

Stephanie MacLeod

At the Top of their Game

By Christina Staalstrom | Photo Courtesy Dewars

DISTILLING BECOMES A FEMALE-FULL FIELD

To make a great spirit takes equal parts chemistry, vision, and passion. To be a great distiller, you need to have the skills and the courage to break the mold and create a blend like no other. The path to the still is different for each blender, but whether it's genever, gin, grappa, rum, tequila, or whisky, today's top female distillers have skills you can taste in every sip. With an industry whose history is so full of women, it is no wonder that distilling has once again become a woman's field.

Stephanie MacLeod, master blender at John Dewars & Sons, won the International Master Blender Award for the second year in a row with her four-step aging method developed for Dewar's Scotch Whisky Double Double Collection. With a discerning palate and taste driven by science and instinct, she made headlines last year as the first woman to receive the coveted accolade—bringing the history of distilling full circle from Mary the Prophetess, known as the Mother of Alchemy, who started it all when she invented the still in 200 CE.

The world of distilling has often been characterized as one dominated by men. Still, the reality is that women have had their thumbprint on the industry throughout history. Up until the Industrial Revolution, distilling was something done in the home by women. Be it for enjoyment or medicinal purposes, industrious women have been creating and blending potions for centuries. Today the field is full of talent at every level as women choose distilling as a career path once again.

SPECIAL SECTION SPIRITED WOMEN

Anne Brock



"WITH THE BOOM IN SMALL DISTILLERIES, THERE ARE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO ENTER THE INDUSTRY, AND WOMEN ARE BECOMING MORE PROMINENT AT EVERY LEVEL."

One cannot downplay the value of working your way up through the ranks and trial by fire, but many of today's top distillers bring with them an engineering and scientific background that gives them a leg up in a science-based process and detail oriented role.

Anne Brock has made a name for herself in the gin world. Her role as master distiller of Bombay Sapphire Gin is one that she has worked up to ever since she left medical school to pursue a Ph.D. in chemistry once realizing that excelling in this area of study could lead to a career distilling gin. Her first industry job with a small gin brand was trial by fire and is encouraged by women entering the field. "With the boom in small distilleries, there are more opportunities to enter the industry, and women are becoming more prominent at every level." Brock expects to see a lot of innovation from distilleries, both large and small, in the months ahead in the format of infused spirits and ready-to-drink offerings as consumers look for more choices. Also, "Personalization is an enticing consumer proposition" and Bombay Creations Gin Liqueurs, a quartet of naturally flavored gin liqueurs, "allows consumers to get creative with their gin and tonic."

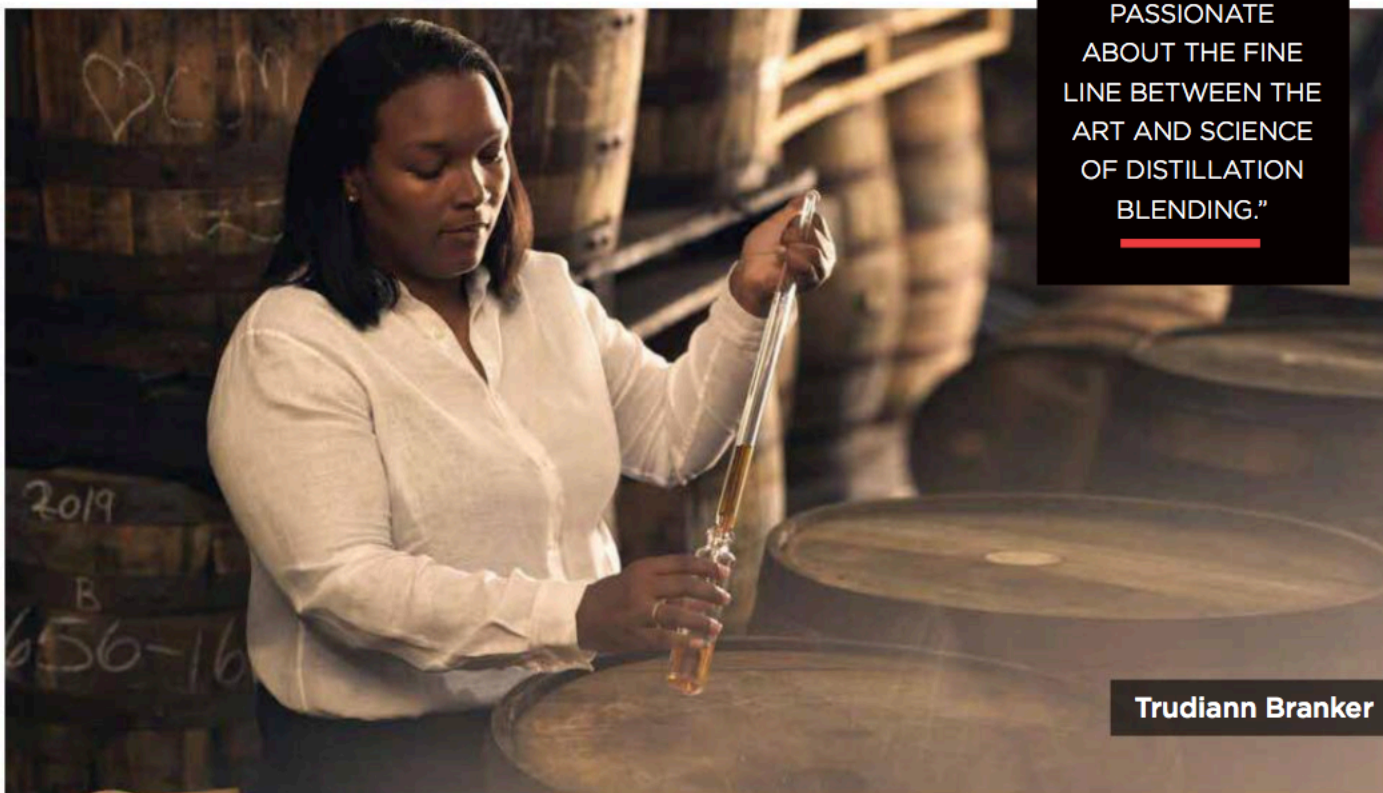
Myriam Hendrickx studied food technology with a specialty in cheese before her fascination with genever. Her work with the Dutch juniper flavored liquor guided her to become master distiller of Holland's craft distillery, Rutte. The 150-year old distillery known for its craftsmanship welcomes Myriam's creativity as she sets out to innovate while honoring century-old traditions. While being a woman does not impact her capabilities, she notes, "women have a broader approach; we tend to take all issues into account instead of focusing on one aspect." As such, she takes inspiration from the perfume world. "Their use of botanicals in creating the perfectly balanced recipe is very much the way we do it at Rutte." Whatever the reason, she's succeeding in her own right as her team recently launched a hybrid gin and genever product, The Old Tom Genever liqueur, a fusion of categories that Myriam believes we'll see more of in the year ahead.

