

From life in **Carloway** to the



| Talking about Whisky...
Gemma Paterson

US world of whisky...

by | Katie Macleod

It was January 2016 when Gemma Paterson received the phone call that would change her life as she knew it.

Gemma, who moved to Carloway with her family as a child, was working as a senior distillery guide for William Grant & Sons in Speyside when she was asked if she would be interested in applying to be a US Ambassador for Balvenie. Five months later, she was living in New York City.

"I'd never thought about moving to the US, but it's not an opportunity anyone's going to turn down," remembers Gemma. "I went home in a daze and sat down and was like, 'Is this real? Is this actually happening?'"

In her first six months as the Balvenie Ambassador for the east coast of America, Gemma has already travelled to twenty states – some more than four times – and is set to clock up even more miles this year as she promotes what she describes as "the most hand-crafted single malt whisky."

"There are no two days the same," says Gemma of her role, which leaves her responsible for promoting Balvenie everywhere between Maine and Miami. "One day I could be hosting whisky tastings or masterclasses, the next day I could be doing radio interviews or TV slots, and then the day after that I could be at a distributor's premises training a hundred distributors on how to sell our whisky."

Not only was Gemma the first woman to hold an ambassadorial role at Balvenie, but she is also the first ambassador whose experience comes directly from the distillery itself, rather than the marketing industry. In fact, her personal introduction to – and entry into – the world of whisky is so romantic that it practically begs to be told.

It was while working on the Grimersta Estate in Lewis that Gemma met her husband,

Rory, who worked there as a ghillie, and where she tried her first dram of Balvenie. "That's what a lot of the guests drink," says Gemma, who worked on the estate during her summer holidays from the University of Glasgow, where she studied Russian and Slavonic Studies. "The ghillies I worked with as well, they'd have little hip flasks that they'd fill with whisky, and that's when I tried Balvenie."

"There's nothing like when you're outdoors, and you're cold in the river and the wind and the rain, and you have a little swig of whisky from the hip flask. It's warming... That certainly wasn't the first whisky I ever had, but it planted the seed."

It was a seed that started to grow when she and Rory moved to Speyside in 2012, after a year of living and working in Lewis. In a small area that produces 60 per cent of Scotland's whisky, it wasn't surprising that Gemma found herself intrigued by the industry. "It's on your doorstep every single day. It was just this little seed that was planted in my head, that started to grow, and I couldn't get rid of it – and now I'm obsessed!" she laughs. "I've been to just over 60 distilleries in Scotland. It's a bit like Munro bagging, except I'm doing it with whisky!"

Taken on at Glenfiddich as a part-time tour guide thanks to her Russian skills, Gemma soon found herself promoted to senior guide, where she worked across the Balvenie brand too. She studied her General Certificate of Distillation, worked on the nosing panel at the distillery, and even got involved in the hands-on elements of the job on her days off. "I would go in and work with the guys at process, go in and help malt barley on the malting floor, work in the mash house, spend an afternoon in the still house, just to try and learn," she says.

"Whisky is something you can really get lost in, because there are so many different aspects. There's the drinking, the complexity of the aroma and flavours, and then there's the process, and the history, and the way the industry is globally. There are so many different layers to it."

It's these layers that Gemma reveals to whisky drinkers and bar tenders up and down the east coast of the US. She notes that the role has "actually been quite a natural progression" from her days at the distillery, as while she's had to learn the ins and outs of American liquor laws – many of which are hangovers from the days of Prohibition – she already had the brand knowledge.

"For me, the best part has been travelling to different states and getting to know different people, and seeing the country," she explains. "For us based in the UK, we generally think of 'America' as a whole, but in fact each state is so different. Florida is nothing like New York, and I could not even stand up in front of an audience and give the same presentation in Florida as I would in New York, or DC.... I just love that. I'm the kind of person who thrives on change, doing something different every day."

Gemma's also travelled to Japan as part of her ambassador training, and will be heading to Sweden later this year – but she's hoping to squeeze in a visit home, too. "I've not been to Lewis for a year now... I've got a few trips back to the distillery this year, so hopefully I can combine a trip to Lewis on one of those."

Reflecting on her American experience so far, Gemma admits she couldn't have imagined being where she is now. "When I was going through the process, I never actually thought it was going to happen," she says. "I feel so lucky. I feel like I've lucked out."