

## The Irish Whiskey Renaissance: A Revolution of Sorts?

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Irish whiskey is back into spotlight. Distillery owners won't fail to point out that Irish whiskey is now the fastest growing spirit in the world and that the sales are expected to keep on increasing by 60% between 2014 and 2019 (Drinks Industry Ireland, 2015). The industry has indeed been on the rise and more particularly so for the past ten years. So much so that the pace at which new projects or openings are announced has made it difficult to keep up. The current surge is a welcomed turnaround for an industry which was on the verge of disappearing 40 years ago. This rise has been coined by many as an 'Irish whiskey renaissance', while others use terms such as 'resurgence' or 'revival', all emphasizing the notion of 'rebirth' of the industry. The Teeling Whiskey Company has gone as far as naming one of its whiskeys 'Revival' – surprisingly, a 15 year-old rum barrel finished single malt. A closer look at the history of the Irish distilling industry or at the nature of some of the products at the forefront of this movement shows that the idea of a renaissance applies indeed. However, if it is undeniable that the interest for Irish whiskey has been 'revived' over the past three decades, the Irish distilling industry seems to be rapidly going beyond this rebirth stage and many clues show that what is currently going on with Irish whiskey may well be much more than a mere renaissance. Making the most of the momentum, by experimenting with their products while keeping a very open mind on consumption patterns, Irish whiskey producers are now establishing new standards. The industry might actually be undergoing a revolution that could change the Irish whiskey landscape for decades to come.

Looking back at the history of the Irish distilling industry, what is currently happening in the sector can indeed be described as a 'renaissance', especially when considering the etymology of the French term, meaning 'new birth' (*renaissance* being the act of *renaître* or 'to be born again'). Back in the second half of the 19th century, Irish whiskey used to be the leading whiskey category in the world (Mulryan, 2002, pp.35-41). During this 'golden age', the industry was thriving. Unfortunately, a series of events, such as the missed opportunity (on the praiseworthy grounds of quality and tradition) to adopt the column still method and its resultant 'blended whiskey' – a refusal that benefited the Scottish competition, and later the introduction of prohibition in the United States or the War of Independence, all took a serious toll on Irish whiskey. The Irish distilling industry underwent a seemingly unstoppable decline throughout most of the 20th century. By 1975 there were only two operating distilleries left in Ireland (Midleton and Old Bushmills).

They were joined in 1987 by the Cooley Distillery and then by the Kilbeggan Distillery, bringing up the total of operating Irish distillery to four in 2007. With these low figures in mind, one might be surprised while looking at the Irish distilling landscape in 2016: there are currently twelve operating distilleries in Ireland and at least a dozen more are planning to open in the coming years (McCabe, 2015). Sales-wise, the numbers are also revealing: in 1988 Jameson sold less than half a million cases worldwide; by 2012 this number had increased eightfold, to reach four million cases (Davy, Research Dept, 2011, pp.1-4). Inspired by Pernod Ricard's success, other major alcohol companies (such as Diageo, William Grant & Sons or Beam) have invested in Irish distilleries and Irish whiskey brands. And along with big companies' investments in large plants, independent 'craft distilleries', once the core of the Irish drinks industry, also started to reappear. All these numbers are all the more meaningful when considering the cost and time-frames involved in setting up a distillery and making whiskey (McCabe, 2015). Thus, from that standpoint, the industry has indeed undeniably been 'revived'. But more than the infrastructures and sales, very specific products, some unique to Ireland, have also made a comeback.

The past two decades have witnessed the come back on the forefront of a product that is considered by many (and rightly so) as the quintessence of Irish whiskey: Irish Pot Still Whiskey (or Single Pot Still Whiskey when made by a single distillery and formerly sometimes labelled as 'Pure Pot Still Whiskey'). Characterized by a unique process consisting in adding unmalted barley to the conventional all-malted barley mash, pot still is singular to Ireland. The practice of including unmalted 'green' barley (and sometimes other types of grain, like wheat or rye) with malted barley in the mash started as a way to limit the weight of the 1785 malt tax but it soon became an Irish specificity to the point of being considered as a 'tradition' (O'Connor, 2015, pp.25-30). Distilled in a copper pot still, the result of this uncommon and typically Irish combination is a characteristically 'spicy' whiskey, along with a thicker and oilier texture (sometimes unflatteringly described as 'lathery' for lack of a better term) than most other types of whiskies. But however traditional and unique, Irish pot still almost vanished from the whiskey scene entirely. In its very successful attempt to revive the production of Irish whiskey, the French multinational group Pernod Ricard focused most of its marketing strategy on Jameson. In the process, the iconic brand was transformed into a less challenging whiskey, diluting down the full-body flavour of pot still by blending with column

