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A clear path forward for the spirits industry

TEXT: Helen Medina, CEO, World Spirits Alliance

The sector must keep investing in spirits tourism, while doubling down on innovation and sustainability throughout the value chain.



When I speak with my members and experience their hospitality, I see energy and innovation driving our sector forward.

Visits to distilleries are growing. The welcome centres in Scotland's distillery regions now welcome more than two million visitors a year. I was one of those visitors. I saw firsthand how Scottish whisky's unique character comes from its centuries-old craft, local ingredients and climate – and how each step of the distilling process brings those elements to life.

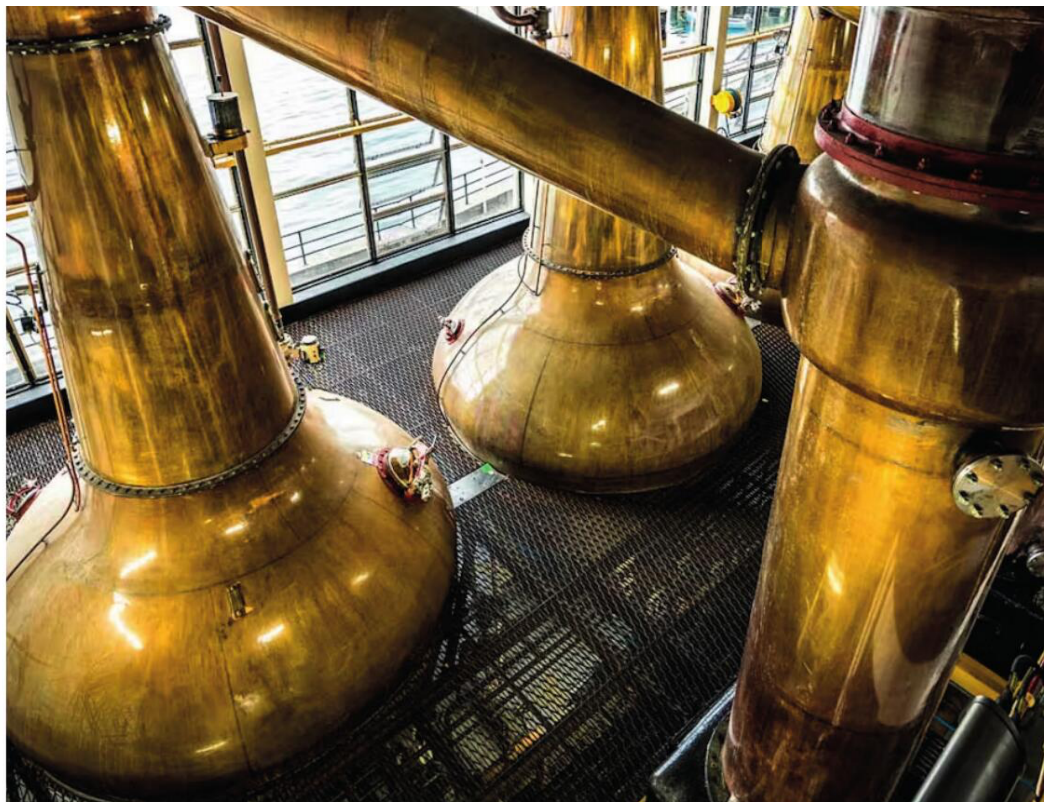
Other regions are benefiting from Spirits Tourism. Irish distilleries get over a million visitors, while the Kentucky Bourbon Trail set a record 2.7 million visits in 2024. The town of Tequila has become a destination in its own right, with roughly 1.2 million tourist arrivals last year. In France, Cognac maisons have demonstrated how culture and commerce

reinforce each other, making savoir-faire a year-round experience, from cooperages and cellars tours to river-barge tastings.

The lesson is simple: when producers open their doors and tell their stories, everyone benefits. Guests who watch a blender at work or nose three casks side-by-side leave with a deeper sense of the price of craftsmanship, and why it matters. That memory travels home – and creates a loyalty to our products.

Creativity and premiumisation

Creative serves are a second engine of momentum. Cocktails are endlessly versatile, offering a canvas for creativity where flavours, textures and styles can be tailored to any taste. Designed to be sipped and savoured, cocktail recipes can be tailored by using less alcohol or by adding low-calorie mixers. They become the perfect choice for those seeking a lighter, more balanced drinking experience.



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Well-made pre-mixed drinks and other technical innovations also support what is a welcome trend: people are embracing better drinking habits.

According to IWSR data, per-capita alcohol consumption worldwide has been declining for more than a decade, down by around 25% since 2012 – that reduction is the equivalent of around four bottles of spirits or a case of wine per adult per year.

The same data show a distinct growth in super-premium and ultra-premium categories, showing that what many consumers want is to drink less but to drink better when they do. In Western markets, moderation is on the rise. This evolution

in consumption patterns towards better drinking habits looks like a continuing trend, and one that the industry is taking advantage of through premiumisation.

Sustainability and trust

The third engine powering my enthusiasm for the industry is sustainability. It means much more than recycling bottles. It extends to responsible production, investment in greener operations, and a commitment to supporting local communities.

Many distilleries are demonstrating what is possible. In 2020, Bruichladdich became the first Scotch company to gain B Corp status, a designation for businesses that meet high standards of verified social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability.

In 2022, Maker's Mark Distillery became the largest distillery to be awarded that status, demonstrating that global brands are on the sustainability journey. The motivation to achieve B Corp status reflects a strategic operational decision that reduces environmental impact and builds resilience. It also serves to signal the company's values to consumers and helps build trust and loyalty.

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Fairness and innovation

It is an exciting time to be in the spirits industry, but we need fair, category-neutral policies. They are essential to build on the progress already made. Policymakers have a unique opportunity to collaborate with the industry to drive shared success – promoting tourism, encouraging responsible drinking and fostering sustainable growth.

The spirits sector actively supports responsible consumption and sustainability. Policymakers should reinforce these efforts by ensuring equal treatment across all alcohol categories through neutral rules on consumer information, age safeguards, marketing and excise taxes.

What should the industry take from this? First, keep investing in the visitor journey. Many of the most memorable experiences are small-scale, seasonal and tightly curated. Second, double down on innovation and experiences that celebrate craft and choice. Third, weave sustainability through operations – energy, water, packaging, sourcing, transport and community – to create resiliency.

All of this can be accelerated with the right policies in place. If we can unlock fairer policies that don't

discriminate against any one category of drinks, the future for spirits can be even brighter.



The World Spirits Alliance is the global voice of the spirits sector, championing responsible policies, open and fair trade, and sustainable practices across the international marketplace. We represent a diverse and dynamic industry that spans continents – rooted in centuries of tradition and united by a shared commitment to excellence, integrity, and responsibility.



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