

## A SPIRIT WORTH BOTTLING



Waterford Distillery owner Mark Reynier: a man with a plan.

Mark Reynier determined to make his mark with Waterford Whiskey

Mark Reynier talks a good game. A great one even. Sitting in what appears to have been the former Guinness Brewery board room in Mary Street, just off Grattan Quay, he spends 45 intriguing minutes discussing his plans for what will, in time, come to be known as the Waterford Whiskey Distillery.

As we reported last week, Mr Reynier (53) has acquired the Brewery where he will, over the course of the next five years, create between 15 and 20 full-time posts, each of whom will help deliver his goal: the creation, distillation and production of Waterford Whiskey.

With a blueprint for the facility's revised composition placed on the desk separating interviewer and interviewee, it's difficult not to feel an enormous sense of optimism about the venture which he has committed himself to.

Indeed, as he leafs through the CVs which he has already received during his brief time in Waterford, I almost feel like handing over my own credentials to the man himself such is his passion and conviction.

That he's in the business of something which concludes in bottling seems wholly appropriate such is his enthusiasm and vision for his latest brainchild.

As Mr Reynier himself pointed out last week, he's not a 'suit', a comment suitably illustrated by the fact that he's not wearing one when he sits down with The Munster Express – think smart casual instead.

"I like Waterford," said the third generation wine dealer, offering his initial impressions of the city. "It's got a vibrancy to it as a port, and it's a compact enough town. I've spent the past 12 months on a Hebridean island with 3,000 people and 10,000 sheep and deer, so it's nice to come to a vibrant community.

"I know the city has had its problems in terms of unemployment and closures, those are well-known, but you'd be hard pressed to know it; it feels like there's a bit of energy around the place, which I like a lot.

"And that sense of vibrancy is very engaging. There are 50,000 people living here, there's a well-educated work force and it's very different to the Hebrides in that respect of course, where it was much harder to find people on the right wavelength to get involved (in the Bruichladdich distillery he previously spearheaded between 2000 and 2012) and that's very encouraging. I've already received plenty of CVs, and I'm sure I'll get a lot more and they're good, they're very good."

He continued: "And it's all very encouraging. I'm pleased, because at the end of the day, it's all about people, which may sound like one of those awfully bland statements, but it's so true; you've got to get a team of people in place and the fact that I'm not inheriting anybody, that I'm starting with a clean sheet, makes things a great deal easier for me. You're not dealing with egos, entrenched views, this, that or the other.

"I've always had a thing about common sense and fairness; you need people who are enthused about what they do, not a 'dot to dot' or A to B-type workforce, you want people who want to be involved in the project itself and be infused by it. That's very important to me, and I for one have never worked any other way. You either buy into the plan, you buy into the project, or you don't."

By his own admission, Mark Reynier has roughly a year to put in place his team on Grattan Quay, and it's clear he's keen to get the right team in place from the get-go.

Distilling is a lengthy process – the chances are they're won't be a bottle of Waterford Whiskey to showcase for another five years, while the first spirit won't be running on site until 2016.

While this may feel like a great deal of time in a business sense without any return, Mark Reynier is keen to hit the ground running by laying a firm foundation and creating a sound employment and business model in equal measure.

And what of the facility itself? "Well, it's a very fancy piece of kit. It's a state of the art brewery and to me, you've got it there in front of you (pointing me towards the schematic of the plant), it's a giant Meccano set which I can use to create the spirit

that I'm looking to make. It's a facilitator for what I want to make - it's not the be all and end all, but it's going to enable me to turn barley into Irish whiskey and that's what we're going to do here."

Distilling, he explains to this wholly ignorant layman, is "two thirds brewing - you take barley, you mill it, you extract sugar, ferment it into a form of beer, and then you cook it".

Mr Reynier continued: "You then separate the alcohol from the water, and then concentrate on collecting the alcohol and leaving the water behind...some of the fancy kit we've got here, we'll be able to use in a different way. The waste streams you get from whiskey include dead yeast, which you get with beer anyhow and you also get pot ale - the deoxygenated leftovers of distillation - but by using some of this kit, you can convert that into a cattle feed, so we're going to be re-interpreting some of the equipment that's already there and re-designating what they do; we're essentially re-wiring what is there."

The Diageo-incepted facility, a maze of pipes, pots and levers housed inside that fetching chrome building on the Lower Quay, provides Mark Reynier with a space age plant which is a far cry from what he acquired on the Scottish Isle of Islay (pronounced 'Aye-La') at the turn of the century.

