

The glass of '93 blossoms early

Hop flowers only two weeks old are the secret of a new beer's fresh flavour, and Michael Jackson tasted love at his first pint

On the first day of this month, Robert and Diane Thomas arose especially early on their farm, knowing they had a deadline to meet. Between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. they and their workers had to pick sufficient hop blossoms to aromatise 300 barrels of a rather special beer.

Their farm, with medieval looking buildings, is hidden behind hawthorn hedges at Risbury, north of Hereford and west of Worcester, England. They grow Goldings, a classically English variety of hop, and they also cultivate some extremely traditional sub-strains.

A truck would be waiting to take the hops to a brewery a couple of hours away in Wiltshire, where the blossoms would be used as soon as they arrived. A further couple of hours and the flowers would have looked brown and bruised, a condition known to Hereford and Worcester hop-farmers as "beethy."

It is always the cone-like flower of the hop-vine (or "bine") that is used to aromatise beer; but the blossom is not usually employed in its fresh, green form. Normally, the hops are dried in a kiln (an oasthouse) and compacted in a press. This gets rid of air, dew or rain and sappy moisture, and thus prevents the flowers from going beethy and mouldy, while preserving most of the oils, resins and acids that give the beer its bouquet and bitterness.

When they are delivered to the brewery in the normal way, hop blossoms look like dried flowers, packed as tightly as tobacco in a cigar, and corseted in hessian, in long sacks known as pockets. In this form, one year's harvest will last until the next, although -- even under refrigeration -- the hops will lose some of their character with the passing months.

Trevor Holmes, head brewer at Wadworth, of Devizes in Wiltshire, was inspecting the harvest a year or two ago when he began to wonder how beer would taste if it were aromatised with hops fresh off the vine. Most working brewers love hops, and would use far more in their beer if they, or their marketing colleagues, were not worried about frightening the drinker with the flower's assertive aromas and flavours.

The hop is a potent perennial, its shoots peeping through the ground at the end of the winter, and reaching 15 feet by September. In the Hereford and Worcester region, the vines grow in what are called hop yards. In Kent, which has about the same acreage but whose hop culture is better known outside the industry, they are known as gardens. To walk in either at the beginning of September is to see vines weighed down with full fronds of flowers, a sight almost as sensuous as the leafy, piney zesty aromas that fill the air.

"It's gorgeous!" exclaims Mr. Holmes, otherwise a down-to-earth Midlander. "I thought, if only we could brew with hops this fresh."

The practicalities are such that it could be done only once a year. Mr. Holmes tried it first last year. The 100-barrel brew was meant to last a month; it sold out in a week. This year, there are almost 300 barrels.

Because hops are a condiment, less than a pound of them are used in a barrel of beer. The basis of the brew is malted barley, almost 50lb per barrel. Barley sown in winter is harvested in early July, but needs a couple of months' dormancy before it can be persuaded to germinate by even the most skilled maltster.

Mr. Holmes has used the first of the new seasons malt to make his "green hop" beer. The brewery calls it simply Malt and Hops. I can think of only one other brewery that has tried making such a "biere nouvelle," and that is in the far West of the United States.

This time last week, the brew was beginning to mature in the cellar at Wadworth's. "We had a worrying weekend, because it did not seem to be dropping bright," Colin Oke, the second brewer, told me. "That can happen when the malt is made from very young barley."

The possibility of hazy beer is only one of the difficulties encountered when working with newly harvested barley and hops. In no aspect can the brewer know quite how new ingredients will perform. Once they have been used, some measurements can be taken, and subsequent brews are more predictable.

This week, I went to Wadworth's, a classic tower brewery built in 1885, saw the magnificent open copper kettle, and sampled the 1993 brew of Malt and Hops. The third brewer, Sandra Bates, watched anxiously as the first pint was pulled. It was wonderfully clear.

While some of Wadworth's better-known brews, such as 6X and Farmer's Glory, contain highly kilned malts, this one does not. It is made primarily from pale-ale malt, and emerges with the colour of ripe barley.

There was the lightest touch of malty sweetness to start; then a surge of cleansing, refreshing, resinous, almost orange-zest flavours; and, finally, an astonishingly late, long finish of fresh, appetite-arousing bitterness.

Malt and Hops, at 4.5 per cent alcohol, might be regarded in style as a seasonal special bitter, and is available only on draught.

It is in selected pubs within a radius of 50 or 60 miles of the brewery. If you fancy a pint, look for it this weekend or next. I don't imagine it will be around much longer.

For further information on stockists of Malt and Hops, call Wadworth's at 011 44 0380 729500.

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