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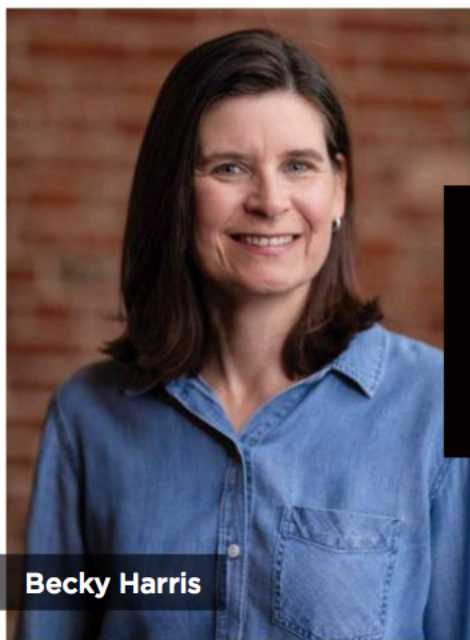
Trudiann Branker

Shoot across to Barbados, and you'll find Trudiann Branker, master distiller for Mount Gay Rum, developing her Master Blender Barrel Collection. Trudiann is the 300-year-old distillery's first female master blender, and her recent release, Port Cask, is a testament to her blending skills. "I was always passionate about the fine line between the art and science of distillation blending." With a background in brewing and years of managing Mount Gay's rigorous Quality Assurance program, this food scientist comes to her role with a big toolbox that embraces the entire process. Like many distillers, Branker knows the source and the process are equally important to the final product. "I do think that many brands will become more transparent, clearly outlining what goes into each expression in their range: the age, barrels used, aging methods, and any additives. Rum enthusiasts have helped push this forward as they're hungry for more information."

Transparency is a key factor when talking about craft spirits, and no one knows that better than Becky Harris, president of the American Craft Spirits Association. Advocating for over 2,000 members in 50 states has its challenges in

our new environment. Harris expects the numbers to rise with new products and formats coming into the market as brands try to navigate this new landscape. But as an entrepreneur and distiller herself, Harris takes it all in stride. She continues to turn out great rye whiskies as the chief distiller at her Catoctin Creek Distillery in Virginia. Balancing both roles admittedly

has its challenges, but Harris is a woman with a constant thirst for learning. "I love both roles, which are stretching my communication skills in new ways after years of keeping my focus more technical."



Becky Harris

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Like many of the women in her field, Harris' background is in chemical engineering. She has an unexpected knowledge of polystyrene foam trays and contact lens production under her belt. Her transition to distillery owner came when she took a passion for basically distilling anything with starch or sugar in it and turned it into a business.

“SOME THINGS YOU CANNOT PICK UP IN SCHOOL.”

While education and an aptitude for science seem to play a role with many of today's top female distillers, one cannot discredit the value of being born into a family legacy of production.

The Italian Nonino family is known for its beautifully handcrafted grappa and its gifted and skilled distilling women. Three sisters, Elisabetta, Antonella, and Cristina, each take on master distillers' roles as they carry on their grandmother's legacy, Silvia Nonino. The elder Nonino's path was born out of necessity, having lost her husband during the second world war. But her skill and palate helped her rise to the top and became the first female master distiller in Italy. Today, the three sisters are equally passionate and dedicated to the family business. They grew up watching their father distill, “surrounded by steam, it truly looked to us as if he was a magician or an alchemist,” and eagerly picked up the know-how and traditions that went into making their family legacy of distilling. “Some things you cannot pick up in school.”

The new ranks of female master distillers will tell you that being a female master distiller takes much of the same skill, palate, courage, and creativity of their male counterparts. Maybe a bit more, some may argue. While it may be true that scientifically women have better palates (that's why there are so many female tasters in our industry), the proof is in the pot, and these women are pouring at the top of their game.

The Nonino Sisters