



POITÍN MAKING

Cover image: A woman arrested for poitín-making stands in front of the stills seized by members of the RIC in a raid in Mayo in the late 1800s (image from Western People)

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Poitín Making

Poitín stems from the Irish word meaning pot, referring to the technique used to filter the spirit using a pot still.

Its origins can be traced back to the monks in the 6th century. They produced it from malt grains such as barley, oats and wheat. It was used liberally as a disinfectant, to ease muscle pain and as a treatment for every illness from colic to smallpox. This practice continued in monastic settlements until King Henry VIII of England dissolved the monasteries in 1536 and distilling moved beyond the confines of the clergy. By then, people were using this spirit as a recreational drink and not only as a medicine.

As a result, poitín distilling began to increase sharply. However, this rise came to a halt, as on Christmas Day 1661, taxation on alcohol was first introduced by the British crown. The Irish, wanting to evade this taxation, hid the spirit in concealed cellars. The London Parliament reacted with tighter legislation.

They introduced a tax based on pot still capacity, the bigger the pot still, the higher the tax bill. This meant that London would generate their tax regardless of whether the spirit was produced or not. Consequently, Ireland's oldest spirit was forced underground, as the English tried to tax it to extinction.

From then on, it was illicitly distilled for over 300 years before being legalised in 1997. During that time frame, production carried on in remote and mountainous areas, away from the watchful eyes of the law. The key ingredients used were potatoes, sugar, and yeast. The heat required was fuelled by turf (peat), however, the rising smoke was a giveaway to the law enforcers. Therefore, illegal distillers would wait for windy and unsettled weather before brewing commenced.

Like many rural areas by the 1900s, Mayo was a hotbed for poitín production and special Garda teams would roam the countryside looking to break up stills. The newspaper archives of the *Western People* are filled with court reports, Garda raids, and tales of the "Mayo Moonshine". It was reported in 1929 that Mayo contributed to almost half of the total fines issued in the Irish State for poitín-related offences. Of the £920 in fines issued that year, £473 was raised in Mayo following 162 seizures and 48 prosecutions.

Areas of Mayo were classed in the *Western People's* pages as particular hubs for poitín production. Killasser, outside of Swinford, was described as the 'Home of Poitín Kings' in the 1940s. "*In their ceaseless efforts to stamp out the poitín racket in Killaser district, Swinford Gardaí are carrying out widespread raids with unabated ferocity,*" reported the *Western People* in August 1941.



"If you are born in Killasser, you're born not with the proverbial silver spoon in your mouth but with a 'still' or a 'cooler', a 'worm' and all the other gear which means so much to the life of a poitín maker," the article continued.

Glass Island in Pontoon, situated within north Mayo, achieved legendary status as a centre for poitín manufacturing.

The Glass Island moonshiners had developed the poitín-making to a fine art. A look-out was posted on the high rock, 'The Reindeer Lean', near the six-arched bridge at Pontoon.

From this elevated position, they could see Garda patrols approach the island from every direction. The wave of a flag or the flash of a mirror directing the sun's rays to the distillers' hideout was all that was needed to escape the law.

Nowadays, there has been increased interest in this rebellious spirit, with a revival of legal poitín producers crafting a beverage that is modern and versatile, whilst preserving its eventful past.

Resources:

www.rte.ie

www.westernpeople.ie

Below: A poitín stíl, typical of the type used in Ireland down through the years

(image from North Mayo Heritage Centre)



Merry Christmas

