

# WOMEN BEHIND THE STILL

*Female master distillers and master blenders take the reins at both small start-ups and established companies*

BY AMBER DREA

While many beverage alcohol marketers are courting female consumers through flavored whiskies, sweet wine blends and low-calorie products, other companies are putting women in charge at the very top tier of spirits innovation and creation. In the male-dominated worlds of distilling and blending, a handful of ladies have spent decades working hard and moving up the ranks, or they've educated themselves on the technical aspects of the business and struck out on their own. Most have a background in chemistry, while a few come from completely unrelated fields. But what they all have in common is a passion for making spirits and sharing that passion with others. MARKET WATCH spotlights six women at six different distilleries for insight into the challenges they've faced, as well as the rewards they've experienced.



*The 253-year-old Cheshire, England-based G&J Distillers made Joanne Moore its first female master distiller in 2006.*

## Rachel Barrie, Master Blender for Morrison Bowmore Distillers

Rachel Barrie has always been deeply connected to whisky. She grew up just a couple miles away from Morrison Bowmore's Glen Garioch distillery in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and joined the malt whisky society at the University of Edinburgh, where she studied science and chemistry. Though it might seem that she was destined to become a Scotch master blender, Barrie mostly chalks up her career choice to good fortune. "I was offered jobs in pharmaceuticals, the oil industry and cosmetics, and I was just very lucky that a job came up in whisky research," she recalls.

In 2011, Barrie was hired as master blender for Morrison Bowmore Distillers and now manages all three of the company's distilleries: Glen Garioch in the Highlands, Auchentoshan in the Lowlands and Bowmore on Islay. Her role at Morrison Bowmore involves coming up with new releases, including Bowmore The Devil's Casks (\$89.99 a 750-ml. bottle), Glen Garioch Virgin Oak (\$109.99) and Auchentoshan 1979 (\$550), which was named Whisky Advocate's 2013 "Lowlands/Campbeltown Single Malt of the Year." Barrie has even innovated in the realm of social media, having conducted a few Twitter tastings within the last year, using such hash tags as #LoveBowmore.

In 1991, Barrie accepted a position at the Scotch Whisky Research Institute, where she was the only female research scientist in the maturation and blending department and worked on developing the ideal Bourbon cask for whisky aging. "It was a great place to start because at the time there were very few women in the industry," she says. "The institute gave me an in-depth understanding of the chemistry, structure and composition of distilled spirits."

After four years, Barrie took a job at The Glenmorangie Co., which also owns the Ardbeg Distillery, and moved her way up from quality manager to product development manager, eventually becoming the first female Scotch whisky master blender in 2003. While at Glenmorangie, she helped develop new innovations, such as different wood finishes, heavily peated expressions and whiskies that focus on story rather than age statement.

THIS PAGE: PHOTO BY JASON LOCK. OPPOSITE PAGE: BOTTOM RIGHT PHOTO BY PAUL WAGTQUIZ



*(CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT) Joanne Moore of G&J Distillers has created a number of gin brands and expressions, including the floral, female-friendly Bloom; Rachel Barrie, master blender of Morrison Bowmore Distillers, is responsible for such notable releases as the 1979 Auchentoshan single malt Scotch; Bridget Firtle is a self-taught distiller who founded her own company, The Noble Experiment NYC, in 2012; and Joy Spence, master blender for Appleton Estate Jamaica Rum, unveiled the world's first 30-year-old rum in 2008.*





LEFT: Appleton Estate Jamaica rum (barrels pictured) appointed the world's first female master blender when it promoted Joy Spence in 1997. RIGHT: Glen Garioch Distillery in Scotland is owned by Morrison Bowmore Distillers, which hired Rachel Barrie as master blender in 2011.

LEFT: Casa Herradura (agave field pictured), which began making Tequila in 1870, named Maria Teresa Lara López its first female master distiller in 2009. RIGHT: Distiller Becky Harris cofounded Catoctin Creek Distilling Co. with her husband, Scott (left), in 2009.

Regarding being a woman in the Scotch world, Barrie says attitudes have improved. "When I first started, women were quite rare, so I'd often have to prove that I know what I'm talking about," she explains. "In recent years, it's gotten easier because more women are drinking whisky."

### Joanne Moore, Master Distiller for G&J Distillers

As a native to Cheshire, England, where G&J Distillers' production facility is located, Joanne Moore grew up with gin. "I was kind of brought up with mum and dad always having a Gin and Tonic at the start of a meal," she recalls. "So it's always been a spirits choice for our family, and I've always liked gin myself."