still spirit (while keeping a certain amount of pot still whiskey in the blend, contributing to the final product's characteristic taste) coming up with a product that was easy to drink, smooth, and offer an accessible counterpart to the more challenging Scotch whiskeys, especially for younger or unexperienced drinkers. Jameson positioned itself as a brand fit for the *craic* of an Irish pub (or any type of bar for that matter), as an easily mixable product, far from complexity and 'seriousness' then associated with Scotch whisky. In 2010 the brand launched its 'easy going' marketing campaign, which depicted Jameson drinkers as the most easy-going people, once again emphasizing the supposed absence of serious-mindedness and complexity surrounding Irish whiskey. Following Jameson's success, other brands, such as Tullamore D.E.W., opted for a similar marketing strategy. Though gaining in popularity, by the late 1990s Irish whiskey was mostly reduced down to the image of a 'triple-distilled for smoothness, easy to drink' spirit. One can see the danger of such an association: it marginalised any Irish whiskey which did not correspond to this new standard, and therefore threatened the existence of the already endangered Irish pot still whiskey. Thankfully, a couple of pot still brands managed to survive in this phase of mutation of Irish whiskey. And if the Irish whiskey renaissance was undeniably triggered by Jameson, and other lighter style whiskeys, it is Irish pot still whiskey, with brands such as Redbreast (also owned by Pernod Ricard and made by the Midleton Distillery) and Green Spot, that helped Irish whiskey gain back its respectability and its recognition as a high quality product among guided amateurs and connoisseurs. These brands showed the world that Irish whiskey could be much more than the 'triple-distilled for smoothness' whiskey that has been ubiquitously marketed by Jameson for the past 20 years. Single pot still whiskey offers a serious and interesting alternative to Scotch single malt. It also testifies of a strong expertise and craftsmanship among Irish distillers. Acknowledging these facts, other brands went back to their old ways and started producing pot still whiskey again: Powers for instance upgraded its range of products with the addition in 2012 of two single pot still whiskeys (the very well received Powers John's Lane and Powers Signature Release). Paddy also released a single pot still whiskey in 2013 to celebrate the centenary of the brand. Since 2014, the 'World Whiskies Awards' have featured a 'pot still' category – in which Redbreast has thrived. Irish pot still is now once again praised by connoisseurs and critics alike. Once a popular Irish standard, then fallen out of love and now back from the grave, Irish pot still, with its unique production process, flavour profile and ties to Ireland, may be considered as the hobby-horse of the Irish whiskey renaissance. It also perfectly exemplifies how well this notion of renaissance itself applies.

Maybe even more 'unique to Ireland' (or at least presented as such) another 'traditional' Irish spirit has recently made its way back to the spirits retailers' shelves:

poitín. A lot can be discussed about poitín, from its origins, to its evolution along centuries, to the problems raised by the 'legalisation' in 1997 of a beverage almost exclusively defined by its illicitness. But in what ways is poitín part of the Irish whiskey renaissance? Poitín can be considered as a sibling of Irish whiskey: the two spirits have a common origin and their histories are closely linked. Gaelic for 'little pot', a reference to the small copper pot still used to make this spirit, poitín was traditionally a grain spirit, generally made from malted barley, therefore identical to whiskey (keeping in mind that back in the 17th century, Irish whiskey was much different than what it is now, then often unaged and peated). Thus, poitín and whiskey (or *uisce beatha* in Gaelic) were two terms referring to the same product. So when did they part ways? Two dates seem to be key: in 1661 a law passed that introduced a duty on home-made spirits. In other words, it made domestic distilling, if not registered, illegal. If the law changed very little in reality, it can be defining in the sense that it indirectly led to the association of the term 'whiskey' for the legally produced beverage and 'poitín' for its illicit counterpart. The second key date is 1779, which witnessed the enforcement of the 'Still Licence Act'. The act, by introducing a duty based on the size and supposed throughput, pushed hundreds of small distillers, those without substantial markets (especially in the North-West and West of Ireland) out of business. The following 40 years can be considered as poitín heydays, as many of those distillers used their craftsmanship illicitly to meet the demand for reasonably priced, good quality spirits, in areas where 'parliament whiskey' (then known for its poor quality) was condemned. It is also during those years that poitín took its characteristics: an illicit clear and strong malted grain spirit. The Still Licence Act was repealed in 1823. With the legislation going back to more reasonable standards, the phenomenon of illicit distillations in Ireland steadily faded during the second half of the 19th century. Along with the production decline, poitín know-how also started to get lost. Other ingredients, such as beetroot, potatoes, or at times even plain sugar, all more readily available and less complicated to work with than malted barley, were used. By the early 20th century, poitín making, though not extinguished entirely, was a marginal phenomenon and the product had little to do with what it used to be. Only the strength, clearness and illicit character remained.

