

TOITŪ TE WHENUA, TOIORA TE WAI

OUR LAND AND WATER

The Gin Genie

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Nestled amongst the spectacular Paparoa and Victoria ranges, Reefton is home to the eponymous Reefton Distilling Co., founded by local Patsy Bass. She and her team of specialists have created one of New Zealand’s largest distilleries, harnessing the town’s compelling history and foraged botanicals to entice people to the area – and try their luxury spirits.

Rain is one of our unique ingredients and part of what makes our beverages so special. It travels thousands of kilometres across the great Southern Ocean to our rainforests, and I’ve been told by a specialist in precipitation that it’s amongst the purest water on the planet. I’m a born and bred West Coaster and I love the rain. I find it invigorating.

I had no experience of distilleries when deciding this was the perfect business for the town five years ago. Friends thought I was completely mad! They knew me as a non-drinker and former social worker whose clients included people in drug and alcohol rehab. Before my husband Shane and I moved back here I spent three months on the main street talking with visitors, asking them why they were in town, what they liked and didn’t like and what they’d like to see. I then brought some of my professional network here and we held community forums to brainstorm possibilities.

I was born in Reefton, the youngest of five. My dad, Arthur, came out to New Zealand as a Ten Pound Pom from London where he’d been in the Royal Navy during World War Two. His passage was ten pounds to come to New Zealand and work in the coal mines. He met my mum, Eva, here. After the 1968 Inangahua earthquake, we left Reefton to live in Christchurch. My parents were terribly homesick, so we used to come back to Reefton for

weekends and all school holidays until I was about fourteen. Those were the caravan days. As kids back then we’d be gone for the day on our bikes, or horse riding, exploring the bush and creeks and tadpoling.

I never fell out of love with Reefton, but Christchurch was where my parents felt there would be better opportunities for their children. I had a career in banking, then I took up studying social work at the University of Canterbury. Unfortunately, a social work salary wouldn’t allow me to provide my daughter with the opportunities I wanted for her, so I moved into a career in human resources and later project management – my superpower, as it turns out, is creating order from chaos! So, for the next few years I worked on some big projects for entities such as Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu and Farmlands.

Running a distillery was outside my experience, but the idea seemed to bring together some of the best aspects of Reefton – the rugged, unspoiled nature, gutsy people and gold-mining history. It all resonated with my ethics and beliefs – I wanted to contribute in some small way to see this town thrive through authentic enterprise that honours the spirit of the place and offers secure, sustainable jobs.

Little Biddy – Bridget “Biddy” Goodwin – and George Fairweather Moonlight were real people from Reefton’s gold rush past. They’re characters of old, and they are the inspiration behind some of our brands. Biddy was a four-foot-tall Irish immigrant and legend has it she enjoyed whisky and gin, smoked a pipe and worked as hard as any gold-digging man.

It’s weird now to think some locals then refused to speak to her because she was unconventional. She worked with men, lived with men out of wedlock, and was shunned for the sin of all of those things, and even for wearing trousers! According

to legend she never saw another person go hungry. She died in her nineties and is buried in the local cemetery.

Scotsman George Fairweather Moonlight arrived here via the California gold rush. He famously discovered a goldfield where some of the largest nuggets in New Zealand were found – one the size of a potato! He and his wife, Elizabeth, were known for opening up the region’s back country for goldmining. There’s a number of natural landmarks named Moonlight around here after him.

Their stories of endurance and their pioneering spirit brings heart and soul to our brand – our customers connect with this. We’ve also got the attention of researchers who recognised Reefton Distilling Co.’s strong, authentic customer focus as one of nine attributes that other New Zealand food and beverage brands could adopt to earn a premium price in our export markets. That makes me really proud!

I’m excited about our Moonlight Creek single malt whisky coming onto the market this year. We have a team of foragers who collect the native botanicals prior to distillation, like toatoa and horopito. I’ve even started to enjoy a Little Biddy Gin and tonic with the team from time to time.

Glossary. Horopito, pepper tree. Toatoa, a native tree with wedge-shaped, thick, leathery leaves.

This piece is the fifth in a series supported by the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge. To learn more about the nine attributes that show how Aotearoa New Zealand can capture more value for our sustainable food, beverage and fibre production, see The Value Project from the Our Land and Water National Science Challenge. thevalueproject.nz