

A photograph of two women standing on a row of wooden whisky barrels in a rural New Zealand landscape. The woman on the left is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved blouse and black leggings, while the woman on the right is wearing a dark polo shirt and shorts. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background shows rolling hills and a clear blue sky.

# A NEW WAY FORWARD

WORDS JACOPO MAZZEO

*Distillers in New Zealand have agreed to a new set of production and labelling standards to define the country's whiskies*

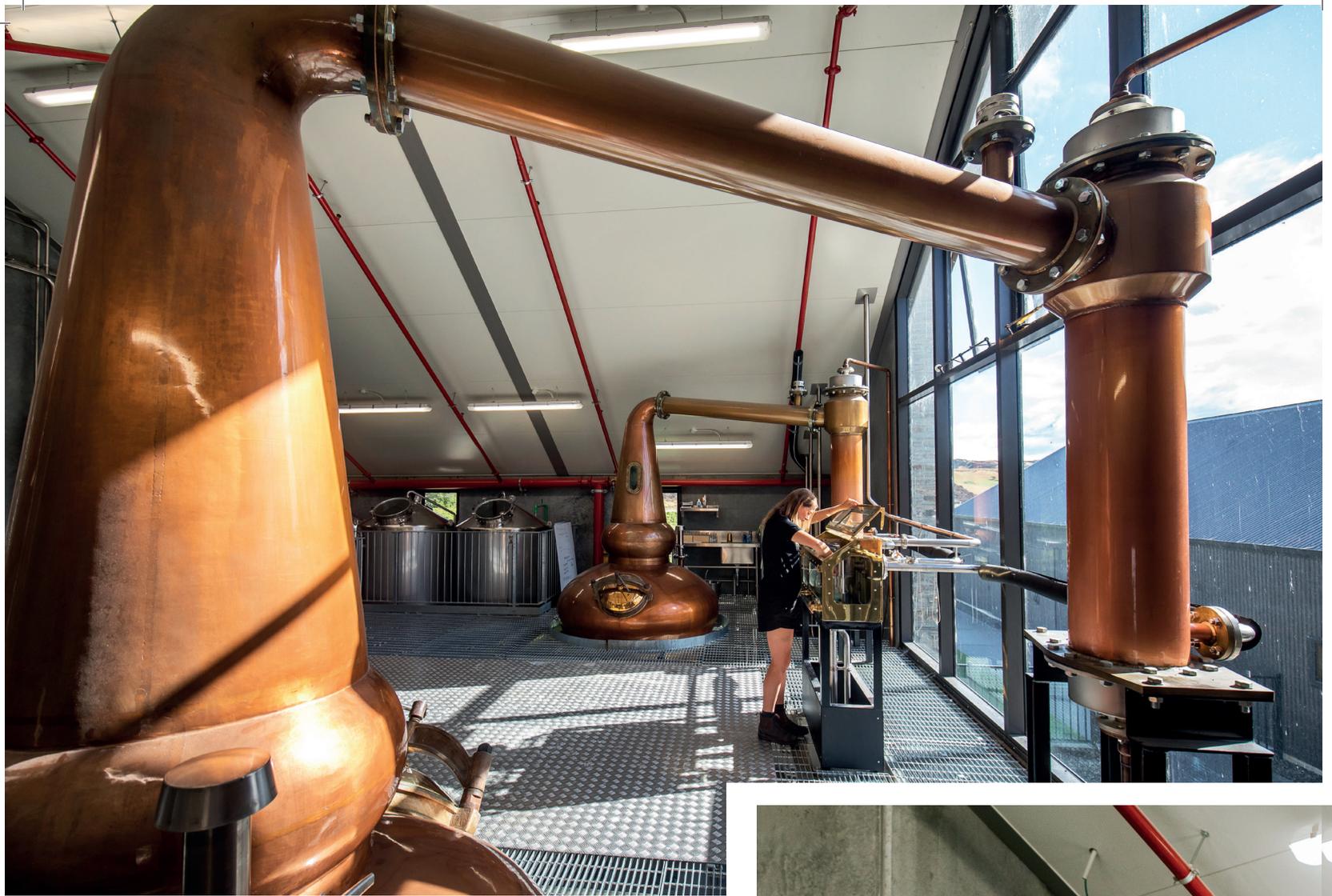


If heavily detailed restaurant menus and the rise of single-origin coffee are any indication of what we're looking for when we consume food and drinks today, it is that we crave authenticity. Drinkers demand transparency on ingredients and production techniques, an issue that segments of the rum industry have long been advocating to tackle.