Out of the blue, in 1997, the infamous poitín was 'legalised', and spirits labelled 'poitín' (also 'poteen', its English spelling, or 'potcheen') slowly started to appear. One may wonder why distillers have been so keen on reviving such a marginal and forgotten spirit. First, from a financial point of view, poitín is a blessed opportunity for new distilleries. Readily available, since, as explained above, making poitín is technically an inherent step in whiskey making, this spirit can be sold immediately whereas it must mature for at least three years before it can be sold as Irish whiskey. Poitín therefore allows new

businesses to make profits and start to recoup their investments at an early stage. Marketing *poitín* is also a good way to promote and draw attention to a distillery while its core product, whiskey, is aging (the Glendalough Distillery for instance made the most of this strategy). But most of all, as a culturally and historically loaded beverage, *poitín* allows Irish distillers to anchor their craft in polished notion of heritage. The spirit is inextricably linked to the history of Ireland, it could be argued that it was forged by history more than by taste. Moreover, it is linked to a side of Irish history that perfectly corresponds to collective unconscious perception of Ireland: that of a rebellious and romantic country, that of the roguish *poitín* maker, outwitting the oppressive ‘gauger’ (exciseman). Thus, *poitín* is yet another way to commodify a specific side of Irishness. In the words of Donal O’Gallachoir, co-owner and brand manager of Glendalough Irish Whiskey: ‘*poitín* itself is the forefather of modern whiskey distillation and a style of distilling that went its own path [...], we wanted to show the world the other side of Irish whiskey, really to celebrate this independent streak in Irish distillation’ (Evans, 2015). Therefore, many claim to revive the ‘true spirit of Ireland’, using adjective such as ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ to describe their *poitín*. And it works, as *poitín* distiller Cara Humphreys explains: ‘Bartenders are always interested in the new, but it’s definitely *poitín*’s underground history that gets them going’ (Evans, 2015). *Poitín* participates in the historical legitimisation of an industry which is still rebuilding itself, and it gives it the stormy and romantic aspect that is often expected from ‘Irishness’. It helps creating a specific framework for the revival. *Poitín* also illustrates the shift from a ‘renaissance’ to the building of something new and different. It is a good example of the construction of new traditions and standards from old ones, reworking a heritage to create a new future for the industry. As one can read on Teeling Whiskey website: ‘Our philosophy is that while we are respectful to the rich provenance and heritage of Irish whiskey, as a new generation of Irish whiskey makers we are confident to forge a new future for Dublin and Irish whiskey’ (Teeling Whiskey, 2015). Where are these revolutionary aspects to be seen then?

Driven by the confidence created by rising sales and bright perspectives, Irish producers have been conducting daring experiments with their products since the early noughties. The results of these experiments are now seeing the light of day at a rapid pace. While there have never been specific ‘rules’ about how Irish whiskey should be matured, it is fair to say that there has been some traditional standards. American Bourbon or fortified wine (Sherry, Port, Madeira, etc) for example have been staple types of casks for decades. But Irish distillers seem to be increasingly willing to experiment with other types of maturing barrels. The Teeling Whiskey Company for instance has partly matured its single grain whiskey in Californian red wine barrels. They also state to be the