Moore studied biochemistry in college and interned in G&J's lab during the summer after her second year. When she graduated in 1995, the company offered Moore a permanent position and then quickly promoted her to quality manager. For 11 years, she worked alongside previous master distiller Eric Hughes, checking the quality of the products and assisting with new product development. "I found this side of the job very interesting and discovered that I have a flair for creating the gins," Moore says.

When Hughes retired in 2006, it was a natural progression for Moore to take over, becoming the seventh master distiller in G&J's 253-year history and the first woman to hold the position at the company. In addition to overseeing the production of Greenall's London Dry gin, Berkeley Square London Dry gin and various brands from other companies, Moore developed her own gin offering called Bloom. "I created Bloom as a light, floral gin that doesn't have heavy juniper notes and would appeal to vodka drinkers," she explains. It's the only G&J product that's sold in the United States, retailing for \$27 to \$29 a 750-ml. bottle. Launched in 2011, Bloom is now available in 25 states via St. Paul, Minnesota-based Prestige Wine & Spirits Group.

As the face of G&J Distillers, Moore spends much of her time educating both the trade and consumers about gin, and she believes the U.S. market has potential for growth. "We still feel there's a lot of room in the United States for new products," she says. Moore also predicts that the number of women working in spirits production will continue to increase, especially with the trend toward craft distilling. "They do say that women have a better sense of smell and taste than men," she adds.

### Joy Spence, Master Blender for Appleton Estate Jamaica Rum

When Joy Spence joined Appleton Estate Jamaica rum as chief chemist in 1981, she'd never even sipped a spirit, much less tasted rum. Previously, Spence had taught chemistry at both the high school and college levels in Jamaica for seven years before switching careers. "I got very bored with what I was doing and decided to get some industrial experience," she recalls. Spence served as research chemist at Jamaica's Estate Industries Ltd., the producers of Tia Maria liqueur, for two years and then applied for a job at nearby J. Wray & Nephew Ltd.

Spence worked diligently alongside previous master blender Owen Tulloch and held various positions until 1996, when she was promoted to general manager of technical and quality services. The following year, Tulloch retired, and Spence became the spirits industry's very first female master blender. In addition to creating new releases and overseeing the entire quality control process from distillation through aging and blending, she's responsible for ensuring that the facility meets all environmental and regulatory standards and that safety programs are implemented.

As master blender, Spence travels the world to educate consumers about Appleton Estate's rums, which have become a great source of pride and joy for her. "I fell in love with rum and became fascinated with the world of spirits," she says. "It's

the perfect combination of art and science." This enthusiasm shows in her dedication to innovation, having created the first-ever 30-year-old rum (\$395 a 750-ml. bottle) in 2009, as well as the 50-year-old Jamaica Independence Reserve (\$5,000) in 2012 and the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Blend (price not available) in 1999.

While she never experienced difficulty as a woman in the male-dominated spirits industry, Spence acknowledges that she hasn't always been accepted, but is happy to see more female master blenders and master distillers being appointed. "I feel like I broke the glass ceiling," she says. "Once you have the passion and creativity for it, the sky's the limit."

### Maria Teresa Lara López, Master Distiller for Casa Herradura

While working as director of chemical control at a pharmaceutical company, Maria Teresa Lara López took a course on fermentation in the production of Tequila, sparking her interest in Mexico's native spirit. "The complicated process associated with dealing with the agave plant awakened my passion for crafting Tequila," she says. López joined Casa Herradura in Amatitán, Jalisco, in 1987 and held various roles, including quality control manager, research and development manager, and director of production. In 2009, she became master distiller.

In this role, López maintains the quality of Casa Herradura's Tequilas in line with the distillery's standards and oversees the traditional crafting process to ensure authenticity. She is also responsible for creating new products, as well as evaluating and developing the processes and tasting notes associated with these innovations. Her latest innovation is the Colección de la Casa range, a series of small-batch Tequilas that has released two expressions: Port Cask Finish Reposado (\$89.99 a 750-ml. bottle) and Cognac Cask Finish Reposado (\$89.99).

Experimentation is a significant part of Herradura's heritage: The company began playing with barrel-aging in the 1960s—long before any other Tequila distillery—and is credited with inventing the reposado expression in 1974 and the extra añejo designation in 1995. "Although there is some uncertainty when I begin experimenting, it is very satisfying to evolve our Tequila and develop a unique experience for connoisseurs," López says.

Tequila production continues to be dominated by men, but López notes that more women are entering the industry in the quality control, research and bottling departments, which will hopefully lead to more female master distillers in the future. "I believe I am making inroads for all women," López says.

