David and I got down to business: how is Cooley stacking up against its better known Irish whiskey rivals Middleton (Jameson, Redbreast) and Bushmills? David didn't have to provide his opinion; earlier that day Whisky magazine had named Cooley the Irish Distiller of the Year; the Irish Innovator of the Year, and founder John Teeling as Ambassador of the Year. It was a pretty impressive triumvirate for a distillery that celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

What Sets Cooley Apart

Awards are nice, according to David, but the real excitement comes from the whiskey. Cooley is the only Irish distillery to use peated malt in some of its products (primarily the Connemara expressions), distill its own grain whiskey for blending, and they've revived some of the revered, but long dormant names in Irish whiskey: Kilbeggan, Inishowen and Locke's. In fact, Cooley has some two-dozen specialty labels it makes for both EU and U.S. independent bottlers, including the Michael Collins blend and single malt bottled by Sidney Frank Importers.

My visit to the distillery was going to be short, in my mind. After all, if you're the distiller of the year, you have things to do. However, David's enthusiasm for Cooley whiskey is an enthusiasm shared by everyone I met at the site, so the visit turned into a daylong education.

I peered into fermenters, watched mash tuns at work, sampled grain spirit right off the still (with water added, of course), stood in awe as the bot-



Cooley managing director David Hynes explains the technical aspects of distilling

tlung crew worked as one unit under rapid fire conditions, and tried my best to charm two dark-haired Irish beauties with my smile. Thankfully, the distillery's operations work a lot more smoothly than mine do.

Faith, and Scientific Reasoning

By training, David is a chemical engineer; but the way he runs the distillery is less analytical and more alchemistic. His crew, especially master blender Noel Sweeney, have each whiskey tasting exactly how they want it through a combination of hard work, scientific reasoning and, ultimately, through faith that their process will produce the best whiskey in Ireland.

“If you get the vegetables right, don't keep



Cooley's malt stills are the heart of the distilling process.

cooking them. Nobody likes mushy carrots," David says of the Cooley process. In other words: do it well without over-thinking it.

"Take Your Writer to Work Day" ended with my opportunity to sample 15 whiskeys in the Cooley family, including an 8-year-old grain whiskey, the entire Tyrconnell range, several fantastic Connemaras, and for good measure, the Michael Collins whiskeys. Throughout all the whiskeys, and amazingly, even in the grain whiskey, I picked up the light fruity notes of the house style. In most cases those notes were enhanced through aging, blending and even marrying them with casks other than bourbon.

Many distillers have tried different marketing techniques in recent years through

wine finishes, and I have to say that Cooley's foray into this area with its Tyrconnell line hits the mark. The port finish adds subtle warming undertones to the house style, while the madeira finish is the best I've ever had with that type of cask. In fact, I've gone from never liking a madeira finish to falling head over heels in love with the Tyrconnell version, soon to be available in the U.S.

My favorite Cooley expression still has to be its 12-year-old peated Connemara. I love the unaged version as well, but the 12-year-old mellows out the peatiness to create a perfectly balanced Irish whiskey that pays homage to variety of distillation techniques that have marked Irish whiskey for more than 1,000 years.

At 800,000 litres of malt whiskey a year produced, Cooley is smaller than its island peers. But they make up for size with a big taste, huge innovation and an enormous desire to produce some of the best whiskey in Ireland and beyond.

For more information, visit www.cooleywhiskey.com.

A Living Whiskey Distillery Museum

Cooley also owns the historic Locke's Distillery in Kilbeggan, Ireland.

Locke's currently is a living whiskey distillery museum that hosts some 45,000 visitors a year, teaching them about the history of Irish whiskey distilling. In March of this year, Locke's went to its past to forge a future as a working historic distillery.

For the first time in 50 years, the distillery fired up the stills to create its own spirit. Distillery manager Brian Quinn said that with the distillery celebrating its 250th anniversary, the time was right to breathe new life into the museum.

Quinn and the rest of the Cooley team will rely upon an historic small pot still to give Locke's a unique Irish whiskey signature. Quinn is excited about the possibilities and believes the end result will be a spirit that will make the ghosts of past Locke's glories proud. "An old man in Kilbeggan said there is no bad whiskey, just some of it is better than others," Quinn said.

The Cooley/Locke's team expects theirs will be on the better side.



Locke's Distillery museum in Kilbeggan, Ireland