The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Gets a Taste For Irish Whiskey

Russia is now the second largest market for Irish whiskey in the world.

By Jason Corcoran for bne Intellinews

March 31, 2021



Jameson Distillery in Middleton. **BNE IntelliNews**

Irish whiskey is flying off the shelves in Russian bars, supermarkets and off-licenses, with the country now the second biggest market globally for the spirit after the U.S.

Distilleries say that the thirst for Irish whiskey is growing right across central and eastern Europe, as consumers increasingly turn away from traditional drinks such as vodka and schnapps.

The latest data from the Irish Whiskey Association shows Russia is the second largest geographic market with sales of 605,800 cases, or 7.3 million bottles, for the last recorded year in 2019 — a jump of 231% since 2010.

Russia has overtaken the U.K., France, South Africa, the domestic Irish market and only now lags the U.S. Premium brands, such as Jameson, Bushmills, Kilbeggan and Teeling, are proving to be hugely popular in Russia — as well as cheaper entry-level whiskeys such as Proper No. Twelve, the brand promoted by Conor McGregor, "the notorious" mixed martials arts (MMA) fighter.

"Russia has continued to grow in 2020 and this year, as most western markets have stuttered," John Teeling, owner of Ireland's Great Northern Distillery, told *bne IntelliNews* in an interview.

Related article: Ireland Comes to Arbat for St. Patrick's Day

"We have had many repeat orders and new clients. The taste of Irish whiskey obviously suits the Russian palate and the fact it's an imported spirit goes well with the middle class, who want to show off by buying imported spirits."

Teeling is in large part responsible for Irish whiskey's global revival after breaking the then monopoly controlled by Irish Distillers, the producers of Jameson, by setting up Cooley Distillery in 1987. Teeling sold Cooley, which supplied bulk whiskey to independent bottlers, to Beam Suntory in 2011 for $100 million and started a similar business in 2015 with Great Northern, while his two sons set up their eponymous Teeling Distillery.

"Jameson, Tullamore and Bushmills are still taking the bulk of the market," said Teeling. "All of the other brands on the shelves [in Russia] that you don't recognize would be ours."

Jameson, the world's leading Irish whiskey with sales of eight million cases a year, last month reported that its whiskey sales to Russia had risen by 7% last year.

Great Northern supplies bulk to four distributors from Russia, the Baltics, Italy and France, who brand, bottle and ship whiskey into Russia. In turn, they supply supermarket chains, including Metro, Lenta and Auchan.

Lenta sells the obscure-sounding Shamrose Irish blended whiskey for 1,000 rubles ($13) and Armstrong Irish Whiskey for 1,300 rubles ($17) — well below the 3,150 rubles ($42) charged for premium Teeling whiskey. Metro stocks Kilbeggan, Teeling, Roe & Co, Lambay and even the single malt Pogues Whiskey, made by independent West Cork Distillers.

The popularity of Irish whiskey was much in evidence in Moscow over the past week for the annual weekly St Patrick's Festival even if the wild parade was canned. Bushmills was the sponsor for the Irish film festival and hundreds of bottles were made available for tastings at the Karo cinema on Novy Arbat in Moscow and the Karo 9 Varshavskiy Express cinema in St. Petersburg.

Such is the increased clamour for Irish whiskey that Russians are now making it for themselves. Praskoveya Winery, which was established in 1898 in the Stavropol region, started to develop its own Irish Prashkovsky Whiskey in 2009 using strict Irish production methods. The winery, which has been producing its own cognac, produces 3-year-old, 5-year-old and 6-year-old whiskey.

Irish imitations

As well as the legitimately-made whiskey, there is a huge problem in Russia and across Eastern Europe with fake Irish whiskey brands, says Teeling.

"As Irish whiskey grows faster, you are always going to have rip-off merchants but they seem to be getting on top of it — including Irish-styled whiskey coming out of Ukraine for the Russian market."

The Irish Whiskey Association (IWA) last year came across six fake Irish whiskey brands in Russia, three of which were produced in Belarus. It has sought to have the products taken off shelves in Russia and has lobbied the European Union to negotiate intellectual property and geographical indication protection with the Kremlin. Cease-and-desist letters have been issued to various companies and retailers selling the fake Irish whiskey, leading to them no longer being sold.

But William Lavelle, head of the IWA, argues these infringing brands are actually "a massive endorsement" of the real product. "We have seen people who buy cheap or knock-off Irish whiskey move up the chain as they develop a taste for it," Lavelle told *bne IntelliNews* in an interview.

Russians first got a taste for whiskey in the 1980s when Aer Rianta, a pioneer investor in the perestroika era, set up the country's first duty-free shops in a joint venture with Aeroflot.

Related article: Russians and Alcohol: When Beer Replaced Vodka

Lavelle believes whiskey sales are taking off in the region at the expense of Scotch and bourbon because more people are realising that the Irish drink is a smoother and slightly sweeter spirit. "It's down to the multiple distillation and it's a much more palatable drink straight, on the rocks or in cocktails," he said.

The most remarkable growth of any Irish whiskey in the region has been recorded by Conor McGregor's Proper No. Twelve due to his profile and the popularity of MMA in the region. McGregor flaunted his whiskey during a press tour of Moscow in October 2019 as hundreds packed into the historic Central Telegraph building and thousands more gathered on Moscow's central Tverskaya street, chasing his limousine as he left.

Teeling himself has witnessed the appeal of McGregor, who was even a personal guest of President Vladimir Putin in Moscow during the 2018 World Cup, across Russia and eastern Europe.

"I met four businessmen at the Teeling distillery in Dublin one Sunday, who had flown over from Minsk on Ryanair simply to buy as many bottles of Proper No. Twelve as possible," he said.

"It's a matter of taste, so they were drinking our whiskey with us at Teeling, which is, of course, much more expensive than McGregor's."

This article first appeared on bneIntelliNews.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/31/russia-gets-a-taste-for-irish-whiskey-a73426