

# IRISH 'SHINE

Poitín—Ireland's moonshine—packs a potent punch of Irish history and culture

Story by • Kit Bernardi



Head distiller Jimín Ó Griallais tests the poitín to determine when to make the hearts cut. Micil Distillery's family poitín recipe is 170 years old.

» In the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Ireland was under British rule, a thread of smoke twisting up from a remote hillside alerted the king's men of Irish likely breaking the law. Where there was smoke, there could be a wily farmer's still distilling the illegal, fiery clear alcohol called poitín, the precursor to whiskey. Sounds good, right?

Taxation was the motivation for enterprising Irish to set up their portable, single-pot stills in the hinterlands, often on obscure land boundaries where, if caught, actual still ownership would be difficult to prove. In the Irish language, poitín (pronounced "put-cheen") is derived from the word "pota" meaning "pot" and "póit" meaning hangover.

Home distillers made their potent Irish moonshine from cereals, primarily barley, as well as fruit and potatoes. The British Crown was unsuccessful at collecting taxes on illicit poitín production. In 1661, King Charles II banned it. But poitín is so deeply ingrained in



Photos Courtesy Micil Distillery



Pádraic Ó Griallais founded Micil Distillery, which welcomes visitors for pre-booked tours and tastings.

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Ireland's history—dating back to sixth-century monks distilling the drink—that the threat of jail failed to temper the Irish spirit.

Before the introduction of cask aging to the distillation process, poitín and whiskey were basically the same spirit. What separated

them was a government-issued license to legally make it. In the Irish language, both were called “fuisce,” an abbreviation of “uisce beatha,” which means “water of life.” Fuisce (pronounced “fwishka” in Irish) was later anglicized to “whiskey.”

**MORE POTENT PARTICULARS**

One of the oldest and strongest drinks in the world, poitín's alcohol content ranges from 40 percent ABV to a skyrocketing 90 percent. Its potency inspired folklore. Rubbing a greyhound's body with poitín was said to make the dog race faster. Some said it caused blindness, hence the term “blind drunk.” Others credit the drink for curing colds and aching joints.

The spirit has one attribute proven time and again. Poitín, along with beer and whiskey, has always been a social lubricant served at Irish gatherings, christenings, weddings, wakes and funerals.

Finally in 1997, the Irish government legalized poitín production and regulated the drink's potency. In 2008, the Council of the European Union granted poitín Protected Geographical Indication Status, which means that the recognized heritage-based spirit must be made in Ireland to be called poitín.

But because poitín was covertly home-distilled for centuries, there is no formal recipe for it. Today, each Irish distillery's poitín's flavor profile is different reflecting the region's terroir and native botanicals used in production.



Ó Griallais brothers Pádraic and Jimín are sixth generation distillers from Ireland's Connemara region.



Micil Distillery's "Connemara-style" poitín, using wild bogbean botanicals, is a family recipe handed down 170 years through six generations. Pádraic Ó Griallais founded the Micil Distillery in 2016, and his brother Jimín Ó Griallais is head distiller at their County Galway operation in the seaside town of Salthill on Galway Bay. The distillery's name honors their great-great-grandfather Micil Mac Chearra who began distilling illegal poitín in 1848 on hillsides near the family farm in western Ireland's rugged Connemara region. Micil claims to represent Ireland's "longest unbroken family distilling tradition."

The flavor profiles of Micil's poitíns have been described as full-flavored, sweet, spicy, slightly floral and very smooth. The distillery produces award-winning gin, whiskey, Irish cream liqueur and a limited-edition, cask-rested poitín. Other notable Ireland distilleries making poitíns include Teeling, Ballykeefe, Intrepid Spirits and Glendalough.

Pádraic says, "Poitín is not only an important part of the Irish culture, language and identity showing that we have a colonial past, but a spirit that expresses modern Ireland possessing all the heritage and craftsmanship of any spirit category in the world."

**TOP O' THE SHELF**

Micil's Heritage Poitín made from peat-malted barley and oats won the 2022 World Drink Awards "Best Unaged Grain Spirit." Peated means that the grain has been dried in a



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peat-fueled kiln and exposed to peat smoke prior to distillation, whereas unpeated poitín, like the Micil's Classic Poitín, has not.

Micil Irish Cream won the prestigious 2022 World Liqueur Awards "Best Irish Cream Liqueur" accolade for what is perhaps the world's first poitín-based Irish cream liqueur. It is the Ó Griallais brothers' late grandmother Brid's recipe that stands the test of time.

Poitín can be enjoyed multiple ways. The first is neat—often chased with a hoppy dark porter, like stout—or served with ice. Traditionally, the spirit has been consumed in hot toddies, called "punches." The Irish also historically mixed poitín with dairy products, spices and honey to make a drink called "scáiltín" in Irish, or scalteen.

While traditional ways of drinking poitín will always be popular, the spirit is increasingly being used in long drinks at bars across Ireland. In a Moscow mule, replace the vodka with poitín. Instead of tequila or mezcal in a paloma, pour poitín. A very nice riff on traditional Irish coffee is Belfast coffee made with cold brew coffee, poitín instead of whiskey and served chilled.

The spirits industry, mixologists and bartenders in other parts of the world, including the United States, where Micil plans to launch its products this year, are embracing poitín.

As Pádraic explains, "The beauty of poitín today is the spirit's versatility, which is why it is gaining traction in sophisticated, contemporary cocktail culture."

Micil Distillery offers pre-booked tours, tastings and guided distillery experiences. To learn more, visit [micildistillery.com](http://micildistillery.com). &



Micil Distillery makes award-winning Irish poitín, whiskey, gin and Irish cream liqueur. Micil's signature "Connemartini" features the Irish cream liqueur made from the Ó Griallais brothers' grandmother's recipe.