

Master Distiller Blog

Hear from Benedikt Blomendahl - the youngest candidate to complete the CIBD Master Distiller* qualification - as he gives insight into his distilling journey and his aspirations.

*correct as of February 2025.



1. Can you tell us about your professional journey so far - your background and your key responsibilities in your current role?

Since I can remember Distilling has been what I love and always dreamed of doing. As soon as I could walk, I was walking around my dad's distillery and helping him by putting on the caps of the bottles. When we moved to South Africa in 2003 I was foot stomping grapes in my dad's cellar. When we got our 1000L distillery in 2009 I was amazed by it and wanted to learn everything about it. My dad taught me a lot and we distilled a lot of different spirits together. Then when I turned 18, I could finally distil my own gin, whisky, brandy, rum and other spirits. In 2019 a couple of my gin recipes received double gold awards and one even a platinum award at Michelangelo International Wine and Spirits Awards. In 2020 I completed my certificate in distilling through Distillique in South Africa. In 2022 I finished my Diploma in Distilling with the highest average grade and continued my studies with the Master Distiller the very next year and completed this in 2024. In February 2025 I wrote my final exam for the Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA) through CIMA. For me it was always important to cover both aspects, the distilling side and the business side. The Master Distiller combined this very well but having done my Postgraduate in management accounting I was motivated to follow through and complete the CGMA as

well.

I got fully involved in the distillery as soon as I completed my matric and started developing new brands and launching the Blomendahl Spirit range together with my dad. I studied my BCom part time as I did with all my studies thereafter so that I could still focus on the distillery and get practical experience. My current role is very broad as is generally the case in a small /medium family run business. My dad is handing over the management of our distillery in Germany and South Africa to me and is giving me advise whenever I need assistance. I am managing the finance and accounting side of things as well as the production, distilling and distribution.

2. What inspired you to join the drinks industry, and what are your long-term career aspirations within the sector?

My dad was my biggest inspiration and role model, and I always had the most fun when I was around him in the cellar. Distilling was what I wanted to do for as long as I can remember.

My goal is to build up our various spirit brands to be recognisable and well-established brands and to help other people who are looking to set up their own distillery by offering them training and equipment to fulfil their dream.

3. What would you say is your most significant professional achievement so far? Could you share some details about it?

I would say that was probable in 2024 when we sold a full distillery setup to an entrepreneur in Ghana which I then subsequently setup by myself in Ghana and did training with the client so that they will be able to operate it and distil good quality local vodka and gin. I designed the components of the still myself and then had the parts manufactured. I then assembled all the parts to ensure everything was right before I organised the shipper to collect the equipment and ship it to Ghana. Once it arrived there, I flew over to set up the still and the other equipment and did a distillation of vodka and gin to show the client how to operate the still. I also developed a few gin recipes for them which also integrate local botanicals and fruit.

4. What made you choose the CIBD for your distilling qualification?

I first heard about it through my certificate course in distilling through a South African company. I quickly googled and realised that this is the best place to possibly complete my qualification as a Master Distiller as CIBD is one of the most accredited and established institutes that offer the Master Distiller in the world.

5. How did you manage to balance your job and studies at the same time?

Balancing work and studies is never easy but fortunately I had some experience with this as my BCom I had also done part time whilst working but still within the 3 years minimum. I mainly studied in the morning while my brain was fresh and then worked in the distillery or did other company admin in the afternoon. It is quicker learning something when you can physically do the thing you are learning about the next day in the distillery. I think this link between theory and practice really helped me with retaining all the information.

6. Congratulations on becoming the youngest CIBD Master Distiller! How does it feel to achieve

this?

I was an amazing feeling of accomplishment when I saw that I passed the Master Distiller, and my dad was so proud of me. When I heard from CIBD that I am in fact the youngest Master Distiller that they ever had I was speechless and filled with joy as my hard work and dedication had finally paid off.

7. Throughout your preparation for the qualification, what has been the most valuable lesson you've learned, and how have you applied it in your day-to-day work?

I think the most valuable lesson is to not postpone something to tomorrow if you can do it today. We all love procrastinating, but I would have procrastinated with my degree I would not have been able to be the youngest. I apply this in my day-to-day work by always pushing to finish work sooner rather than later. If I promise a client a deadline I am generally done before the promised day. What is done is done!

8. How has your company benefited from the technical knowledge you gained through your CIBD qualification?

The knowledge I have gained greatly benefits my company as we do a lot of custom brands and product developments for clients who want to start their own brand or distributors looking to add an own labelled product to their offering. I can now develop these products with a whole new knowledge base and in depth understanding of the entire process. Our clients also feel reassured that they are in good hands with the credibility that comes with completing the Master Distiller at CIBD.

9. In what ways has earning this qualification helped you advance in your career?

This qualification has helped me expand our business by acquiring new customers who are looking for a qualified producer. It has also helped me in taking over the management of the distillery from my dad and gave me the confidence to run the operations.

10. From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges and opportunities in your field right now?

The ever-rising alcohol tax in South Africa is a big threat as not only does it increase costs significantly, it also creates a black market which further damages business that are following the law as they start to become uncompetitive when there are spirits selling for less than the excise tax.

The growing African market is a big opportunity as they are looking for high quality products and the market is constantly expanding. Ready to drink products and even alcohol free or low alcohol alternatives are also opportunities now as the drinking culture is changing.

11. Would you recommend CIBD qualifications to your peers? If so, why?

Yes, as the qualification teaches you everything you need to know about distilling and gives you a confident base to stand on. It is also well accredited and shows that you know what you are doing.

12. What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the industry?

To find a mentor they can trust and learn from and to always be open to new ideas and processes. Talking to other people in the industry is the best way to learn and share ideas. Visiting other distilleries also opens your mind to new ways of doing things and optimisations of processes.

13. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

I just want to say a big thank you to my dad, Franz Blomendahl, who supported me throughout this entire process and made it possible for me to be where I am today.

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