

# Barley or bust: New King Island distillers go with the grain

■ By Lachlan Bennett, ABC Rural

## AT A GLANCE...

- The distillers are relying on a crop uncommon on King Island due to the wetter climate, barley.
- The hopeful distillers have had an ageing header shipped to the island.
- The entrepreneurs say they are committed to a whisky they won't release for 12 years.

It was a relaxed night in spring a few years ago and King Island farmer Thomas Shaw was having a beer and chatting with neighbour Vaughan O'Connor when Vaughan announced the island needed a distillery.

"And I said, 'Woah, don't get me started,'" Thomas recalls.

"I've probably been talking about it for five or six years too long now."

Thomas said he had dreamed of opening a distillery since travelling to his ancestral homeland Scotland.

For Vaughan, the idea took hold when he started coming to King Island to surf at the world-renowned Martha Lavinia break.

"Anyone who's been there (King Island) probably falls in

love with the community and the place itself," he said.

"And the more time we spent there, the more we realised that it would be a great opportunity to do something special with the distillery."

With that, a distillery was conceived. But the project hasn't been without challenges.

Vaughan's vision is to build a distillery with a "world-renowned pedigree" akin to King Island's iconic cheese and beef brands.

To do that, the distillery will use King Island's natural peat and grow its own barley on Vaughan's five hectare block.

Grain crops aren't common on King Island, which is



King Island Distillery founder Vaughan O'Connor says he is fully committed to the venture. (PHOTO: Vaughan O'Connor)



Fields of barley grow at the site of a new distillery on King Island. (PHOTO: Vaughan O'Connor)



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**King Island farmers helped transport an ageing Massey Ferguson header to the distillery. (PHOTO: Thomas Shaw)**

dominated by green pasture due to its climate and rainfall, but veteran farmer Robbie Payne says they are possible.

"For growing, the rainfall is always reliable. But the biggest problem is probably trying to get the grain moisture levels down," he said. "You don't always get those hot, drying days that you do in traditional grain-growing country."

Vaughan isn't too concerned. He has grain growing in his veins because his father grew up in the "wheat and barley belt" of Victoria.

"We're very fortunate in the fact that we can pick up the phone and talk to my second cousins and uncles and actually say, 'What are we doing wrong here? What do we need to do to get this crop going?'" he said.

Thomas knows it can be done. The previous owner of his farm grew barley to feed livestock.

"And I grew a test crop about three years ago," he said.

The inaugural distillery crop was planted in November and now boasts "beautiful, fat barley heads".

But growing might be the easy part – harvesting is another story.

### 'Cranking up the old beast'

Vaughan admits his original plan for harvesting was a little naïve.

"I thought I'd just be able to ring someone up and contract them in to take off the crop but that wasn't an option," he said.

Grain headers are just as rare on King Island as grain crops, so Vaughan was forced to get an old Massey Ferguson header shipped across Bass Strait.

"We didn't think it would be all that clever, smart or financial to purchase one of the more technologically advanced harvesters," he said.

"They're almost like Battlestar Galactica these days in size and complexity .... and [King Island] is not the kind of place that's easy to find parts."

Vaughan says they are now a couple of weeks away "from cranking up the old beast and seeing how it goes".

Then the real work begins, especially for Thomas, who will serve as chief distiller.

Vaughan, meanwhile, will harness his strengths in salesmanship, given his career in marketing and brand management.

King Island Tourism Association president Adam Hely said he was excited about the venture, which would complement an



**King Island distiller Thomas Shaw inspects the progress of the barley. (PHOTO: Vaughan O'Connor)**

existing distillery run by Heidi Weitjens and a brewery set to open in a few weeks.

He said it made sense for the tourism sector to trade on King Island's agricultural excellence.

"The location, rainfall and geography sets us apart for being able to produce the best of the best," he said. "We've got unreal, dedicated farmers."

### The 'Viking strategy'

As they prepare to start their first batch, Vaughan has already scouted nearby farms for an expanded barley crop.

He expects clear spirits such as gin and vodka to be on shelves by September but the whisky will be a long time in the making.

"We're going to try to go the whole hog in terms of a 12-year, barrel-aged [spirit] for our Cape Wickham whisky," he said.

Vaughan says he realises it "takes a lot to be able to keep pouring into production that you're not going to see a dollar on for a decade".

But he's confident and has embraced the 'Viking strategy'.

"Let's burn our boat and go hard on this and not have the chance to either retreat or surrender," he said.

"Most good businesses, if you really weigh it up, don't give themselves an exit strategy. They actually make sure they have to go through and make it work." ■

## FARM STUDY TOUR INCLUDES KING ISLAND

*Greenmount Travel* will be visiting King Island – and saying hello to Thomas and Vaughan – on their Southern Sojourn tour in June. This 18-day adventure begins in Adelaide and ends in Hobart with stacks of farming and scenic highlights in between.

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