

SHOWCASE



Pure craft at Pōkeno Whisky

A distillery in the northern Waikato is crafting distinctly New Zealand whisky from barley to barrel...

TUCKED AWAY in the hills just south of Auckland is a whisky distillery that prides itself on using New Zealand ingredients to craft single malt whisky, using processes that honour tradition while reflecting innovation and a sense of place.

Pōkeno Whisky is made using only New Zealand barley (sourced from three family-owned farms in the South Island) and pure spring water. Every part of the whisky-making process is done on site: from mashing and distilling, to maturation, filtration and bottling. There is even a purpose-built cooperage for barrel making.

Matt and Céline Johns founded Pōkeno Whisky Company in 2017 and released their first range of single malt whiskies in mid-2022. The Pōkeno Whisky range is available nationwide through Liquorland and exported to nine international markets, with more in the pipeline.

Matt Johns, who has more than 25 years' experience in the whisky industry, says that the Pōkeno area had two standout qualities when it came to whisky making: the spring water from the surrounding volcanic hills, and an ideal climate for maturation.

"Obviously, in production of whisky the water's incredibly important," says Johns. "We managed to build the distillery over a water aquifer, and it's a type of water that's really rich in iron and manganese, so it's great for distilling."

"Secondly, the levels of humidity and atmospheric pressure here in Pōkeno are crazy, and that all acts to accelerate maturation."

The Pōkeno Whisky difference

Pōkeno Whisky's core range comprises three expressions: Pōkeno Origin, Pōkeno Revelation, and Pōkeno Discovery. There are also regular single cask releases, such as the PX sherry cask aged single malt.

Matt and Céline Johns work with the team in their state-of-the-art distillery, which is fully automated to allow full control over fermentation and distillation.

"Everything at Pōkeno is done with no compromises," explains Matt Johns. "Long fermentation, slow distillation – this is a real point of difference – enormous reflux in the stills creating an incredibly smooth and sweet spirit with wonderful citrus notes."

Another unique aspect to Pōkeno Whisky is that it's home to New Zealand's

only working cooperage. Matt Johns says that it became part of their plan a few years ago, after realising there were no cooperages in New Zealand. The couple could see an opportunity around further developing the New Zealand character of their whiskies by making barrels from native wood.

In late 2022, experienced Master Cooper Mike Tawse arrived from Scotland to join the Pōkeno Whisky team and the purpose-built cooperage is where he repairs, toasts, chars and builds new casks.

Matt Johns says they've experimented with a range of native New Zealand woods that they've air dried, toasted and charred and then aged for six months with new make spirit to assess the effects.

"There were a couple of native woods that really stood out, and one of them was totara," says Johns. "We decided to start there and we've got some more that we'll experiment with in coming months."

Mike Tawse's first totara barrel rolled out of the cooperage in January this year and was filled with whisky; early sampling indicates the totara barrel ageing is bringing a creamy, coconutty depth to the spirit.

At a time when New Zealand whisky is starting to make a place for itself on the global stage, the use of native wood is a distinct difference for Pōkeno Whisky.

"For me, it's probably one of the most exciting things we're doing," says Johns. "This is a world first. The only way of making New Zealand native wood barrels is if you have a cooperage in New Zealand, because exporting native timber that hasn't been transformed into something else is prohibited. So we are the only people on this planet who can make totara barrels at this point in time."

Fast growth at Pōkeno

Since the first release in August 2022, the range has quickly gained traction here and overseas. Pōkeno Whisky is New Zealand's largest distillery and was scaled up straight away for launch into international markets, where 90-95% of its stock is sent. It is already exporting to the UK, France, Germany, Belgium, Norway, USA, China, Taiwan and Australia, with launches into other overseas markets underway.

Pōkeno Whisky also sent the biggest ever single shipment of New Zealand single malt whisky to Australia in December last year. The distillery partnered with The Whisky Club Australia to create an exclusive edition of Pōkeno Origin, which was its featured 'Whisky of the Month' in March.

Matt Johns says that while New Zealand is a small single malt market, they understand the importance of having a good domestic presence and have an exclusive partnership with Liquorland to be part of the core range across its stores, and also supply key independents such as Whisky Galore and key on-premise outlets.



Matt Johns, Mike Tawse, Céline Johns and Rohan McGowan of Pōkeno Whisky



Master Cooper Mike Tawse

Start of the journey

For Matt and Céline Johns and the team at Pōkeno Whisky, it's just the beginning. "We're at the start of the journey here," says Johns. "We're a true craft distiller. We're only focused on single malts so there's no compromise ever on our process."

"We're getting incredibly mature whisky very early, but because they're not spending so much time in barrel, they're really fruit-forward. So, we've got a real point of difference, which will distinguish New World from Old World. We've got our own profile."

"We want to put New Zealand on the map as a single malt-producing nation and prove to the rest of the world that we can make just as good whisky over here as anybody else."

Pōkeno Whisky Company

📧 For wholesale orders email contact@pokenowhisky.co.nz

Pōkeno Whisky is open for distillery tours and tastings every Saturday.

📍 For tour bookings and more information visit pokenowhisky.com



Now available from Pōkeno Whisky

Pōkeno Origin

Fully matured in first fill bourbon casks – showcasing the profile of Pōkeno single malt.

Pōkeno Discovery

A marriage of spirit fully aged in first fill bourbon, Oloroso and PX sherry casks, then finished together in cask for a final period of maturation.

Pōkeno Revelation

A marriage of spirit fully aged in first fill bourbon and new New Zealand red wine casks. It is then finished together in cask for a final period of maturation.

Pōkeno PX Sherry Cask Finish Single Cask

After a full maturation in a first fill bourbon barrel, this single malt is re-casked into a PX sherry butt from Miguel Martin for six months.