### Becky Harris, Distiller and Cofounder of Catoctin Creek Distilling Co.

Starting a craft distillery isn't exactly the first thing that comes to mind when brainstorming concepts for a new business. However, in 2009, Becky Harris and her husband, Scott, launched Catoctin Creek Distilling Co. in Purcellville, Virginia. After staying home with her kids for 10 years, the former chemical engineer decided to take on distilling duties, while Scott managed the marketing and sales side. "I've always been interested in making things," Harris explains. It also helped that she had a science background. "This business was Scott's dream job, so he chose well when we got married 20 years ago," she jokes.

Once Harris educated herself on the distilling process, she and Scott honed in on the product lineup fairly quickly. Rye whiskey is a historical spirit of the region, but they wanted it to be delicious with less than two years of age. The result is Catoctin's flagship Roundstone Rye (\$38.90 a 750-ml. bottle), which sells

RIGHT PHOTO BY MARK RHODES

twice as much as the distillery's other two grain products—the unaged whiskey Mosby's Spirit (\$38.10) and Watershed gin (\$38.10). Catoctin also produces brandies made with fruit from local farms and wineries, including the Short Hill Mountain Peach brandy (\$42.30 a 375-ml. bottle), the Pearousia (\$42.30 a 375-ml. bottle) and the 1757 Virginia brandy (\$49.80 a 750-ml. bottle). In addition to appealing to locavores, Catoctin is certified organic and certified kosher. The products are available in seven Eastern states, as well as Washington, D.C., and Singapore.

Last summer, Catoctin unveiled its new distillery on Main Street in Purcellville's historical downtown area. Housed in a 93-year-old building, the space features a 300-gallon still along with the original 100-gallon still, as well as a huge tasting room. Catoctin produced 4,500 cases in 2013 and aims to double that volume this year. The new location also provides more visibility for the distillery, which had previously been tucked away in an industrial park. Not only has the move boosted Catoctin's foot traffic, but it's helping other businesses in that part of town. "There's a lot of tourism for the wine industry, and we get the overflow," Harris says.

Other than occasional visitors who refuse to believe she's the distiller at Catoctin, Harris hasn't experienced too much negativity regarding her position. She hopes more women get into the distilling side of the spirits industry. "There is a real dearth, but it's growing and that's what's exciting," Harris says. "I think it's good to bring a woman's perspective to spirits."

## Bridget Firtle, Founder and CEO of The Noble Experiment NYC

Brooklyn, New York-based craft distillery The Noble Experiment NYC is a one-woman operation. Founder Bridget Firtle serves as distiller, salesperson, publicist and events coordinator for the spirits company, which launched in 2012 and produces Owney's rum. With a master's degree in business, she always wanted to start her own company, but assumed it



*The Noble Experiment NYC is led by founder and CEO Bridget Firtle, who does all the distilling, sales and marketing for Owney's rum.*

would be in the financial sector. However, Firtle became familiar with the beverage alcohol industry as a hedge fund analyst specializing in beer, wine and spirits, and when she began feeling dissatisfied with her job, the 29-year-old Queens native decided to leave Wall Street and get into the distilling game. "I think there's a market right now to develop craft spirits," she explains. "You're basically seeing what happened in craft beer 25 years ago happening in craft spirits now."

Firtle chose to highlight rum because of its connection to the history of the United States and to New York City. "Molasses-based rum is the first spirit distilled in the country and it's the first spirit on record in 1664 in Staten Island," she says. Named for Owen "Owney" Madden, who smuggled Caribbean rum to the United States via Rockaway Beach during Prohibition, Owney's is a white rum that's distilled in a hybrid copper pot-column still using grade A molasses from independent sugar plantations in Louisiana and Florida and then blended with filtered New York City tap water. "Owney's is a grittier, edgier rum," Firtle says. "It's not that sweet, tropical Caribbean style."

Located in a warehouse space in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, The Noble Experiment offers tours every Saturday at 4 P.M. for \$10, which includes up to three ¾-ounce tastings. Owney's is currently the sole product available and can be found in more than 200 New York City accounts, including Barclays Center. Firtle plans to add an aged rum, as well as limited-edition American whiskeys, to the portfolio.

While some people have trouble taking her seriously, Firtle says being a woman in charge of her own distillery has been a mostly positive experience. She has gotten lots of media attention from outlets like The New York Times and Forbes, which named her one of its "30 Under 30" in 2013. "My gender differentiates me and separates me from the crowd," she adds. "I'll use whatever assets are on the balance sheet, and if one of them is because I'm a woman, then sure." **mw**



*Catoctin Creek Distilling Co. produces a rye whiskey, an unaged whiskey, a gin and several brandies—all distilled by Becky Harris.*

(BOTTOM LEFT) PHOTO BY RICK MARTIN. (TOP RIGHT) PHOTO BY MR. AESTHETIC