“first” distiller to use ex- white Port barrels for finishing’ (Kiely, 2016). Even Jameson, though a well established brand that could easily rest on its commercially successful standard range, have conducted such experiments. They recently released ‘Jameson Caskmates’, a twist on their standard product that was finished in Jameson barrels in which craft stout from a Cork craft brewery had been aged. Though the result itself is not a game-changer, the daring idea, especially coming from such a big brand, is worth welcoming. On the similar note, Tullamore D.E.W. is now making an annual batch of its main whiskey finished in Irish craft cider casks, which, according to them, combines ‘two of Ireland’s oldest crafts, cider-making and whiskey-making’ (Marchetti, 2015). Those two cases also show how distillers can reinforce the Irish character of Irish whiskey thanks to innovating maturation process. And indeed what could be a better alcoholic embodiment of Irishness than a combination of Irish whiskey and Irish stout or cider? As for pot still whiskey, Sherry casks (Oloroso or Fino for instance) have been a traditional association, to the point where, according to Fionnán O’Connor, author of *A Glass Apart*: ‘today, our entire culinary imagination of single pot still as a category would be unthinkable without sherry’ (O’Connor, 2015, pp.44-7). And yet, even the venerable pot still is now liable to experiments: Green Spot successfully released ‘Green Spot Château Léoville Barton’ a version of its whiskey finished in French wine casks, a twist on a revived product that could open the door to a real change in how pot still whiskey is perceived.

Walking on Scottish grounds (or at least on what is considered to be Scottish ground, even though it is not really historically accurate) the Nephin Distillery is currently experimenting with peat, a side of Irish whiskey that had previously been explored by the Cooley Distillery when it released its peated Connemara Irish single malt in 1995. Others still plan on innovating with raw materials: the Waterford Distillery (a new major project) want to create ‘the most profound and complex single malt whiskey anyone has ever seen’ by ‘using barley sourced from 46 different Irish farms, five of which are organic – with a total of five different strains grown on 19 distinctive soil types [which is] “unprecedented” in the sector’. The distillery then plan to experiment with yeast in the near future (Hopkins, 2015). Another sign of renewed confidence in Irish distillers’ expertise can be seen in the steady releases of older whiskeys: 15, 18, 21 and even up to 30 year-old Irish whiskeys are increasingly being released. Confident about the quality of their spirits, a growing number of producers now also offer ‘cask strength’ version of their whiskeys. An ‘uncut’, pure expression of the spirits, cask strength whiskeys are traditionally more associated with high-end Scotch. Thus the most visible outcome of all those experiments is a greater diversity of products, most of them not ‘traditionally’ associated with Ireland. Cask strength whiskeys, single grains, peated whiskeys, whiskey aged over 20 years or high-end single malts all contribute to

the expansion of an Irish whiskey range which for too long had been 'reduced' to smooth triple-distilled whiskey or pot still whiskey. The result of these experiments and daring releases is a richer, more complex, varied, and complete Irish whiskey range. One could argue that Irish whiskey is on its path to equal both Scottish quality and sense of heritage, Japanese sense of innovation and American accessibility, while on top of that, cleverly emphasizing the specific 'Irishness' of the products. It also clearly shows that Irish whiskey producers have a will to go beyond the revival of traditional and 'conventional' Irish whiskey. They seem to be making the most of the current global interest in Irish whiskey to create new essences and definitions what Irish can be.

In terms of the production methods, one of the interesting side of the near absence of Irish distilleries between the 1970's and the early 2000's is that now that are coming back, a whole new world of technologies is available to them. And these new technologies are an entire part of the new Irish distilleries' initial investments, contrary to many older distilleries in Scotland, Japan or the USA, for which new technologies represent additional investments and an always risky change of their production processes. If their strong will to maintain traditional distilling methods once almost cost Irish distillers their whole businesses, many of them are now fully embracing some of the most modern and innovating technologies available; a little revolution then, in this world in which tradition and heritage are still prominently put forwards. Technological advances, such as computer-controlled brewing and distilling processes, allow distillers to better control and therefore improve the consistency and quality of their products, as well as their output. But they can also lead to actual innovation in the whiskey making process itself. Inaugurated in 2016, the Boann Distillery has been described as 'a clever mix of the traditional and modern'. Its founder Pat Cooney explains: 'we've added a technological twist to our pot stills – the lyne arms have nanotechnology, which exposes the spirit to six times more copper than the traditional still. We also have reflux cooling in the necks [...], allowing us to make different styles of whiskey in the same still. The whole process is computer controlled. Some people still have great faith in the old manual system but we have computer management from start to finish ensuring a consistently high quality from one distillation to the next' (Genireland, 2015). The Connacht Whiskey Company stated that they were aiming to aims 'bring modern techniques to an old tradition of craft distilling' (Hopkins, 2016).

