

The Drink

by Yvonne Gordon



Not-So-Dry Dock

Titanic Distillers brings a new spirit to Belfast's historic waterfront

The recent redevelopment of Belfast's waterfront has always kept the area's nautical history in mind; after all, the district is called the Titanic Quarter, in honor of the star-crossed cruise liner that was built here from 1909 to 1912. A new attraction is continuing that nostalgic trend, while also helping to revive an industry—distilling—that has long been dormant in the Northern Ireland capital.

This spring, Titanic Distillers opened its production facility in the old Titanic Pumphouse, alongside the Thompson Graving Dock—formerly the largest dry dock in the world and the place where the *Titanic* was painted, fitted out, and had her engines installed. While the pumphouse's steam-powered machinery once could flush 23 million gallons of water from the dock's basin in about 100 minutes, today it's the three copper pot stills installed amid the old works that are doing the pumping.

The old facility humming once more would be news on its own, but that's not the only rebirth happening here. Back in 1899, Belfast was home to as many as 18 distilleries, but the local industry died out; when Titanic Distillers debuted this spring, it became the first whiskey producer to operate here in 88 years.

"Our slogan for the whiskey is 'Blood, Sweat, and Years,'" says visitor attraction and site manager Ruairi Burns. "It's our duty to carry on the legacy of all the workers [at the shipyard], and we've brought that back to life with the distillery. This



was a really important building in Belfast; we've just cleaned it and gave it a dust, but everything here is as it was."

Visitors have a few options for taking in both the new operation and the historic site. The one-hour Signature Tour includes a whiskey and vodka tasting and a walkthrough of the distillery, where guests can see the new stills, the dials on the old dock master's control desk, and—by peering three levels down a deep well—the original Gwynne pumps. The two-hour Premium Tour adds a visit to the Thompson Graving Dock, where ticketholders can walk among the keel blocks and stand in the physical footprint of the *Titanic*. The two-and-half-hour Legacy Tour, which is limited to groups of five, includes

all of that, plus a chance to descend into the building's depths to see the pumps up close.

It's this blend of the preservation of a historic place and the reinvigoration of an age-old tradition that Titanic Distillers tour guide Brian Cunning says he loves. "Highlighting the innovation of the time and making it comparable to the innovation of today is equally important," he says. "This is the sort of place that does that, by remembering our past and looking toward our future."

Clockwise from top: the copper stills at Titanic Distillers; the pumphouse sits alongside the old Thompson Graving Dock; the distillery's slogan; tour guide Brian Cunning leads a tasting

Courtesy of Titanic Distillers (stills, exterior); Yvonne Gordon (slogan, guide)