

Farm enterprise is in high spirits

One of the remotest farms in Britain is home to a unique and innovative farm diversification enterprise, as **Claire Powell** explains

Rockside Farm, in the parish of Kilchoman on the far west coast of the Isle of Islay, has been home to Mark and Rohaise French and their family for over a quarter of a century.

Rockside, a 1000ha (2500-acre) unit, is one of the few Islay farms capable of growing a decent crop of malting barley. But this is unlikely barley-baron country. The winters are wild, wet and windy, though long, sunny summer days do help to compensate.

Also, tens of thousands of protected – and greedy – Barnacle and White-Fronted geese overwinter on the island, delaying barley planting until they migrate to Greenland in mid-April. On top of that, conventional malting barley markets are many costly ferry and road miles away.

The Frenches, however, have a premium malting barley market literally on their doorstep. In some of their old stone farm buildings, where until a couple of years ago cattle over-wintered, there are now two gleaming, copper icons of the whisky industry – long-necked whisky stills.

A few steps across the yard, in

a secure building, are racks of ex-sherry and bourbon casks, filled with maturing single-malt whisky spirit. The oldest is stamped 14 December 2005, the date it was filled.

It will be the end of 2010 before the malt whisky inside this cask can be bottled. The first bottle from this cask will be the very first bottle of malt whisky from the Kilchoman Distillery, which is based on Rockside Farm.

As the malt whisky flows from that first cask, a special toast will be made at Rockside. For this whisky has been made from barley grown on the farm where it was distilled and with spring water which has percolated through the dramatic cliffs of Kilchoman which loom over Rockside, before flowing through the farm to the distillery.

Known as the Whisky Isle, Islay has a centuries-old whisky history. In fact the opening of Kilchoman Distillery in summer 2005, the first on Islay since the 1880s, brought the number of operational Islay distilleries to eight.

Operating a distillery is the latest venture in two decades of



Mark French with spirit still in the still/mash house at Rockside Farm.

farm diversification at Rockside. Over the years the Frenches have moved into pony trekking, retailing fresh and smoked meat throughout Britain, (they were winners of an NFU Scotland 2002 Innovation Award), plus a

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recently opened farm shop.

The distillery has given his family a guaranteed, premium market for their malting barley, explains Mark, and it has also taken them many steps towards their goal of sustainable farming.

“In addition to an outlet for our barley, with no transport costs, we can also weave the distillery into our whole farming operation, including our smoked beef enterprise,” said Mark French.

“The pot ale, a distillery by-product, goes back on the land as fertiliser for the next barley crop. We feed the draff [what’s left of the grain after fermentation] to our cattle, which are winter-bedded on the barley straw. The straw and manure also go back to the land as fertiliser.

“One of our smoked beef range is Smoked Whisky Beef, so this will be marinated in Kilchoman malt whisky before smoking. It really is satisfying to see our various enterprises integrating in this way.”

The Kilchoman distillery is scheduled to be running at full capacity by 2012, producing approximately 120,000 litres a year. Meanwhile, the Frenches are increasing their barley acreage, enabling them to supply barley to the only other independently owned distillery on the island – Bruichladdich.



Mark French heading down the Rockside drive to drill the last of his 2007 crop of Optic spring barley. The new distillery will give a premium market for the crop.