

WORDS TASH MCGILL

A valley of **DREAMS**

From their distillery nestled in a picturesque valley on New Zealand's North Island, the founders of Pōkeno Whisky are determined to make a spirit that truly represents their adopted homeland



The highway leads south from Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, past cropping fields of rich soil before climbing over the Bombay Hills. Over the crest of the hill, it drops into a valley that is mercurial – often covered in a low mist through winter mornings and bathed in sunlight. The valley is called Pōkeno – meaning 'a place of refuge'. Until recently, Pōkeno was mostly famous for summer road trip stops; travellers can indulge in rich ice-cream cones, stacked three, four or five scoops high, and pick up some highly sought-after Pōkeno bacon and sausages before continuing on. There's a new taste in town, though. While Pōkeno village has been expanding, Pōkeno Whisky has been putting down roots.

Founders Matt and Céline Johns originally came to New Zealand from the UK in 2013. Five months into a six-month trip, they decided to stay. The decision to start Pōkeno Whisky took a little longer.

"Do we have the courage to do it? Have we got one more project in us? Because it is a huge investment, with no return for about 10 years. It was all our savings going into one place, in a country that was not renowned for whisky making at the time. If we could make a good whisky, I knew I could go and put that whisky on the international market – that's what I've been doing all my life. I can do that. But it was the uncertainty of it in our mid-40s, starting from scratch," Matt recalls, sitting with Céline in the tasting room and office at the distillery that now bustles with activity six days a week.

They did have the courage, alongside Matt's crystal clarity about the kind of whisky he wanted to make – New World whisky, letting the land shape the outcome. New Zealand's whisky industry is still in its infancy, where the best of traditional techniques and technology available in larger markets can broadly influence the methodology and process, but as Johns goes to pains to point out, everything else is up for grabs.

"It was very important to us that if we're going to make a country our home, we want to do something in that country. We didn't want to be there living off overseas businesses, we wanted to build something in New Zealand. Yes, it's stressful. Yes, it's tiring. But when you are at the start of the journey for a country which is just getting established as a whisky-making nation, it is super exciting. It's not scary anymore. We've done the hard work to get past the scary part," Matt shares, while Céline adds, "Now it's just hard work."

Matt has 25 years' experience in the Scotch whisky industry, having worked in and led significant brands. He spent the first decade of his career selling whisky before moving into management and then blending. While managing international markets, attending trade shows and selling offshore meant plenty of travel, so it also made sense for Céline to work on the Scottish brands, putting her skills in business and marketing to good use. The chemistry of their partnership and relationship is

evident in their natural environment, the business they've spent the last seven years building, on top of 31 years of relationship, marriage, children, and living internationally. Céline is the organised one; Matt, despite the all-business persona, is driven by creativity and innovation, occasionally accused of having too many projects on the go – at the moment, this includes sample bottles of new make that form all manner of experiments.

Those experiments are the heart of

Opening pages:
Pōkeno co-founder
Matt Johns.

**These pages,
clockwise from
below:**
Pōkeno's core-
range Revelation,
Discovery, and
Origin whiskies;
Cask preparation;
Pōkeno staff in
the warehouse and
still room.



GETTING TECHNICAL

GENERAL INFORMATION

Distillery name: The Pōkeno Whisky Company
Parent company: Independent
Address: 61 Potts Road, 2471, Whitford
Years of operation: 2018 – present
Open to the public: Yes, on Saturdays

TEAM & OUTPUT

Distillery manager name: Matthew Johns
Production team size: 8 people
Maximum annual capacity: Currently 100,000 litres, moving to 250,000 litres in 2025 (with additional fermenters)
Present working capacity: 80,000 litres
Operation time: 5 days a week, 1 shift
Automation: Fully automated

WATER

Water source: Natural spring

CEREALS & MASHING

Cereal varieties: Laureate (unpeated)
Mill type: Roller mill
Mash tun type: Semi lauter, mash tun filter
Batch size: 0.5 tonnes
Wort clarity: Very clear
Mashes per week: 8

FERMENTATION

Washbacks/Fermenters: 4 x stainless steel, 3,000 litres
Wash charge volume: 2,700 litres
Temperature control: Yes
Switchers: No
Duration: 80 hours
Yeast source: Lallemande
Yeast varieties: Distillers yeast

DISTILLATION

Still fabricator: Macmillan
Number of stills: 2 stills
Distillation type: Double distillation

Wash still capacity, shape, and charge:
Tall, lantern shape, 4,000 litres
Wash still run time: 6 hours
Wash still lyne arm angle: Slight decline
Wash still heat source: Steam coils
Wash condenser type(s) and material:
Copper shell and tube

Spirit still capacity, shape, and charge:
Tall, lantern shape, 3,800 litres
Spirit still run time: 7 hours
Spirit still lyne arm angle: Incline
Spirit still heat source: Steam coils
Spirit condenser type(s) and material:
Copper shell and tube

Purifiers: No
Doubler/Thumper: No
Water jacket: No
Receivers: 1 low wines, 1 foreshots and feints, 1 spirit

SPIRIT

Cut points: 77–72% ABV
Bulk spirit yield: 500 litres
Average receiver strength: 75% ABV
Spirit styles produced: Green-grassy, fruity

MATURATION

Cask filling strength: 63.5% ABV
Warehousing: Palletised on-site





Pōkeno Whisky's great intentionality. New Zealand has great water, including the large spring aquifer the distillery is located by. They share a broad industrial road with a spring-water bottling plant, so they knew it would be good. As for grain, the region of Canterbury grows some of the world's best with residual sugar yields that suit fermentation. The extensive networks Matt has built over nearly three decades of whisky business can ensure a consistent supply of excellent ex-bourbon, sherry, and wine casks.