The whisky world is susceptible to the trend, too. In February 2021, the Japan Spirits & Liqueurs Makers Association responded to such criticism by releasing a protocol to regulate the production of spirits labeled as Japanese whisky. Simultaneously, Distilled Spirits Aotearoa (DSA), the association that represents New Zealand's distilled spirits manufacturers, released a set of guidelines for the labelling of New Zealand whisky.

"It was an absolute coincidence," says strategist, broadcaster, writer and DSA chairwoman Tash McGill, "but certainly the sign of a larger trend." At present, distilleries are free to choose whether to adhere to the guidelines when calling a product 'New Zealand whisky', but the protocol is expected to be formally recognised into New Zealand legislation over the next two to three years, during which time it will likely undergo at least one formal revision. According to McGill, the guidelines hold a point of tension between New Zealand's Scotch whisky heritage, which influences a large segment of the country's producers, and the country's 'New World' whisky status.

"We need to leave room for innovation while not compromising on the guardrails that will protect and preserve quality," she says. "Thankfully, all currently operating whisky distilleries and distilleries in construction have so far agreed." A goal that, according to Soren Crabb of 1919 Distilling, the DSA achieved through an open and collaborative process. Crabb points out that involving both large producers as well as early-stage whisky



distillers gave the DSA board a unique perspectives from all sides.

For the last decades, there has been a limited number of whisky distilleries in New Zealand: the country even found itself without a single whisky distillery for a few years, when Willowbank shut down in the late 1990s. “As more and more distilleries start, though, we see this step [of releasing the guidelines] as really important,” explains Mat Thomson of Thomson Whisky, one of the pioneers of the country’s revival. For him, setting the bar high at such an early stage of the Kiwi whisky industry’s renaissance is a crucial step to building a healthy future, “before too many distilleries or brands go down a route that we would consider unacceptable”, as he puts it. “We expect [these guidelines]’ impact to be very positive – it will create a level playing field, with a focus on quality, and will be very beneficial to the drinker as they will have greater trust in New Zealand brands.”

With a rather loose New Zealand spirits legislation looming in the background (“Effectively you could make anything from white ethanol and just add flavours afterwards,” says McGill), the new guidelines’ final

purpose is to communicate a sense of quality as it grows on the international market. Indeed, although Kiwi whisky already benefits from a premium average price, McGill highlights that’s mostly due to issues of small volumes and high demand. She is confident that the guidelines will help producers focus on quality and authenticity, thus ensuring that premium prices can be retained as the industry grows.

“We’re currently producing approximately 250,000 litres a year, which is tiny. Only two distilleries are making what I would call large volumes: Pokeno and Cardrona.” Even so, Cardrona is tiny in a world context. “There’s just a single pair of copper pot stills,” says CEO and founder Desiree Whitaker. “The wash still is 2,000 litres, and the spirit still is 1,300 litres.” According to McGill, 80 per cent of Kiwi whisky production is currently destined for the domestic market, while a mere 20 per cent goes abroad – with the majority being what Cardrona sends to the UK. However, McGill highlights that the DSA expects these figures to change dramatically over the next five to six years, “which is why it’s such an ideal time to work together to put some guidelines and some frameworks in



**Opening pages:**  
The team at Cardrona Distillery. Left to right: Desiree Reid-Whitaker, Mikayla Austin, Sarah Elsom, Jamel Barber.

**These pages, left to right:**  
Distilling at Cardrona; The Cardrona Distillery.

place. As the big expansion happens we can all move in one direction.”

With New Zealand’s Scottish heritage engrained in much of the country’s whisky production, the DSA looked to the regulations for the production of Scotch whisky for inspiration when compiling the new guidelines. A number of noticeable differences, however, have attracted some criticism. The minimum maturation period in cask, set to just two years (it’s three for Scotch, Irish, and Japanese whisky), has been one of the most controversial decisions. McGill explained that it was motivated by New Zealand’s diverse climatic conditions (markedly wet on the South Island’s west coast, semi-arid in Central Otago, subtropical in the North Island’s far north) and that the industry is currently researching how such conditions affect the liquid and impact maturation in cask.

