



In good spirits

The owners of North Queensland's first boutique distillery have proven a small operation can achieve big things. Emily McAuliffe reports.

THE SPIRITS MARKET IN AUSTRALIA
OUR SPIRITS MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY SUPPLIES LESS THAN 40 PER CENT OF DOMESTIC DEMAND, WITH MOST OF OUR SPIRITS IMPORTED.

SIZE OF MARKET IN AUSTRALIA: Revenue from spirits is currently valued at \$566.4m (IBISWorld).

KEY PLAYERS: Diageo, Asahi Holdings, Lion, Coca-Cola Amatil.

CHALLENGES: Inconsistent alcohol taxes are a problem, as are rising concerns about FTD consumption which have led many to voluntarily reduce the alcohol content of some drinks.

GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES: The rise of penitentiation is expected to boost demand for pre-mixed cocktail drinks and value-added bottled spirits in the next five years, according to IBISWorld.

SPIRITS TO GROW BY 1.50% EVERY YEAR FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS



SIGNATURE STYLE

Watkins started out making fruit liqueurs, but found them hard to move from a wholesale perspective. So he shifted into spirits including gin, whiskey, rum and vodka, with unique flavour twists. His gin-style spirit Botanic Australis, for instance, awarded internationally for the last five years, is based on a 300-year-old London dry recipe, but substitutes traditional ingredients for Australian native botanicals.

"For example, instead of cinnamon or casia bark, we use cinnamon myrtle, and instead of lemon peel we use lemon-scented gum," Watkins says. Most of these ingredients are grown onsite or collected locally.

Then, maximising the plentitude of sugar cane on the Atherton Tableland, Watkins makes his international multi-award-winning 'Trindum' gold rum out of sugar cane syrup from the local mill, resulting in a light and clean product that can't be emulated using a molasses base.

For his Anela vodka, awarded silver at the 2015 International Wine and Spirit Competition, Watkins uses a honey mash filtered through volcanic rock, and avoids the common practice of using sugar or citric acid as a smoothing agent.

"Our product is totally clean," he says. "If you spit it on glass it would evaporate to nothing – it wouldn't be sticky."

Watkins firmly believes copper stills produce the best products, so utilises a 1500-litre Holslein still imported from Germany. "There's not many of these stills around," he says, "but I



LEFT TO RIGHT: Indium Gold Rum's colour is obtained from a four-year barrel ageing process. Mt Uncle's rum is the highest-awarded Australian-produced rum in the country; Botanic Australis garners Australian native botanicals.

TROPICAL DELIGHTS

Watkins has a few home advantages he believes help create such distinguished products, including the altitude of Atherton Tableland, which sits around 700 metres above sea level. "Distillation works on the principle that at 78 degrees Celsius sea level, the product will go from a liquid to vapour stage, but here it boils at a lower temperature, about 76.5 degrees,

consider the technology inside some of the best in the world." According to Watkins, copper reduces sulphides in vapour more effectively than stainless steel and glass, thus avoiding development of a harsh taste. And he bases this opinion on experience. "The first still I built when we opened was all stainless, and the quality of the spirit that came out was nowhere near as good."

"A lot of people will put caramel in their rum to bring the colour up, but we get all our colour from the barrels," he says. For his single malts, Watkins uses reconditioned ex-red wine barrels with an American oak head and French oak body. "French oak brings out your cinnamon and spicy clove notes and a nice dry finish," he explains. American oak brings in vanillians and some sugars for sweetness, so the whiskey also has a long finish."

Clearly the best

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