

A DEEP DIVE

INTO SILENT POOL DISTILLERS

Emma Eversham catches up with
Silent Pool managing director
Ian McCulloch to discuss the
past, present and future

TOP RIGHT:
Ian McCulloch, managing
director, Silent Pool Distillers

BELOW:
Bottles on the production line



When Ian McCulloch set plans in motion to create a 'well-crafted' gin that would showcase 'the very best of modern England' he also had niggling doubts he'd missed the boat.

It was 2014 – five years into the great gin boom – when he and Silent Pool co-founder James Shelbourne met in their local pub and chatted through plans to open a distillery in their home county of Surrey.

The pair shared a 'grand vision' of building a sustainable distillery that would produce handcrafted, artisan spirits using locally sourced ingredients and, like many of their admired Scotch whisky distilleries, be located near a fresh water source.

Despite his fears he'd hit the gin market too late, McCulloch was determined to realise his and Shelbourne's vision, so with dogged determination, scoured the south east for the perfect spot. It was a chance visit to Sherbourne Farm, a former cow barn and petting zoo, nestled in the woodlands of the lush Surrey Hills and on the banks of spring-fed lake Silent Pool, where his dream suddenly became a reality.

When the farm's owner, The Duke of Northumberland, gave McCulloch and Shelbourne the go-ahead to convert the dilapidated farm buildings into their sustainable distillery, they pushed forward, but those niggling doubts still remained.

"We had about a year of shall we, shan't we, spreadsheets and thinking we'd



missed it all, then it was 18 months from start to first liquid," says McCulloch.

That first liquid was Silent Pool Gin, a London Dry-style gin made in a copper pot still with 24 botanicals, including juniper, chamomile, lavender, elderflower, bergamot, dried pear, kaffir lime and local honey. "It's single shot," explains McCulloch, "we don't make concentrates," referring to the fact all flavours are added during distillation, not after.

The combination of botanicals which are distilled using Silent Pool's bespoke four-stage process and the clear spring water drawn from the neighbouring lake led to the creation of a gin that is 'accessible, layered, delicate, interesting and very smooth.'

"What's not to like?" asks McCulloch.

There aren't many who would disagree with him. Bottled in distinctive teal glass bottles with copper etchings, Silent Pool Gin looks as good as it tastes and has been a runaway success since first launching to market in 2015.

Just one year after launch, Silent Pool classic, as McCulloch calls it, secured a listing with nationwide drinks retailer Majestic following successful listings in independent retailers. The plaudits

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followed in 2017, with Silent Pool Gin winning Double Gold at the highly respected San Francisco World Spirits Competition.

Those previous doubts about missing the gin boom rapidly fell away: "We never stopped growing, we started exporting very early on and went above the line with advertising almost from day one," McCulloch continues proudly.

"We started with independent retail and that's a core strength even today. Now we are in nationwide distribution and export to 45 countries."

While Silent Pool Gin was a clear success - and remains the company's best-seller - Silent Pool Distillery has continued to innovate, adding several expressions to the Silent Pool family followed by the Silent Pool Distillers short run ranges, made using limited availability ingredients (Damson and English Rose are among the flavours in the current range) "so if you see them and they appeal, buy them, as they may not be around for long!"

Rose Expression, Silent Pool Gin distilled with rose tea was the next expression in the Silent Pool 'family' to be launched in early 2020. Following later that year was Silent Pool Rare Citrus, which includes four rare citrus fruits - Buddha's Hand, Natsu Dai Dai, Green Seville Orange and Hirado Buntan - at distillation, resulting in a smooth gin with a zesty kick.

Although these gins have marked flavours - rose and citrus - McCulloch is keen to distinguish them from the flavoured gin category - describing Rose Expression as 'the classic Silent Pool Gin with its rose amplified' for example.



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LEFT:
Green Man
Wildwood Gin,
the world's first
sustainably
produced gin

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We have huge headroom and strong demand for what we do. Micropubs are created and run by people who want to offer something different to the mainstream. To do that they need to differentiate their spirit offering...that's where we come in

Ian McCulloch, Silent Pool Distillers

"We won't make odd variations, we produce Silent Pool Rare Citrus which despite it being in an orange bottle isn't an orange flavoured gin, it's a layered combination of subtle citrus flavours," he adds.

A more recent addition to the family is Platinum Celebration Edition Gin, launched this year to commemorate the Queen's Jubilee. The gin boasts peach and tea notes while the teal bottle's usual copper pattern has been turned platinum. While McCulloch has been keen to remain a distiller of artisan spirits, the business hasn't stood still and has found ways to innovate without losing sight of its values.

Running the distillery sustainably was a core aim from day one and remains embedded in its culture. Its original 350l still – Juliette – is heated using a steam boiler fired using seasoned hardwood from the Albury Estate, while its larger 1800l still – Ophelia – is fuelled by renewable hydrogenated vegetable oil.

Solar panels on the distillery's roof produce energy, and the still house is fitted with a closed loop cooling system, while waste is sent off to make electricity.

Ingredients are sourced locally where possible. Honey, used in the distillation of Silent Pool Gin, is sourced from a neighbouring bee keeper while non-local ingredients are ethically sourced. All products are made and bottled on site.

The rural location in the heart of the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty serves as a constant reminder to minimise the business's impact on the local and wider environment, and also as inspiration for the world's first sustainably produced gin.

Green Man Wildwood Gin, launched last year, uses botanicals found in Silent Pool's surrounding woodland – pine, fir, birch leaf, rose hips and apple to name a few – and is packaged in a cardboard bottle meaning its carbon footprint is 83% lower than its glass counterparts.

For every bottle sold, a tree is planted through a partnership with Tree Nation, making it a worthy spirit to list for micropubs with a sustainable slant.

Innovation, growth and 'maintaining a high standard of product' is the aim for Silent Pool Distillers now and in the future and McCulloch sees micropubs as integral to its growth in the on-trade.

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