

HUSK DISTILLERS

*From paddock to bottle, the great
rise of the Australian gin*



Growing up in the 90s in Australia you pretty much had two choices of gin – Gordon’s or the exotic Bombay Sapphire that your mum kept on the bar for special occasions. We were always told gin would make us depressed or we mixed it with such awful tonics that overpowered the delicate botanicals. For these reasons most of us stuck to the classic vodka, lime, and soda when we hit the pubs and bars of Australia.

Fast forward to 2021 and gin in Australia has come a long way. It is now a growing domestic industry worth over \$1 billion a year that supports countless jobs and our many boutique distilleries have put Australian gins on the world map.

One of these local distilleries is Husk Farm Distillery, located on a 150 acre farm in the Tweed Valley near the tiny river side town of Tumbulgum. ele HOME sat down with Harriet Messenger, the General Manager of Marketing and Hospitality at Husk to talk about one of the highest selling gins in Australia and how Husk flourished.

How did Husk come to life?

Husk Distillers was started up in 2012 with a vision to bring sipping quality agricultural rum to Australia after a revelation that there was no-one in Australia making this style of rum, which is so popular in France and the French Caribbean.

As a rum loving, sugar cane producing country we wanted to bring this fantastic, full flavoured, provenance driven style of rum to Australia.

We sold the family home, purchased a 150 acre farm in the Tweed Valley, converted a 6x8m farm shed to a pilot plant distillery, planted some sugar cane in the paddock, and the rest is history.



Tell us about the Husk product line?

As well as Husk Rum, we also make Ink Gin, which is currently Australia’s best-selling ultra-premium gin (which is so amazing – thank you Ink Gin fans!!).

Ink came about as a by-product of the rum making process. Because agricultural rum can only be made during the cane harvest season, we knew we wanted to create a gin to make during the summer months. After searching Australia and our wide backyard of the Asia Pacific, we came across the beautiful butterfly pea flower.

Our founder Paul started experimenting with butterfly pea flowers in 2011 when we were in the planning stage of our farm distillery.

While working through the design and approvals process we spent time cutting and crushing fresh cane juice and running trial ferments and distillations of what would become the first Australian agricultural rum. We knew from the outset that we would only ever be able to make fresh cane juice rum for five months of the year and we needed another product to improve cash flow projections for the business, so we started looking around for interesting gin botanicals.

Paul was introduced to dok un chan, the Thai butterfly pea (non-alcoholic) drink and its colour changing properties and wondered if it would work in a gin. We bought five seeds for five dollars, planted them and a few months later picked enough flowers to start trial infusions. It didn’t impart much flavour, but the blue colour was unusual and it was pretty cool to see it change with lime or lemon juice. Then we started playing around with different mixers. Mixing soda water made an attractive sky-blue drink that tasted great but didn’t change colour. When we mixed a Gin and Tonic the result was sensational. We didn’t realise until then that tonic water is acidic, most with a pH around three. The transformation from deep blue to the beautiful, sparkling, bluish pink and vibrant liquid full of effervescence was a game changer, very different to the dull cloudiness when mixed with lemon or lime juice. We could see right then that the butterfly pea ink gin and tonic was a match made in heaven.

That was definitely a eureka moment for us but it would take another four years before we were ready to launch Ink Gin in



Founder and CEO of Husk Distillers, Paul Messenger and Head Distiller, Quentin Brival



Harvesting sugar cane for the rum agricole



the market. Over the next 18 months we trialed dozens of botanicals, traditional and local natives, until we finally had a flavour profile that consistently beat the bestselling high end commercial gins in the blind tastings we ran. In August 2013 we registered our trademark for Ink Gin and began working on the packaging. By this time, we had set up our pilot plant distillery on the farm and we were filling barrels of Agricole rum using hand cut and crushed cane sticks from our paddock. Around that time, we began to notice the early bottles of gin were fading in colour. It didn’t affect the flavour but the organic colour was slowly fading out, so we experimented with different preparation and filtration methods which took time and then we ran a whole bunch of shelf life storage and transport tests.

We had no background in the liquor game, so everything was new to us and it was a steep and adventurous learning curve. We knew we had a novel idea, and we were unsure what to do next, so, in February 2015 we registered an Innovation Patent for our colour changing gin and put our first batch of 105 bottles in the market that July. The initial response was mixed, consumers loved the theatre and taste of it and, while the bar scene agreed it was a great tasting gin, some to our astonishment asked “why didn’t you just make a clear gin”...

We distilled that first batch in our 50-litre pot still, but in a few months we stepped up to the 1000 litre pot and by June 2018 we were running all batches through our new 6,000 litre Forsyth pot still.



Can you tell us about the design and creation of the Husk buildings? What inspired you? Who designed the buildings and outdoor spaces?

The Husk Distillery buildings were inspired by a rundown old factory we drove past while on a family trip to New Zealand. It was sitting proud and crumbling in the middle of a beautiful field. We pulled up, jumped out and started pacing it out. Co-founder Mandy (and wife of Paul) can be credited for the interior and exterior design of the building. The grounds were designed by local Landscape Architect Duncan Gibbs.

What does 2021 have in store for Husk?

2021 will see several new products be launched, that we have been working on for some time. In 2021 we will also commission a new sugar mill, our new 1000-barrel strong barrel house and spirit tank farm. We are also hoping to purchase a whiz bang bottling line in 2021 – at the moment we still bottle everything by hand.

@huskdistillers and @ink_gin
 www.huskdistillers.com
 1152 Dulguigan Road North Tumbulgum NSW 2490
 Open to the public for tours, cocktails & bar snacks Wednesday-Sunday.



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Winding Road - Citrus and Sea Gin.
 Handcrafted using a combination of nine local, Australian native and traditional botanicals, the citrus and sea gin is inspired by the stunning North Coast NSW coastline and the rolling hinterland hills.
 RRP \$77 - 700ml
 www.windingroaddistilling.com.au



MGC - Single Shot Gin.
 A gin made in a single distillation in which botanicals are individually distilled then blended together. The result is a full flavoured gin so much so it may louche (for a fine glazy mist) in a G&T.
 RRP \$95 - 700ml
 www.melbournegincompany.com



Brookie's Byron Dry Gin
 Distilled with native botanicals foraged from the heart of Cape Byron Distillery's` rainforest and hand crafted on their farm in the hinterland of Byron Bay.
 RRP \$75 - 700ml
 www.capebyrondistillery.com



Four Pillars Navy Strength Gin.
 An intense but smooth gin, made for cocktails. Distilled with native finger limes and fresh ginger, palate is sweet and juicy but still very clean.
 RRP \$90 - 500ml
 www.fourpillarsgin.com