The notion of 'craft distilling' needs to be addressed: the term generally refers to smaller distilleries, as opposed to bigger, more 'industrial' plants. It is also applied to 'independent' businesses, that is distilleries which are not owned by big groups. However the term suffers from a lack of proper definition, and what exactly constitutes a craft distillery is subject to interpretation. Nevertheless, the return of this type of distillery can be considered as a entire

part of the revival process. Indeed, small scale family-run distilleries used to be scattered all over Ireland. But in many ways, craft distilleries are also 'revolutionising' the industry. As small businesses, with more limited capitals than big companies, craft distilleries are also looking for ways to cover their investments, which explains that many of them plan on producing poitín, but also vodka, gin or Irish cream, beside Irish whiskey. Thus, they contribute to the diversification of the Irish drinks industry. Moreover, craft distilleries generally don't feel the need to follow the industry standards, from which they will need to differentiate themselves if they want to make the most of their 'craft' added value. From that perspective, one could see a connection between what is going on in parallel in the whiskey industry and in the Irish brewing industry. A lot could be said about the Irish 'craft beer' revolution that began around the same time Irish whiskey was coming back under the spotlights. Small brewers are innovating all the around Ireland, offering an interesting and serious competition to major breweries such as Guinness. It is noteworthy that just as Jameson is following this innovating 'craft' trend, rejuvenating their image by collaborating with a craft brewery for their Jameson Caskmates, Guinness is also trying to catch on to the trend and recently released two of their own 'craft' beers: Guinness Dublin Porter and Dublin West Indies Porter (Thomas, 2014). Interestingly the past five years have witnessed an increasing collaboration between Irish breweries and distilleries. Jameson has already been mentioned, but Teeling also collaborated with a Galway craft brewery, providing them with empty Teeling casks to age their beer in (Teeling Whiskey, 2015). The Boann Distillery also has its own brewing counterpart: the Boyne Brewhouse, and it is fair to assume that the two entities may be crossing paths in the near future. These growing ties between the two closely related industries and the emphasis on mutual support and cooperation rather than mere competition, illustrate a new basis toward which the Irish whiskey industry is now evolving.

Finally, one of the best signs of the revolutionary aspect of the Irish whiskey surge might be found in the new perception of Irish whiskey as a consumption product. In the 1980s, whiskey conveyed the image of an aging spirit, drunk by 'old' people and not easily accessible. But Jameson played a major role in overturning this image. By targeting younger drinkers and giving its product a trendy edge by encouraging its use in mixed drinks, Pernod Ricard successfully rejuvenated Jameson consumers (Garavan, 1996, pp.431-3). Producers are well aware of this shift, as Stephen Teeling puts it: 'when my dad was setting up, Irish whiskey was drunk by old men in hats. Now it is being drunk by young American women' (Boland, 2015). If a little caricatural, this statement is nonetheless true, and it is a key aspect of the Irish whiskey revolution.

Lew Bryson, author of *Tasting Whiskey* explains: 'Irish whiskey has transitioned from being a shot- with-a-beer to a "plus-one" drunk with a mixer, most notably ginger ale. Irish and ginger has exploded, and made Irish whiskey quite

