



A CONVERSATION WITH **SLANE IRISH WHISKEY** CO-FOUNDER ALEX CONYNGHAM

Alex Conyngham might not be a household name on this side of the Atlantic, but over in Ireland, the Earl of Mount Charles (as he's known) and his family's Slane Caste are synonymous with epic rock concerts and gorgeously groomed grounds.

Here in the states, Conyngham is hoping to make a name for himself and his family via a new venture: Slane Irish Whiskey. Thanks to a partnership with Brown-Forman, Conyngham is now stepping foot onto a different type of stage to perform in front of a completely new audience.



START AT THE BEGINNING. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO PARTNER WITH BROWN-FORMAN TO CREATE SLANE IRISH WHISKEY?

Alex Conyngham: The partnership with Brown-Forman actually started over lunch between myself and Garvin Brown IV. When the two of us got together, we very quickly realized we had quite a few things in common. I knew they wanted to get into the Irish whiskey category and I needed a partner to bring the project to realization because it's a very substantial investment.

Most importantly, however, Brown-Forman is a family business and for myself and dad (Henry Mountcharles) to allow another company to come

into the heart of our home, which effectively they have, there has to be a lot of trust. And we trust Brown-Forman because they're always thinking about the next generation and the long term. And that's how we have to behave as a family as well. So there's a lot of shared values.

TELL US A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND THE SLANE CASTLE.

My family, the Conyngham's, have been in Slane since 1703. When my ancestor Henry Conyngham purchased the estate, he took out a big loan to do it. The estate is now more than 1,600 acres and on that we grow about 2,000 tons of barley a year. Obviously barely is one of the raw materials for making whiskey. That was one of the reasons we got into the business.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE BOYNE VALLEY AND THE SLANE GROUNDS THAT MAKE IT IDEAL FOR WHISKEY PRODUCTION?

If you go back to the 1800s when Irish whiskey was really in its previous heyday, there were actually a lot of distilleries in the Boyne Valley. They were there for two reasons: Firstly, it's all a limestone, bedrock basin which creates ideal water quality for making whiskey. And then secondly, you've got good fertile farmland for actually growing the other raw material, which is the barley. And then the River Boyne exits at a port called Drogheda and that provided a good means of exporting the whiskey.

So all of that added up to making the Boyne Valley the perfect place for setting up Irish whiskey distilleries. So we're kind of bringing distilling back to the Boyne Valley.

HOW DOES THE REGION'S CLIMATE EFFECT THE BARRELED WHISKEY?

The climate in Ireland and indeed in Scotland as well, is a little gentler than where most of the distilleries will be located in the U.S. So that means you lose less. The angel's share is lower. The maturation takes a bit longer. It's kind of gentler. And I think that helps to account for the softer flavor profile of Irish whiskey.

SLANE USES THREE DIFFERENT CASKS TO MATURE ITS WHISKEY IN, CORRECT?

We do.

WHAT LED TO YOUR DECISION TO INNOVATE LIKE THAT?

Part of it comes from the expertise that Brown-Forman brought to the table. As well as the barrels themselves.

If you look at the first barrel, it's a virgin American oak barrel. Which is obviously how American whiskey is made. So it's not unique to have virgin oak in an Irish or a Scotch whiskey. However, what is unique about this one is it was customized specifically for Slane.

It's very heavily toasted. And I've tried unsuccessfully to get into the toasting room in the Brown-Forman Cooperage but they have proprietary technology that allows them to toast, not just char, the wood. And that treats the wood sugars differently and it produces some love-

ly flavor notes. Slane Irish whiskey has, for example, a nice vanilla hint on the nose. And a lot of that is coming from that virgin oak cask.

WHAT ABOUT THE SHERRY BARRELS?

That one was a little bit unusual for Brown-Forman because they quite rightly pointed out to me that they make very good barrels themselves. Why would we spend more money on someone else's barrels?

The reason is that I grew up admiring Irish whiskeys that had a sherry influence in them. So we went out to Spain, myself and Brown-Forman, and we found an Oloroso sherry producer that also builds their own barrels. The Oloroso sherry sits in that barrel for two years. The sherry stays with them in Spain. They sell that. We ship the barrel to Ireland and then put some of the whiskey into it. And even with a few months in that barrel it already acquires some lovely dark fruit raisin notes and maybe a little brown spice. And it's added a lot of body and complexity to the liquid.

THERE'S ALSO AN EX-AMERICAN WHISKEY BARREL. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THOSE?

So what's interesting about that is if you're an Irish distillery, generally speaking you tend to buy your barrels in bulk, most of them are ex-American whiskey barrels. And you're either buying through a barrel dealer or you might be buying direct from a distillery. And that distillery might make a number of different liquids. The result is that you don't actually know what liquid was in that barrel. Because of the partnership with Brown-Forman, we can now delve into barrels where we know exactly what was in it before.

What we decided to do was take some Jack Daniel's Tennessee
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Whiskey barrels and put it into those. As a result it's taken on some of those Tennessee whiskey notes. Principally I would say a lovely ripe banana note, along with a bit of butterscotch and caramel as well.

IN THE U.S. IRISH WHISKEY IS REALLY SURGING RIGHT NOW. WHERE DO YOU SEE SLANE FITTING IN? AND HOW DO YOU SEE IT GRABBING CONSUMERS' ATTENTION?

I think if you look at specifically the blended Irish whiskey category, and by that I'm talking about the premium segment that would include, say, the top three brands at the moment, Slane is a new entrant into that. What we're trying to offer is a bit more flavor. So we've deliberately designed an Irish whiskey that's still smooth. It's still accessible. It's affordable, but it does offer a bit more in flavor, it's deliberately bigger and bolder. I think flavor is what people are looking for now. And that's what we've been banking on and we're getting a great response already. We're selling well in Ireland already. It's the early days. But I think we're off to a good start. ■



GREG FERRIERI, BROWN-FORMAN; JOE GIARDINA, BREAKTHRU BEVERAGE; JESSICA RANDALL, BROWN-FORMAN; ALEX CONYNGHAM, SLANE IRISH WHISKEY; KEVIN DUNN, JEFF SCARRY, BOTH WITH BREAKTHRU BEVERAGE; DUSTIN HALL AND BRIAN RILEY, BOTH WITH BROWN-FORMAN; AT THE MARYLAND SLANE IRISH WHISKEY KICK-OFF MEETING.



AT THE WASHINGTON, DC SLANE IRISH WHISKEY KICK-OFF MEETING ARE TODD FISCHER, SEAN MACDONALD, MELVIN WARD, MATT AUBREY, CHRIS PHAIR, JORDAN DAVIDOWITZ, WILL FEDEN, CHRISTINA OH, BRYANT HALL, ALL WITH BREAKTHRU BEVERAGE; ALEX CONYNGHAM, SLANE IRISH WHISKEY; DUSTIN HALL, GREG FERRIERI, BOTH WITH BROWN-FORMAN; MARIA DENTON, AMOS JUNG, LOKESH JAISWAL, DEE DEE KENNEDY, MARK YOON, AND SCOTT KIM, ALL WITH BREAKTHRU BEVERAGE.



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THE NATURE OF IRISH WHISKEY