

Complexity And Scalability

An Interview with Mark Reynier, Chief Executive Officer and Founder, Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum

EDITORS' NOTE Mark Reynier has over 40 years' experience in the drinks industry – 20 years in wine, and 20 years in spirits. A maverick entrepreneur who has brought terroir to the spirits world, he began his career in the London wine trade in 1980, formed *La Réserve* – one of London's premier wine and spirit merchants – before resurrecting the mothballed Bruichladdich Distillery in 2000. The distillery was sold to Rémy Cointreau in 2012. Reynier then bought the former Guinness brewery in Waterford in 2014, transforming a state-of-the-art brewery into a modern distillery, and in July 2018 commenced building the game-changing \$30 million Renegade Rum Distillery in Grenada.



Mark Reynier

COMPANY BRIEF *Waterford Whisky* (waterfordwhisky.com) is on a quest to unearth whisky's most natural flavors. Unashamedly influenced by the world's greatest winemakers, Waterford Distillery brings the same intellectual drive, methodology, and rigor to unearth the nuances that make Waterford Whisky the most profound single malt ever created. Across southern Ireland, warmed by the Gulf Stream, temperate, moist air crosses fertile soils to produce a verdant landscape and the world's finest barley. Since barley is the source of malt whisky's complex flavors, it makes abundant sense to focus on where and how the barley is cultivated. Those flavors are shaped by place, by the soils that nourish its roots, and by the microclimate in which it ripens. By terroir, Waterford is a whisky of the world, born of Irish barley.

Renegade Rum (renegaderum.com) is a game-changing rum distillery located in Grenada, using fresh sugar cane juice rather than generic molasses (a by-product of sugar production), grown on the diverse terroirs of Grenada in the Caribbean. Renegade Rum began producing its first spirit in the autumn of 2020. The cane plant, rum's primary raw ingredient, is the natural source of its flavor. Thus, the land on which it grows and its microclimate determines its character.

Will you discuss your career journey in the wine and spirits industry?

My first job was to bottle and label a Cotes de Blaye in September 1980, having spent a year in

the French vineyards at Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Alsace and Burgundy. I ran the cellars of my father's wine company before he sold it to a West Country brewer – Eldridge Pope, one of the last standing traditional brewers in Thomas Hardy country. As well as brewing, my first whisky experience was the preparation and bottling of the brewery's own label whisky blend. The heady aromas of decanting and vating butts of Highland Park in a dark, dank cellar was a formative experience. I started my own wine

company in 1985, importing and retailing principally Burgundy wines. Burgundy – and other French vineyards – were undergoing a renaissance.

After WW2, European wines had rather lost their way, their soul, terroir, thanks to a calamitous combination of poor weather, cooperative wine making, excessive agrochemical use, lack of investment and arcane techniques which favored volume over quality.

Following the humiliation of the Judgement of Paris, the 1980s saw a new generation taking back control of the vineyards having learnt the science of winemaking in California and Australia, and the importance of modern technology and equipment. Modern winemaking, historic terroirs and lower yields saw a renaissance that I witnessed firsthand: in the cellar temperature control, stainless steel, pneumatic presses and wood integration; in the vineyard new viticulture principles, organics, and biodynamics.

The origin of the flavor is the plant, the vine, influenced by its nurture – the microclimate, soil, topography of what we know as terroir. It struck me that as wine starts with the vineyard and the grape, whisky starts with the barley field and the grain. Why not apply the same principles to barley, the most flavorsome cereal in the world, the very origin of whisky's identity?

My first foray was renovating and developing the Islay distillery of Bruichladdich, creating Botanist gin, Octomore and Port Charlotte. Remy Cointreau acquired that business in 2012, so following the barley, I moved 240 miles south to Waterford on Ireland's south coast – almost the same latitude as London.

What was your vision for founding Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum and how are the brands positioned in the market?

I am a natural flavor seeker. Of the 2,000 barley flavor compounds that are the taste of whisky, 60 percent are influenced by terroir. Greatly inspired by the legendary grand vins of Bordeaux, the sensual grand marques of Champagne, and their principle of isolating terroir-derived flavor then to assemble creatively for maximum complexity – why not for single malt or rum?

Both Waterford and Renegade share that same DNA, the principle of liberating natural flavor, farm by farm, via modern fermentation and considered distillation, that can be layered to create the most compelling, textured and profound taste experience possible. It means going back to the farm, our base unit, and setting up the logistics required to track the terroir and trace the transparency.

From there, using those base units – the building blocks – we have brought forth a core range of Cuvée Concepts. For single malt: The Waterford – Cuvée Koffi; along with cuvées



Waterford Whisky

made up of Organic barley (Gaia) and Peated barley (Fumo). For rum, this is expressed as both Single Farm Cuvées (for we can assemble the components from within the farm) as well as Cuvée Nova, our All-Island flavor extravaganza.

Both brands are built around the Cuvée Concept at one end, giving us complexity and scalability; and terroir-driven precision at the other. We can run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

How do you define the Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum difference in their respective categories?

The rules for whisky production are well established, which is not at all the case for rum, where anything goes.