popular. That's taken Irish [whiskey] out of the "old white guy" ghetto and into the mainstream. Add in the growing popularity of all things Irish, the explosion of Irish pubs around the world, and you've got a great recipe for success' (Kulp, 2015). Mixing ginger ale and whiskey with a twist of lime is indeed a simple but successful recipe, especially among younger drinkers; it could be considered as a 21st century take on the traditional (and quite outmoded) 'Irish whiskey punch'. It is interesting to notice that a significant number of Jameson marketing campaigns feature not a glass of whiskey but of this 'whiskey, ginger and lime' mix. In turn, younger drinkers are also more inclined to bring Irish whiskey into more modern consumption patterns, and into mixology in particular. Those new ways of enjoying Irish whiskey are greatly encouraged by the producers themselves. A significant number of brands feature a 'cocktail' section on their websites, suggesting recipes, from Irish twists on classic cocktails to complex home-made creations. Thus, the timeless 'Whiskey Sour' becomes a 'Teeling Souring Inferno', the 'Mint Julep' becomes a 'Dewlep', while exotic ingredients are used to create original cocktails: grapefruit juice, coffee liqueur, balsamic syrup, chocolate bitters, smoked salt, etc. Those suggestions illustrate the flexibility and boldness of Irish whiskey companies, it shows that Irish whiskey and its producers are not 'stuck' in traditions, as some prestigious Scotch brands might be. Irish producers are not simply reviving Irish whiskey, they are creating a new identity for it. One could argue that they are simply following a trend, but it would be ignoring the fact that they are actually greatly contributing to that trend, challenging the public perception of Irish whiskey along the way. But Irish whiskey won't be reduced down to a mixed drinks spirits though. For many young drinkers it is also a 'gateway whiskey', an 'entry point' to higher quality more complex whiskey. According to Ally Alpine, manager of the Celtic Whiskey Shop in Dublin: 'there is definitely a new generation of younger drinkers who really appreciate whiskey in the right way' (Independent, 2015). Thus, Irish whiskey has been turned into a much more versatile drink, capable of playing successfully on a number of different fronts.

New consumption patterns that are reflected in the pubs. If having a glass of Irish whiskey in an Irish pub can be described as a 'traditional' way of enjoying the product, many of them now have 'whiskey tasting tray' offers, appealing to whiskey enthusiasts. At the same time, their drink menus increasingly features whiskey long drinks and fancy cocktails.

Even *poitín* has made its way into the cocktail world. Once a harsh and raw spirit drunk secretly in *shebeens*, *poitín* is now served in some of the fanciest cocktail bars in the world (Evans, 2015). During an 'Irish *poitín* masterclass' led by a 'moonshine expert' one can learn how to 'incorporated [*poitín*] into a range of delicious cocktails' (Walsh, 2015). The fiery spirit has been willingly adapted to 21st century palates, as *poitín* producer Dave Mulligan explains: 'its rawest form wouldn't work on the mass

market; it'd spoil cocktails [...], that's why we've adapted it'. As a result, consumers around the world can now enjoy drinks such as 'a *poitín*-based Old Fashioned of sorts, with lavender bitters and a touch of sugar syrup' (Barrie, 2014). Bringing a traditional spirit back to life, keeping the 'spark and sentiment' attached to its history and Irish character, while making it workable for a global market: the case of Irish *poitín* sums up the Irish whiskey revolution. It illustrates the both conscious and unconscious construction of new traditions and new consumption patterns based on a recreated heritage.

Finally it is worth noticing that nowadays Irish whiskey is more and more marketed as a 'cultural' product. Helped by the revival of *poitín*, which as explained above is probably more about history than it is about flavour, and backed by the tourism industry, Irish whiskey is becoming more than an alcoholic drink. It is sold as a piece of Irish history and culture, working on the notions of 'heritage' and 'traditions'. It is no wonder that a whole side of Dublin Airport's duty-free area is dedicated to Irish whiskey. It has become the perfect Irish gift for anyone enjoying an occasional drink. The association between the spirit and the powerful mental representation conveyed by its native country is giving Irish whiskey the 'Irishness' required to allow, as Mark McGovern puts it, 'tourism without travel', the core idea behind the development of 'Irish pubs' throughout the world (McGovern, 2003, pp.89-92).

Thus, if on many aspects the Irish whiskey industry has indeed been revived, this renaissance stage is now opening the path for a new era. The revival has highlighted how strong and powerful 'traditional' Irish whiskey is, both as a consumption product but also as a cultural one. Irish whiskey is taking up a real challenge: to be equally enjoyable by new whiskey drinkers and whiskey connoisseurs alike, while rooting the product in Irishness and innovating to move forwards. And it is fair to say that so far, the Irish whiskey industry has been up to the task as Irish whiskey is increasingly recognized as a very versatile and rich drink. This revolution comes within the scope of a new image of Ireland, built on a sense of place and heritage to which outsiders can relate. All the experiments and innovations that are currently conducted show that Irish whiskey was not just a tradition to bring back, but is a heritage to build something on.

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