

Distiller interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Interviews for distiller roles focus on your practical ability to run stills, monitor fermentation and assess spirit quality, as well as your understanding of safety and excise compliance. Employers want to know you can work accurately and consistently in a production environment.

- **Technical process:** Questions about how you operate stills, monitor fermentation and take spirit cuts, to test your hands-on knowledge and decision making.
- **Sensory assessment:** Questions about how you assess aroma, flavour and quality, to check your palate and ability to maintain consistency.
- **Safety and compliance:** Questions about food safety, WHS and excise record keeping, to confirm you understand the regulatory side of distilling.
- **Behavioural:** Questions about past experiences, such as solving a quality issue or training a colleague, to see how you work with others.
- **Scenario-based:** Questions that put you in a hypothetical production problem, to assess your judgement under pressure.

A distiller interview typically starts with a conversation about your background and interest in distilling. The interviewer then moves into technical questions about still operation, fermentation and spirit cuts. You may be asked to describe a time you solved a production problem or to walk through a sensory assessment. Some distilleries include a practical element, such as a tour of the production area or a blind tasting. The interview usually finishes with your questions and a discussion of next steps.

1. Walk me through how you operate a pot still from charging to shutdown.

Why they ask

This tests your practical knowledge of the distillation process and your ability to follow a consistent method.

How to structure your answer

A step-by-step walk-through. Start with preparation and charging, then describe heating, monitoring, taking cuts, and shutting down. Highlight key decision points and how you ensure safety and quality.

Example answer

"First, I check the still and all connections are clean and secure. I charge the wash into the pot still, ensuring I leave enough headspace. Then I apply heat and monitor the temperature closely. As the still heats up, I watch for the first distillate to come over. I take the foreshots and discard them, then collect the heads. I use my senses and hydrometer readings to decide when to make the cut to hearts. I collect hearts until I detect tails coming through, then I switch to collecting tails for redistillation. Throughout, I keep an eye on pressure and temperature, and I never leave the still unattended. At shutdown, I turn off the heat, let the still cool, and clean it thoroughly."

2. How do you take a spirit cut? What do you look for?

Why they ask

This tests your sensory skills and your ability to make quality decisions that affect the final product.

How to structure your answer

Describe your sensory method and how you combine it with measurements. Give a concrete example of a cut you made and why.

Example answer

"I take spirit cuts by combining sensory assessment with measurements. I smell and taste the distillate as it comes off the still. I look for a change from sharp, solvent-like notes in the heads to a smoother, sweeter character in the hearts. I also use a hydrometer to check alcohol strength. When I notice the first signs of tails, like oily or cardboard notes, I make the cut. In one batch of gin, I detected a slight bitterness early and decided to cut to hearts sooner, which kept the botanical profile clean and avoided off-flavours in the final bottle."

3. You notice fermentation temperature is rising faster than expected. What do you do?

Why they ask

This assesses your judgement under pressure and your ability to troubleshoot a common production issue.

How to structure your answer

A judgement-under-pressure structure: assess the situation, take immediate action, monitor the result, and communicate as needed.

Example answer

"First, I check the temperature reading against a second thermometer to confirm it is accurate. If the temperature is genuinely rising too fast, I would cool the fermentation vessel by adjusting the jacket or adding cold water, depending on the setup. I would also check the yeast pitching rate and nutrient levels, as a fast rise can sometimes indicate over-pitching or a lack of nutrients. I would monitor the temperature every 15 minutes until it stabilises. If I could not bring it under control, I would notify the head distiller immediately so we could decide whether to adjust the batch or repitch. I would record the incident and the actions taken in the batch log."

4. How do you ensure excise records are accurate and compliant?

Why they ask

This tests your understanding of the regulatory requirements that apply to distilleries in Australia.

How to structure your answer

A process and compliance structure: describe the records you keep, how you keep them, and how you check for accuracy.

Example answer

"I keep excise records by recording every batch of spirit produced, including the volume, alcohol strength and date. I use a distillery management system like Whiskey Systems to log this data as I go, rather than relying on memory at the end of the day. I also record any spirits moved into or out of bond. At the end of each week, I reconcile the physical stock with the system records and investigate any discrepancies immediately. I stay up to date with Australian Taxation Office requirements for excise, and I make sure that all records are stored securely and are available for audit. I have passed internal audits without findings by following this disciplined approach."

5. Tell me about a time you identified a quality issue and fixed it. (Behavioural)

Why they ask

This looks at your problem-solving skills and your commitment to quality.

How to structure your answer

STAR method: describe the situation, the task, the action you took, and the result.

Example answer

"Situation: In a previous role, we noticed a batch of rum had a slightly harsh note in the middle of the run. Task: I needed to identify the cause and prevent it from affecting the final product. Action: I reviewed the fermentation records and found that the temperature had spiked for a few hours due to a

cooling failure. I checked the distillation logs and saw that the cut points had been taken as usual, but the harsh note was coming through. I decided to re-distill the affected portion separately, and I adjusted the cut to hearts earlier for that batch. I also recommended a backup cooling system to prevent future spikes. Result: The re-distilled spirit met our quality standards, and we avoided bottling a substandard batch. The backup cooling system was installed, and we did not have that issue again."

6. Describe a time you trained or mentored a new team member. (Behavioural)

Why they ask

This shows your ability to work in a team and share knowledge, which is important in a distillery.

How to structure your answer

STAR method: set the scene, explain what you needed to do, describe your actions, and state the outcome.

Example answer

"Situation: We hired a new cellar hand who had no previous distilling experience. Task: I was asked to train them on basic still operation and cleaning procedures. Action: I broke the training into small steps, starting with safety and hygiene, then moving to cleaning and finally to assisting with still runs. I demonstrated each task and then watched them do it, giving feedback. I also created a one-page checklist for them to follow. Result: Within a month, they were able to run the still independently under supervision, and they became a reliable member of the team. The checklist is still used for new hires today."