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Scotch whisky producers face growing pressure to move faster into canned cocktails.

Diageo says it sold more than 400,000 RTDs at UK festivals this year, underscoring a fast-growing market Scotch has entered slowly.

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Scotch whisky producers are facing growing pressure to move faster into canned cocktails and other ready-to-drink products as that part of the spirits market expands, even as broader alcohol demand remains under strain.

Large drinks groups are putting more money and attention into spirit-based RTDs, arguing that the format is gaining ground with consumers who want convenience, lower serving sizes and more variety. For Scotch, the shift presents a difficult question: how to protect its premium image while competing in a category built on speed, portability and quick product turnover.

Diageo said in a recent corporate post that RTD is now one of its biggest strategic priorities. The company said cocktail cans are becoming a preferred option at UK festivals because they offer what it described as high-quality drinks in an accessible format. Diageo said it has sold more than 400,000 RTDs so far this year at 27 major UK festivals, pointing to product innovation as a key driver of demand.

Other global producers are reporting similar momentum. Pernod Ricard said RTD sales rose 17% in its latest fiscal year 2026 results. Conor McQuaid, the company's U.S. chief, said RTD remains the standout growth category in the United States. He said Pernod Ricard still sees the segment as a way to bring consumers into its wider spirits portfolio while also supporting its convenience strategy and smaller-format products.

At Suntory Global Spirits, Chief Executive Greg Hughes said during a recent results presentation that RTD has become large enough to drive growth across the wider spirits market. Suntory has been building its RTD business in Asia around Jim Beam bourbon and Japanese whisky brands. Ashish Gandham, managing director of Suntory Global Spirits Oceania, said the company is adjusting its product mix to match changing consumer demand, with RTDs and energy-linked drinks aimed at everyday occasions and premium spirits reserved for more special moments.

Market data supports the industry's focus on the segment. IWSR figures cited by industry executives show canned cocktails posted compound annual growth of 8% from 2019 to 2025. The research group expects growth to slow to 2%-3% over the next four years, but the category is still expanding while beer, wine and total spirits volumes face pressure from health concerns, tighter household budgets and changing drinking habits.

IWSR also found that premium-and-above RTDs, meaning mostly spirit-based products, recorded a 15% rise in volume in 2025, helped mainly by products in the 7%-10% alcohol range. That reflects a broader shift away from the hard seltzer boom that defined the market before the pandemic, especially in the United States. In its place, drinks companies are increasingly betting that consumers who drink less often are still willing to pay more for better-known brands, familiar cocktail serves and single-can convenience.

That change matters beyond Scotch. Across the wider beverage business, producers of spirits, beer and wine are watching the same pattern: consumers are cutting back in some settings but spending more selectively in others. The growth of premium RTDs suggests that format innovation, serving size and speed to market may become more important competitive tools, especially for brands trying to hold younger drinkers and convenience-focused buyers.

Scotch has been slower than American whiskey, Irish whiskey and Japanese whisky to follow that trend. One major reason is structural. Under Scotch whisky rules, the spirit must mature for at least three years before it can be sold as Scotch. That creates a financial hurdle for distillers compared with makers of vodka, tequila or gin, which can be mixed into canned cocktails soon after distillation. For Scotch producers, working capital is tied up for longer, and any RTD product starts with a more expensive liquid.

There is also a brand question. Some executives and industry figures argue that if RTDs are meant to introduce consumers to a whisky label, companies risk weakening their quality message if they rely on younger spirit or overly simple serves. Scotch has long sold itself on age, craft and place. That makes the move into canned cocktails more sensitive than it may be for other spirits categories.

Even so, the commercial case is becoming harder to ignore. If whisky is already widely consumed in mixed drinks, producers see a chance to capture more of that demand in a packaged format. Diageo Chief Executive Sir Dave Lewis has said the company needs to recover lost ground in RTD after allowing others to move ahead. Diageo once held nearly a quarter of the RTD market, according to comments from Lewis, but now has about 10%, though it remains the second-largest player globally.

Lewis has been especially critical of Diageo’s whisky RTD range. He said the company has not put its best foot forward in whiskey RTDs and expressed disappointment with some of the flavor choices, referring mainly to Crown Royal products in Canada. His remarks underscore how seriously large spirits groups now view the segment, not only as a source of incremental sales but as a route to protect relevance with consumers whose drinking habits are changing quickly.

Several whiskey brands outside Scotland already show how large the opportunity can be. Jameson, the leading Irish whiskey label, has made significant gains in the U.S. RTD market. Brown-Forman said Jack and Coke, its joint venture with Coca-Cola, has reached global sales of 1.8 million cases after its rollout over the past three years. In the UK, the product generated more than £55 million in revenue in its first full year on sale.

Scotch producers are beginning to respond, though activity remains limited compared with rivals. Chivas Brothers has launched a Ballantine’s and cola product. Cutty Sark has a Scotch and ginger ale offering. Bruichladdich and Wee Smoky are also among the brands testing more premium pre-mixed serves. Diageo has introduced Johnnie Walker Blonde in a lower-alcohol mix with lemonade and, in Australia, launched Johnnie Walker Black Ruby Blackberry and Cola last year.

Australia is one of the most developed RTD markets in the world, and its importance to global drinks groups has become a testing ground for how whisky-based canned products might work elsewhere. Producers see those markets as evidence that whisky can travel beyond the bottle-and-glass serve without giving up pricing power, provided the flavor, branding and occasion are right.

The debate now is less about whether RTDs matter and more about whether Scotch can move quickly enough to claim a larger share of a category that many rivals already treat as central to growth. For distillers, the answer will depend on whether they can balance aging costs, brand positioning and product innovation at a time when the wider spirits market remains difficult. Diageo’s leadership has made clear it wants to regain momentum, and other producers are likely to face similar pressure as canned cocktails continue to reshape how, where and when consumers buy spirits.