



Photo © Port of Leith Distillery

Life before whisky

Building a distillery and a whisky brand takes time, but the bills sure arrive fast, writes **Alex Mennie**

In 2025, it's trite to point out that making whisky takes patience. Even as the industry dials back from the years of pretension-driven marketing that convinced a generation of drinkers that the only good Scotch is an old Scotch, it's a fact that your spirit needs to mature for at least three years before it can be called whisky. And the years before that first batch can be bottled demand invention and innovation in equal measure. Before they even choose a bottle design, every new distillery faces the same question: What can we sell while we wait for the whisky?

For many distilleries starting up in the mid-2010s, the answer was gin. With the spirit booming in the UK, it

made complete sense for new entrants to the spirits market like Eden Mill (2012), Arbikie, and the Glasgow Distillery (2015) to learn their way around their new equipment by making a wide range of small (and not so small) batch gins in multiple flavours.

For the Isle of Harris Distillery, in particular, gin was always part of the plan. First, because it gave early visitors to its prime location opposite the island's ferry terminal something to take away with them, but also because, as long as you make a really good spirit, it offered a way to build a reputation, tell a story about what you want your brand to stand for, and ultimately build anticipation for future products. "The gin's success went far beyond what we anticipated," explains Executive Chairman and CFO Ron MacEachran, "and



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without it, we could not have built such strong foundations for the future”.

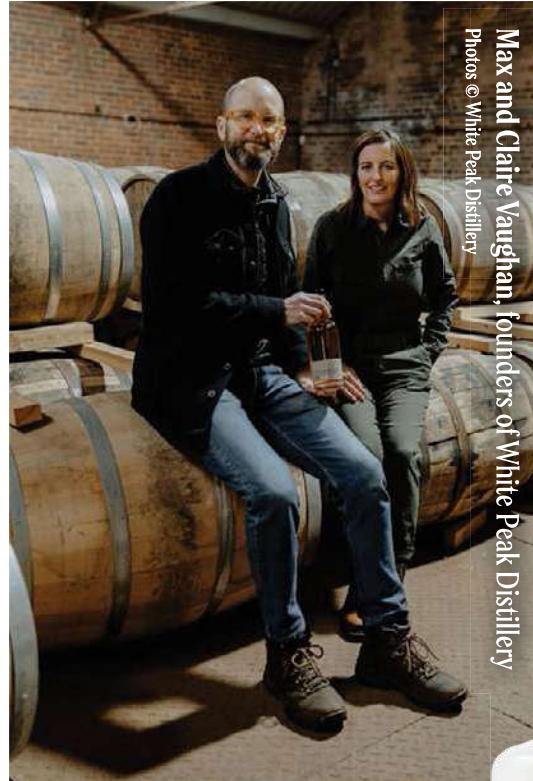
By 2017, however, the next wave of distillery-building hopefuls was less enamoured with juniper. Both White Peak and Port of Leith Distillery initially resisted the idea, before deciding to pursue it anyway. “I think we were a bit late,” admits White Peak co-founder Max Vaughan. “And personally, I was – rightly or wrongly – loath to embrace the flavour gin revolution which seemed to be in full

tilt when we got going”.

Instead, White Peak started selling a traditional London Dry style, Shining Cliff, though as Vaughan notes, “Maybe we could [have sold] some more stuff if we did gin with glitter in it, but that would be totally off brand for us.” While “gin sales on their own have hardly kept many of the lights on,” for him it was never about chasing trends. “We wanted to be building credibility around the spirits we’re making... in the long term, 90-95% of that is about whisky”.

At Port of Leith, Ian Stirling recalls a similar feeling. By 2017, they already had Port and Sherry bottlings generating early revenue, and a Champagne followed swiftly behind. Together, these wine sales were making a “meaningful” contribution to the business, before anything was running off the stills. “You know, for the longest time, we weren’t going to make a gin, right?” he asks me. But with the distillery project taking time, “we needed to do something... to get ourselves into the market and prove ourselves to investors”. Stirling and the Port of Leith team could see “the flavoured gin thing going crazy,” but viewed this as an opportunity to make a classic London Dry instead. That turned into Lind and Lime, which has become both a commercial success and a proof of concept, showing

investors that not only could they make a good product and create a new brand, but they could also start forging a distribution network, proving that they could sell whisky in the future. It also gave them – alongside the wines and a very desirable range of merchandise – stock to sell from their distillery when it opened to the public in 2024.



