

Not your average G&T? How this Irish distillery is shaking up the way gin is made

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Source: Glendalough Distillery

‘We want it to taste as if you picked it from the field yourself.’

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DURING THE EARLY 2000s, every single millilitre of Irish whiskey consumed around the world was being produced in one of three distilleries.

It was a far cry from the 18th and 19th century, when we led the world’s whiskey trade. At its peak, we produced around 12 million cases from 88 licensed distilleries.

In the last few years however, the country has experienced an explosion of new Irish gin distilleries. For some, it’s because it’s quicker and easier to make than whiskey. But Glendalough Distillery, in the wilds of Wicklow, decided to make it the hard way.

The most popular gins of the last few decades are flavoured with dried, stable, reliable ingredients that produce the same flavours, batch after batch. Glendalough decided to do something different. They used fresh ingredients – leaves, flowers and berries that had been picked in the Wicklow countryside that day.

It was something that made their gin stand out during the midst of the gin revival, and foraging here was key. Head distiller Ciaran ‘Rowdy’ Rooney explains:

The gins most of us are used to are made with botanicals and spices, which are probably more consistent, and definitely easier to get. But with our gin, we’re trying to capture a sense of place in a bottle.

Glendalough challenges the typical gin flavours we were used to in the past by using freshly picked ingredients – in fact, most of the ingredients that are foraged go into the still the same day that they are picked.



Source: Glendalough Distillery

Making gin while the sun shines

They then considered their environment of the Wicklow Mountains for flavour inspiration, as head distiller Ciaran ‘Rowdy’ Rooney explains:

We looked around and thought ‘we’re in the garden of Ireland’. Gin was showing revival in parts of the UK and we wondered if we was possible to source our ingredients in the Wicklow Mountains.

They quickly made contact with Geraldine Kavanagh, a local forager who had grown up in Wicklow and has an extensive knowledge of the local Wicklow flora. These days, Kavanagh forages for the distillery every day from March to November.

She's out with her wicker baskets everyday and ingredients are put in the still the day that they're picked. We want it to taste as if you picked it from the field yourself.

For Geraldine, it's an enjoyable job but it's important that it's done in a way that is kind to the surrounding flora and fauna:

There are two crucial parts to my job – timing and sustainability. The timing of when I pick and how quickly I get them into the still. And then, how and where I pick. Some plants need to be cut one by one with a scissors to protect their roots.

Some of the sturdier plants like pine shoots go straight into the pot and are stewed with the alcohol. More delicate plants like wild rose petals must go into a basket to allow only vapour to pass through and extract the flavour.



Source: Glendalough Distillery

The wild cards

Though it might be ‘the bane of both farmers and firemen’, the beautiful yellow flowers from gorse are one of their main ingredients for their Spring Gin, which produces a strong coconut flavour: “it’s very hard to tell the difference between that and coconut in a blind taste test”, shares Rooney.

Out of cucumber? Remember those things we used to stick on our friend’s backs as kids? Stickybacks, as they are known, make for a brilliant alternative. In fact, if you stick them in water overnight there’s virtually no difference in taste to cucumber – and it’s a natural

antioxidant, and is known for cleansing the lymph system.

A huge amount of the ingredients we use would have been used in the past as tonics, or have a strong history of medical use.

Elsewhere in their mix they use a lot of elderflower, scots pine and douglas fir, which both have “an absolutely amazing scent of fresh orange off them”, according to Rooney.



Source: Glendalough Distillery

Ginning up for the future

And at the heart of everything, is ensuring everything is in place for a sustainable future in the mountains around Glendalough:

We can't just pick all of an ingredient in one area. We need to be very conscious of sustainability and where we forage. We need these things to grow back as we'll need them all again next year.



Sound like something you'd love to taste? Glendalough Gin stock nine different varieties of small-batch gin using wild ingredients from the mountains surrounding their distillery, which you can [get your hands on here](#). Or you can try their most popular, award-winning Wild Botanical Gin [right here](#).

About the Author

Glendalough Gin

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