

GOING FROM AMBER TO GREEN

The whisky industry has its sights set on net zero. Susan Low investigates how a very traditional process is adapting to the future



How green is that amber liquid in your whisky glass? The short answer: it's getting greener. Whisky is the UK's most valuable net export, worth over £6 billion in 2022, and supports some 40,000 jobs – but that profit comes at a cost. Use of peat (which plays a vital role in whisky's provenance and taste), fossil fuels and water, together with soil degradation from fertilisers used to grow barley, all need to be mitigated.

In 2021, the Scotch Whisky Association unveiled its new Sustainability Strategy, which commits the industry to reducing its carbon emissions to net zero by 2040. It plans to achieve this by cutting greenhouse gas emissions, reducing packaging, using water efficiently and caring for the land – specifically, playing an active role in conserving and restoring peatlands, the planet's largest carbon store.

The industry is getting a hand from the UK government's £10 million Green Distilleries Fund, which aims to enable distilleries to cut emissions by almost 1 million tonnes of CO₂ a year – the equivalent of taking 200,000 cars off the road.

Islay-based Bruichladdich (known to fans as "The Laddie") received £2.65 million of this for

its "Project HyLaddie" to install a zero-emission hydrogen-powered boiler at its Victorian distillery. It aims to decarbonise its distilling process by 2025. Bruichladdich gained B Corp certification (meaning it meets high, verified standards for social and environmental performance) in May 2020 and is taking "grain to glass" sustainability to heart. It has made one of the first biodynamically produced whiskies, as well as Islay's first rye-based whisky (planting rye helps to regenerate soils depleted by growing barley).

For most distillers, barley remains the core ingredient, so scientists at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh are finding new ways to grow it more sustainably by replacing nitrogen-based fertilisers with sustainable "bio-stimulants" made from algae, bacteria and yeasts. Success would smooth the path for more distilleries to reach net zero.

The first UK distiller to do so (in 2021) was the proudly eco-conscious Nc'nean Distillery on the Morvern Peninsula in Argyll. It was the second UK distillery to gain B Corp status, in February 2022 – just two years after producing its first bottle. It is certified organic, and 99.7 per cent of its waste is recycled or

reused. "I think it is incumbent on any new business to design processes that are as sustainable as possible," says founder Annabel Thomas. "The crisis that the world is facing is quite clear."

Further down the west coast, in Campbeltown, a new distillery with a net-zero goal is in the planning. In May, Glasgow-based blender Brave New Spirits announced its forthcoming Witchburn distillery. Based at the former RAF Machrihanish airbase, it will repurpose an abandoned industrial unit. Production will be headed by Andrew Nairn, previously at Glenkinchie, Strathmill and the Borders Distillery.

And when The Macallan Estate opened its spectacular Speyside distillery in 2018, its low-carbon credentials were put on proud display, from the living turf roof to the energy-efficient, steam-operated copper stills. Since the end of 2021, the estate has operated on 97 per cent renewable energy and intends to be carbon neutral by 2030.

Scotch whisky has long traded on its reputation as a drink laced through with tradition. With net zero in its sights, it's also showing that tradition can embrace change – something to ponder as you swirl that glass.