"It was so beautifully simple, so absolutely and magnificently plain and simple in its design, you could follow one pipe all the way through, whereas what's here in Waterford, well it's like 'Blade Runner' - pipes everywhere, but it does the same sort of thing albeit in a terribly efficient way, what with automatic cleaning and so on; there's a phenomenal amount of stainless steel here because it's been thoroughly, thoroughly well designed and implemented. I just need to re-boot it in a few places to get it do what I want.

"Sure it's not as pretty or romantic (as Islay), it's a bit more brutal and industrial, but as I said, it's a facilitator. This is going to enable me to produce the spirit that I want. And getting farmers to grow barley for me is going to be an important thing too.

"Some tend to look at this as alchemy, but it's not, distillation is actually very simple. For big companies, it's all about conformity and standardisation; they want to everything to be the same, and they go to the 'nth' degree to standardise pretty much everything, whereas I'm the opposite. I want variables. I want the opposite. The more variables I can get, the better."

It would have been inopportune to interrupt Mark Reynier's stream of consciousness, so I didn't.

"I grew up in the wine trade in the 80s and 90s, a great, transformative period in the trade when people really learned the science of wine making while at the same time also taking it back to more organic ways, rediscovering what they'd got which had been somewhat forgotten about amidst all the chemicals and fertilisers and everything; they'd all gone for volume and left behind the quality, but then they realised that quality was the important bit so they calmed everything down and rediscovered the fundamentals of the trade, and that was a very exciting thing to see, and that influenced me in a big way when it came to getting into distilling, it was one of the reasons I got into it."

He passionately continued: "You could see these lovely places and yet no-one was actually bothering to apply those very basic tenets of individuality; it was all about conformity and to me, that was like a red rag to a bull. So I set out to show and prove that you could make a better result by adopting a different philosophy - and it is a philosophy.

"Now I'm not advocating that everyone does it because a lot of people can't; it's an intellectually curious proposition - but whiskey can be more than just a conforming standard product - and it all goes back to the raw ingredients, whether it's Calvados, whether it's Bourbon, whether it's Cognac, whether it's wine, it all goes back to the initial raw ingredients, really, and depending on those, that determines what comes out the other end, with everything else being equal.

"The primary raw ingredient for whiskey is barely; this is the best barely growing region in Europe, which is the one of the reasons I came here, and that's where it all starts from. So if I can get as many variable suppliers of barley from different growers, from different farmers, I can then distil it, and those different origins will produce different results at the other end."

Big alcohol companies, Mark Reynier contends, are "anathema" to such a philosophy given that "all they're interested in is continuous supply - they don't want the individuality - and that kind of work would be so incredibly dull to me. I want to track down as many different barley origins as I can; they hadn't grown barley in Islay for 100 years until I asked; it's a pretty windswept place and it's not exactly ideal barley country, but they grew it and it was great, and everyone was happy and bought into it; that's the whole idea of a buy-in. And it worked. It was fascinating.

"This whole concept is not for everyone, I realise that and I hold my hands up in that regard (he holds his hands up as he declares this). This is not going to be every man on the street's idea of a whiskey. The intellectually curious consumer is going to be interested in this. I've placed the bar quite high; this is taking things to a different level as far as I'm concerned. It may not ultimately be drunk in great quantities here in Ireland, but I feel it has the potential to prosper on overseas markets and be appreciated.

"And it's going to have the name 'Waterford' on it, it's fundamentally about Waterford people, Waterford water (from a spring on the south bank of the Suir), Waterford barley, Waterford maturation - it's going to be from Waterford, of Waterford, by Waterford and off it goes." Waterford being name-checked eight times in one sentence is something I've never previously encountered in my 15 years working for this newspaper and over the course of our conversation, it's difficult not to feel positively swept along by what Mark Reynier has to say.

It's difficult not to feel enthused by his vision for Grattan Quay and it's impossible not to wish Waterford's newest business arrival every good wish and to see this plan succeed.

A glimpse of the former Brewery to the rear of the new plant, a magnificent window into this city's proud industrial past, conjures up images of a visitor centre and walking tours many years from now. But that, one suspects, is a great deal further away than the first bottle of Waterford Whiskey; nonetheless it's a tantalising prospect.

There's barrels to be produced, there's warehousing along the Waterford coastline to be sourced, there's finding adequate storage for his barley (might the North Wharf silos be in for an unexpected re-fit?) and there's a team that needs putting in place. It's all thoroughly fascinating.

"A lot of people in the industry think I'm barking mad, and I admit I'm on a bit of a crusade," he says. "I've proven that it works (in Islay) which, at first was like pushing a boulder uphill, whereas this time I'm starting already running, I know exactly what I want to do. I'm going to be operating within a year, January 2016 is what I'm aiming at, and I'm incredibly enthused by it all."