Whether it's a dram or a drum, we are not trying to make the cheapest liter, but the most naturally flavorsome. Waterford is double distilled single malt, more associated with Scotch whisky. It appears to me the whisky world, fixated on the cheapest liter possible, has painted itself into a qualitative cul-de-sac that's all about the finish. Waterford turns this on its head: it's not the remedial "finish" we're interested in, but the very start: barley. We are the biggest distiller of organic and biodynamic whisky – we are intrigued by natural flavor to the extent we resurrect ancient, long lost barley varieties to explore their originality. Via our back label TÉIREOIR code and QR code we are able to demonstrate agricultural produce over manufactured products. The same level of provenance is provided via the Renegade Rum CaneCode, where reliable authenticity and demonstrable authority in the rum world are in woefully short supply.

Will you provide an overview of the Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum distilleries?

Waterford Distillery is located in the Viking city of Waterford, in the South East of Ireland, right in the key barley growing region. It was a former Guinness brewery – indeed it has been a brewery in some form since 1792 – that we transformed into a single malt distillery via the addition of two pot stills I had previously liberated from the defunct Inverleven facility in Dumbarton many years ago. We were up and running in 2016. We have distilled circa 35 Single Farm Origins per year, 110+ distinct Single Farm Origins to date, some organic, some biodynamic, some growing heritage barley. Some of the farms we have peated using real Irish peat for the first time in generations. Principles I learned by fine winemaking are applied to whisky: farm by farm for individuality; pneumatic pressing for purity; week-long (twice industry standard), temperature-controlled, malolactic fermentation for intensity; and the best French and American oak from diverse sources for harmony. We are able to bottle Single Farm Origins, which offer precision of place; or we can bring these component building blocks together to create complex and compelling cuvées.

Renegade Rum, in the Caribbean island of Grenada, is a different distillery entirely, a radical new-build distillery on the north eastern coast designed around environmental

sensitivities and to do one thing: to distill fresh sugar cane terroir by terroir, field by field. We are interested only in sugar cane – pure cane, just juice – for that is the source of rum's natural flavor. But there's more: in Grenada we run our own farming operation, CaneCo, across over a dozen farms along the island's coast: different cane varieties that had been propagated from fresh material, grown across a vast array of distinct terroirs. Some of the fields begin from the distillery's own doorstep. We then harvest fresh sugar cane ourselves, then mill, ferment, distill and mature the rum all at the distillery – which is sustainably powered by its own biomass boiler – combining state-of-the-art skill from around the world, and the knowledge I had learned at Bruichladdich and Waterford, to produce an array of the most compelling and flavorsome rums possible. We can celebrate rum made from a single field of cane – our MicrOrigins – or, like Waterford, like the Grand Vins of Bordeaux, bring them together in cuvées for the ultimate complexity.



Renegade Rum

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for growth for Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum?

Both Waterford and Renegade are unashamedly for the gastronome and the gourmet; the connoisseur and the curious; people who rejoice in natural flavor and for whom life is simply too short for disappointment. As the bon viveur (and famous British war time leader) once said, "my tastes are simple. I am easily satisfied with the best." These are gamechanger brands, taking single malt and real rum to a new level by going back to basics, to the literal roots of barley and cane.

How important is the focus on sustainability for Waterford Whisky and Renegade Rum?

It seems that many forget that at its heart single malt and cane rum are agricultural produce, so responsible farming methods with strict agronomy – regenerative, organics and biodynamics – are pivotal. They are not newfangled ideas. Before the advent of the agrochemical industry from repurposing munitions and the Haber-Bosch synthesis around the time of WW1, all agriculture was organic, as far back as the last ice age, for 16,000 years everything was biodynamic. We farm our primary raw ingredient locally; we alone list the ingredients on the back label: barley, yeast and water. Our waste streams undergo a five-part treatment process, the solids feeding pigs or being composted for fertilizer. In Grenada, ash, with vinasse and bagasse, are composted, wastewater is phytoremediation by soil microbes and plant roots end up as fish food. Excess steam, derived from biomass combustion of milled cane, produces distillery electricity from an Organic Rankine Cycle turbine.

Did you always know that you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own brands?

Not really, until I was about 25. Explaining entrepreneurialism to my son I used an analogy that on life's pathway one comes across closed doors that bar one's passage. Every now and then a door, an opportunity, will open up. Some will have the courage or indeed madness to go through that door and exploit the chance; others will rationalize every reason why they should not. The first "door" I came to, I hesitated, scared to jump, it took a shove from my brother-in-law to push me through it.

One needs to be a disruptor, maverick, iconoclast – all of which I take as a compliment – to go against the proverbial grain. Bringing to life an idea, nurturing a concept, spreading a vision is what it's all about. And that's painful. The risk, the frustrations – the ups and downs, wins and losses – creating something special that hopefully, one day, will give enormous pleasure both across the world and over decades. And just perhaps, someone, somewhere, will raise a glass to how it all started.

With all that you have achieved during your more than 40 years in the industry, are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to reflect on your accomplishments?

No, not really. There was a moment recently at Renegade, after the COVID nightmare, when we couldn't commission the newly built distillery – all the blood, sweat, toil, and tears – when for the first time I poured myself an inaugural bottling, a Renegade "MicrOrigin." Despite having tasted the rums many, many times in the lab and the warehouse, I realized I had never actually simply sat down and enjoyed the rum in its own right, for the hell of it, as anyone else would do. That was quite some moment as it dawns on you just what one has given birth to, just how special it is.

Seeing Bruichladdich, under Remy's stewardship, going from strength to strength, and quietly thinking to one's self: "I did that." ●