

# A TASTE OF THE VALLEY

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## Foraging with Dyfi Distillery.

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The afternoon light pours over the valley and breaks through the estuary's tall reeds, which have grown a little unruly, arching over the wooden walkways that cut through the marshes. It's serenely quiet. Danny Cameron explains that the Dyfi Osprey Project, normally busy with visitors, has been closed since the disruption of Covid-19. But a pandemic has no bearing on the plant life here; for nature, it's business as usual. And so it is for Danny. He dons his wellies, takes his pruning shears and heads into the marsh to look for bog myrtle. There is gin to be made.

Danny and his brother Pete founded Dyfi Distillery (pronounced 'Dove-y') in the Dyfi Valley, an area of southern Snowdonia recognised by UNESCO as a world biosphere reserve. Pete was drawn here to study biochemistry 35 years ago and has remained ever since, working closely with the land as a forager and beekeeper. Danny, meanwhile, earned some impressive stripes as an international wine consultant, importer and judge. It was in 2013, over a pint in the pub, that their career paths came to an opportune junction and they explored the idea of "making gin here in the valley that tastes of the valley." After all, they not only had Pete's botanical knowledge and Danny's drinks-industry nous, but in Dyfi there was "this astonishing rainbow of things to draw on."

Naturally, Dyfi Distillery gins feature the classic ingredients of juniper and citrus, but their key elements are wild Welsh botanicals, hand-foraged from within the biosphere - an 840-square-kilometre area of lush peaks and valleys that reach from the woodlands near Corris down to the coast at Aberystwyth. Within these boundaries, the brothers and their families gather wildflowers, aromatic leaves, berries and conifer tips.

Today Danny is collecting bog myrtle, a plant that looks a bit like tea, and is the one foraged component used in all their gins. They harvest it

four times a year from the Dyfi Osprey Project in the Cors Dyfi Nature Reserve; an arrangement that sees the distillery written into the land management plan. They take only what they need (about 16,000 stems a year, from growth which requires pruning anyway) and for each forage they make a donation to the reserve, which is run by volunteers. Everybody benefits.

Bog myrtle thrives on the estuary. "It loves wet feet," says Danny. Which means sometimes he has to get his feet wet too, but it's all in the name of gathering that first flush of delicate new growth - the magic ingredient. He snips a tip and crushes it between his fingers, the resin from the leaves turning his fingertips a bright ochre. What we gather today will be snap-frozen, the best way to preserve the quality of the oils and maintain the integrity of the results.

And by results, we're talking award-winning gins. Their first, Dyfi Original, uses pine tips and gorse flowers to amplify the traditional juniper and lemon. Conversationally it's earned itself the moniker of 'the world's ginniest gin'. And sure, while that might depend on your definition, I do declare it's the smoothest gin I've ever tasted.

Danny explains that this is an intentional and hard-earned characteristic. "When I did my apprenticeship, my mentor said to me: if you're going to produce a spirit that is unaged ... the compromise you have to accept is that it's going to be harsh. And I didn't question that - until we started doing our own." Through an impressive amount of research and experimentation they've nailed the process with their elaborate, customised still: a steampunk-esque marvel allowing fastidious control, with which they can meticulously jewel-pick the very best of every component - and remove all else. It means a smaller batch size, but it's a batch of something altogether more interesting.



heather



juniper



Bog Myrtle



Scots Pine tips



organic lemon



rosemary





*Beyond the reeds the crumple-quilted  
hills are brought into vivid relief, long  
shadows tucking the tufts of purple  
heather and grey-green gorse into  
gentle folds.*



“We’re blessed with this wonderful opportunity with gin. We can control the botanical formulation in a way that you can’t really do as a winemaker. You can select the grapes from this hill, control [the amount] of fermentation, and to a degree - as long as you’re not an arch manipulator - you’ve kind of got what you’ve got. But with gin we can dictate the inputs to such a precise degree. We have such control, if we choose to exhibit it.”

It occurs to me that, unlike wine, where so much relies on the initial cultivation of the land and fruit, Dyfi’s botanical gins only work with nature’s end product. There is no need for intervention and manipulation to what nature does or how it does it. Only to what it provides. Which in the case of the biosphere, is a treasure trove.

This is especially celebrated in their Pollination Gin - “botanically more complicated”, as Danny puts it, than Dyfi Original. It features 29 botanicals, 20 of which are foraged local species, including rowan berries, rosehips, hawthorns, elderflowers and bramble leaves. There’s also a sweetness that could be mistaken for honey but comes via the magic of glycyrrhizic acid, derived from liquorice root. It’s marvellous. And there’s a brightness there too, which brings to mind that late afternoon sun spotlighting over the valley.

“I think brightness is a really undervalued characteristic in a gin,” says Danny. “And it’s often dealt with quite a blunt instrument: citrus. And whilst we do use citrus in all our gins, we want the foraged components to work as hard as possible and let them express themselves. For me, we shouldn’t be producing something that should just be one flavour hit hard. Because, well, it’s not really what we would want to drink.”

Piquing the interest of the drinker, and making something that will hold that interest right to

the bottom of the glass, has led the brothers on a road of bold exploration and experimentation - and eventually to their first barrel-aged gin. Dyfi Hibernation Gin is a luscious profile of botanicals including crab apples and blackberries, deepened with age in a 100-year-old white Port barrel (the first gin in the world to be made this way) that brings its own whisper of praline, nutmeg and cinnamon.

With sights always set on what more can be done, Pete and Danny waded into new territory once more with their latest gin, a Navy Strength, which pays homage to the coastal elements of the biosphere. The higher ABV (57%) meant going back to the drawing board in keeping the integrity of the botanicals, but this time they utilised a variety of seaweed and aged the gin in a 140-year-old vintage Madeira barrel, on loan from Vinhos Barbeito. In the glass, the Navy Strength gives the scent of wild ocean air, and the taste is quite unexpected. “Umami!” declares Danny, with characteristic enthusiasm.

That such different, distinctive varieties of gin can come out of a sleepy pocket of Wales says a lot about the Cameron brothers’ shared knowledge, dedication and understanding of the remarkable landscape on their doorstep. “What we use here is something that’s growing in the place that it’s absolutely meant to be,” says Danny. “To work like this is an opportunity to work with nature, rather than against it.”

The light is now getting low across the estuary. Beyond the reeds the crumple-quilted hills are brought into vivid relief, long shadows tucking the tufts of purple heather and grey-green gorse into gentle folds. Danny points out the nesting posts where the ospreys would normally be roosting. Right now they’re empty, the birds already en route to Africa for the colder months. But for the unique plant life in the biosphere - and for Dyfi’s dedicated gin makers - this is the only place to be.