Max and Claire Vaughan, founders of White Peak Distillery
Photos © White Peak Distillery

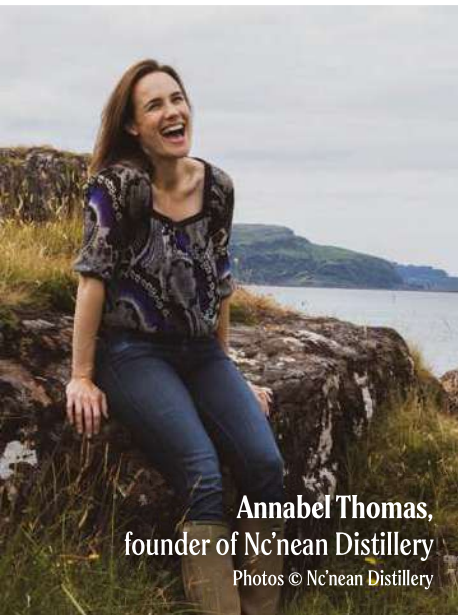


Photo © Port of Leith Distillery

In many ways, it’s quite amazing that a whisky distillery without any actual whisky to sell can still be a tourist magnet. Before the launch of The Hearach single malt in September 2023, the Isle of Harris distillery was already receiving 100,000 visitors in a year, a number now matched by Port of Leith (which doesn’t expect to release a whisky from their own distillery until around 2032).

In both those cases – as well as for White Peak in Derbyshire – location was key. “We have over 10 million visitors a year to the wider Peak District region,” says Vaughan, explaining that the distillery has chosen to focus on the inbound tourists’ interest in the great outdoors and how they might fit in.

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Annabel Thomas,
founder of Nc'nean Distillery
Photos © Nc'nean Distillery



“Frankly,” he adds, “those are things that Claire and I love about this area, and it’s one of the reasons we live here. So, it’s not been difficult for us to conceptualise.”

Way out west on the Morven peninsula, however, visitor numbers are, well, they’re certainly lower. As a result, Nc’nean could not rely solely on passing trade, and initially thought that selling a gin from this location would not bring much income. Founder Annabel Thomas explains, “I think if you’re a distillery in a high tourism destination, you can sell gin just to your tourists, and probably make money. But that is not us...” While the early plans for the distillery had included a gin still, by the time the build started in 2016, Thomas felt the market was already saturated. “I’m a great believer in only bringing things to market that are new and different,” she explains. “I didn’t want to make a gin just for the sake of it.”

What they did instead was create a whole new category, launching a botanical spirit made from redistilling their light and fruit-forward new make with ten plants, including some foraged from the nearby estate. This offered the same commercial benefits as a gin – a product to refine, to sell, and to demonstrate a route to market - and helped them to garner press and bartender attention. “It’s never been a huge-volume product,” Thomas says.

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“But it was profitable... and what was more valuable in that 2018-2019 period was all of the experience and relationships that we gained as a result.”

Nc’nean’s botanical spirit may have been a stroke of creative genius – perhaps helped by Thomas’ foraging trips around a beautifully remote Scottish peninsula, but for others, the temptation to release something closer to whisky even before

their own spirit is ready can prove irresistible. At White Peak, that took the form of a series of two-year-old ‘malt spirit’ releases, including their own bottling of a “Prologue” and two under the That Boutique-y ‘Malt Spirit’ Company name after Dave Worthington approached them with a view to collaborating. To Vaughan’s mind, working with independent bottlers – even in the early days – can be a lifeline for young distilleries, but only when there’s good brand alignment, and where you can reach a new audience.

That interest can also come as a surprise. Back at Port of Leith, Ian Stirling admits that they were “completely and utterly naïve” about the possibility of trading spirit in bulk from day one. But fortunately, other more established distillers approached them, meaning they very quickly caught up. It was the lessons learned through sourcing and swapping that helped to shape the brand’s Table Whisky and Perpetuity bottlings, with stock trading helping to ease some of the early cashflow problems that all new distillers face.

And while those struggles can hit hard, for all these still young distilleries, the early years are less about turning a profit and more about proving a point (or several): Here we are, we can make good spirit, tell a compelling story, and earn a place on the back bar long before the whisky arrives.