“We are sited at 600m above sea level and it is aridly dry,” says Whitaker of her Central Otago-based Cardrona

Distillery. “The temperature varies between 40°C in summer, and -15°C in winter. All of these factors impact the way the spirit interacts with the wood and the angel’s share. The elevation means that alcohol evaporates at a lower temperature [while] the low humidity changes the ratio of alcohol to water in the angel’s share.”

The ban on additional enzymes to be used in single malt whisky caused further frictions: “One distillery has challenged the ban... we suspect that they were looking to increase their yield by using enzymes,” says Thomson. “However, if you use good-quality malt there should be no problem. Distillers’ malt has very high enzymatic activity anyway, so there should be no need to use them for that reason.”

While the DSA has been strict on the use of additional enzymes, the guidelines do not require that mashing, fermenting, distilling, maturation and bottling happen in a single facility. McGill justifies the decision by stressing

## SUMMARY OF NEW ZEALAND WHISKY GUIDELINES

To be labelled as ‘New Zealand whisky’ a product must conform to the following criteria:

- Mashed, fermented, distilled, matured and bottled in New Zealand
- Vatted [blended] malt may only contain New Zealand single malts
- New Zealand blended whisky may only contain New Zealand malt whisky and New Zealand grain whisky. Substitutions to malted barley grain must be clearly stated on the front label (i.e. single malt rye whisky)
- New Zealand single malt whisky can be made exclusively from 100 per cent malted cereal grain, water and yeast and batch-distilled in a single distillery, in pot stills made predominantly of copper
- All of the fermentable sugars must be derived from cereal grain, enzymes permitted in ‘New Zealand whisky’ but not in ‘single malt New Zealand whisky’
- Colouring may be added for the purpose of consistency and then only natural colouring (E150a) may be used
- Maximum distillation of 94.8% alcohol by volume
- Bottled at a minimum of 40% alcohol by volume
- Matured in wooden casks of max. 700 litres for not less than two years. Age statements must state the age of the youngest whisky
- The production of ‘New Zealand whisky’ cannot involve commercially produced liquid malt extract, flavouring ingredients (such as wine, beer, honey, sweeteners or spices), or wood chips during maturation

[Adapted from New Zealand Whisky Guidelines and Definitions, February 25, 2021. Distilled Spirits Aotearoa.]





that some award-winning producers would have been otherwise left out at such a delicate, early stage of the industry's growth on international markets: "It would mean some producers of award-winning whisky would have to stop, change or re-up investment pretty drastically – hard to say to a credible gold medal winner. Part of [our] collegial approach has been to ensure that the regulations don't push any current producers out of the market [while guiding] the whole industry towards greater clarity and quality."

Similarly, the DSA moved away from requiring the use of stills made entirely from copper, as that would have been a barrier for existing producers or new ones who might come along. "Copper is really expensive everywhere but particularly expensive here in NZ", says McGill. But while New Zealand's geographical isolation means that certain materials can be expensive or challenging to access, it also paved the way for new opportunities. The guidelines grant distilleries significant freedom when it comes to wood types, acknowledging a trend that is seeing producers championing native timbers for maturation and alternative cask finishes.



**This page, clockwise from top:** Matthew Thomson of Thomson Whisky; Checking the Still at 1919; Sampling at 1919 Distilling.

"What is currently being produced is so diverse. Producers are seeking quality but are also determined to use what is available to us locally," says McGill. "I see a desire to bring in what we can of our own local flavour, for instance with the use of Manuka wood, or wine barrels from our various winemakers. We've been exploring how we can use local timbers and one

distillery is smoking their malts with swamp beech."

Although it is too early to homogeneously define a New Zealand whisky character, Crabb believes that it will come organically on the back of innovations such as the use of distinctive wood types or original grain bills. "With some exciting launches planned over the next year, it won't be long until we will get a taste of a [Kiwi whisky profile]. New Zealand is an island nation, so I feel that salt and salinity will be present for distilleries located in the north, while down south they have hotter summers and colder winters which will ultimately affect ageing," he says.

Kiwi whisky is still a small player in the global spirits game but, with growth on the horizon, the DSA's new production guidelines have the potential to help shape it into a quality-led and innovative industry. ○