The Johnses are out to make the kind of whisky they like to drink: a sweeter fruit-forward style with plenty of character, roundness, and texture but without the oak being too dominant. To get there, they've been relentless with the process, firm in the belief that craft distilling doesn't and shouldn't mean different every time.

"I needed to understand how the climate can affect my product. I'm going to put it to my advantage. For me, that's the only way to make New Zealand whisky," Matt states. "If I'm trying to influence the ingredients to get a product based on whisky from somewhere else, we're not making New Zealand whisky. I need to be influenced by New Zealand, I want to be influenced by New Zealand because then we're making New Zealand whisky."

The valley lying below the Bombay Hills becomes the lead character in the Pōkeno story, for her temperature and humidity fluctuations and her water.

"Our water is rich in manganese which works well for us. We asked, 'What can the water do to help?', and it has a big role to play in the grapefruit notes we have coming through. One of the key reasons for choosing Pōkeno were the incredible low-pressure systems and levels of humidity that roll through the valley; they produce a maturation that is fast but well balanced, but it does impact the way we use our casks."

While maturation might be happening at speed, the new make is slow and steady. A long fermentation





and incredibly slow distillation to maximise reflux are all part of the profile that the original team painstakingly finetuned in early 2019. Pōkeno is New Zealand's most technologically advanced distillery, running on full automation that requires minimal team members to run. The emphasis has been on tightening the variations and process to cope with the current environment and manage fluctuations brought on by the climate.

"It really took us a couple of months to nail the profile. I've pushed to the limit what we're capable of doing with the equipment we've got in the environment we've got, so I'm trying to make the sweetest, fruitiest, smoothest whisky I possibly can. I am running those stills as slowly as I possibly can without them shaking themselves and bashing to pieces. I pushed that to a limit. And then I worked backwards from there," recalls Johns.

New Zealand's subtropical climate, particularly in the North Island, is challenging norms in ageing and cask use. Pōkeno rarely reuses casks for new make, given the amount of life they are giving to spirit over the first maturation period.

Johns describes it as an expression of the rulebook. "We cannot do things the way the old world will do it. We've got to adjust whether it's our distillation techniques, fermentation with different yeast, what we do with the barrels, how we store them or the length of time. We have to adapt and we can't follow the same rule, because that rulebook was written for a certain climate and a certain way to do things, which is different from where we are, in this valley that we are making whisky in."

Throwing out the rulebook isn't entirely new to Johns, a self-confessed creative who epitomises the future of New World whisky like a paint-splattered artist drawing from an encyclopaedic knowledge of his craft. When you know how things work to the degree Johns does, no stretch of the imagination is too far.

"I love being creative. And so as soon as there's an opportunity for something different or to explore, I want to go there. Old World whisky is very set in its ways, not because it wants to be but because it's so big, whereas New World distilleries are often smaller. They're more agile, they can try things, they can experiment. Where you have the agility



and the willingness to innovate, that excites me more than anything else.”

The re-emergence of coopering in New Zealand is one such example of Johns’ excitement. Inspired by the opportunity to make casks from native New Zealand wood as well as control end-to-end components of production, they brought in Scotsman Mike Tawse to re-establish coopering in the country.

Matt and Céline share a vision for New Zealand becoming known for whisky making on the world stage, demonstrated by their engagement and generosity with the broader whisky-making community. For the first six years of building and production, Matt has continued to offer advice and consultancy to other emerging distilleries, including a regular supply of casks.

The core range of three products was essential to the launch strategy for Pōkeno Whisky, which saw simultaneous launches in New Zealand and in global markets.

Origin is fully matured in first-fill bourbon casks and provides the characteristic backbone of all Pōkeno whiskies, the sweet and elegant fruit-forward profile supported with gentle vanilla and toffee.

Discovery combines first-fill bourbon with oloroso and Pedro Ximénez sherry maturations, which are married in cask before bottling. Dark chocolate, cherry, and sweet citrus fill the mouth before a long, fulfilling finish.

Revelation is a further celebration of New Zealand, marrying first-fill bourbon with red wine casks from one of the founders’ favourite wineries. The character is tropical, with mango, lychee, and strawberries bursting into grapefruit in a refined, summery palate.

But Matt’s indelible enthusiasm for exploration is already finding new outlets. Tawse was responsible for shaping a cask from totara wood, an experiment that started with trying to pinpoint potential flavour characteristics that each native timber might impart. Painstakingly sourced from sustainable forestry, the

These pages, clockwise from far left:

The Pōkeno team in the warehouse with their whiskies; Matt Johns shows off the product; Emptying draff from the mash tun; Pōkeno’s stills; Cooper Mike Tawse; The distillery has brought the craft of coopering back to New Zealand.

first 200-litre totara cask for whisky making was produced at Pōkeno and used for secondary maturation after initial ageing in first-fill bourbon. Totara imparts almost tropical notes of coconut cream, white peaches, and fresh-cut wood character.

Alongside the Totara Cask whisky, the tasting room is full of interesting cask finishes, with a particular leaning towards stout casks and collaborations with local breweries.

For almost seven years, Pōkeno Whisky waited quietly in the valley with the small team laying down spirit to the precise recipe of the land. With core stocks and the space to scale, the team has now more than doubled, with

a full-time bottling line and sales and distribution handled on-site. For Johns, it’s a step back towards the distillery management and structures of a previous life, but this time from a fully owned family business.

There are contradictions that make sense when you see the valley and meet Matt and Céline – rampant passion, an inability not to ask ‘what if’ with a bold, experimental bravery and the courage to do something new. It’s sheltered in the discipline and knowledge that strict attention to detail in even the smallest experiment is vital. Above it all, a vision: the sweetest, fruitiest whisky in the world from a valley tucked at the bottom of it. ○

