

Smell the blossoms while you can

A bittersweet report from Hoppy Valley

Editor's note: This is an unabridged version of a column that appeared in the Independent 9 Sept, 2000.

Now is the time to taste the new season's hops. In a particular instance it might be the last opportunity.

At one of England's most highly-regarded hop farms, I inspected this year's crop the day before the harvesting began. There was much excitement that the moment had come. The blossoms were plump and aromatic. "As evocative as lavender," observed farmer Philip Clift. "For the whole year, we work up to this day. It has been like this since we were children. The aroma brings back the memories of 40 years".

"Bouncing on the bines, loaded on the cart. It was like a hayride," murmured his sister Wiz, scooting back for a moment to her childhood. Wiz never stays still for long. That's why they call her Wiz. Her real name is Liz.

Philip's hops aromatise the beer made at a brewery run by Wiz and their sister Annie. It is a winning combination: hops grown at Lulsley Court, in the deep, loamy, alluvial, valley of river Teme, between the Herefordshire border and Worcester; limestone-tinged water from the hills north of Malvern; malt fetched from Yorkshire, where they grow the famously juicy Maris Otter barley in the flat lands by the Ouse.

The first hops to ripen are a variety appropriately called Early Bird Goldings. At their Teme Valley Brewery Wiz and Annie take Early Birds, fresh from the bine, without preserving them by the usual process of kiln-drying. If these hops were stored even for a few hours, they would shrivel like dead flowers. Before that can happen, while still "green", they go into the brew kettle. The beer is brewed, fermented and matured, the whole process taking two or three weeks.

Last year's Early Bird beer was so fragrant as to be minty. All being well, this year's will make its first appearance at a beer festival at Lindridge, near Tenbury Wells, in the valley. If you would like to taste it, that is the place to be - and remember, the profits from the festival go to the village hall. If Lindridge is not convenient, perhaps you are within tasting range of another "green hop" beer. Several breweries make them, especially in the hop-growing counties: Hereford, Worcester, Hampshire, Surrey and Kent, and now is the time to taste them.

The Teme Valley brewery makes five, as each variety is harvested. Last year, I tasted a cedary, aniseedy, brew made with Fuggles hops; a cinnamon-ish vintage employing the Mathon hop (named after a village in the valley); a more hazelnutty Northdown; and a peppery Challenger. You can taste the range at the Green Beer Festival Weekend on October 14-15. (There you are:

a little more time to plan. I do try to help). That festival takes place at the sisters' 11-bedroom inn, The Talbot, at Knightwick. The beer will be fresh: the brewery is in an adjoining building, formerly put to lesser use as a tea room.

When the hop varieties have been fully explored, there will, later in the year, be rich winter specials, yeastily fruity spring and summer brews...an almost monthly calendar of the brewer's art. There are also three year-round beers: self-effacingly called This, That and t'Other, the first cleansingly dry and appetising; the second a soothingly malty best bitter; the third a gently honeyish refresher.

I sampled This, That and t'Other at the Talbot over a lunch that began with home-made black pudding (leavened with chard) and continued with breast of lamb (garnished with pickled nasturtium seeds). While Wiz whizzes front-of-house, Annie quietly cooks up such creations.

In a kitchen garden behind the inn, the sisters are able to grow about half their requirement of salads and vegetables. They also produce their own pickles, preserves and cider, and rent space to a wine-maker. These and other products are featured in a farmers' market in the car park on the second Sunday of each month, with a dozen or 20 stallholders from the valley. At the last election for Malvern Hills' local council, the voters of the Temeside ward chose Wiz as their representative. "Which party?" I asked. "Independent," she responded, then corrected herself: "Fiercely Independent". She describes the life of rural areas like the Teme Valley as "an eco-system". To survive, she adds, it needs "local industries on a micro scale, and social housing".

The best known local industry is agriculture, famously the cultivation of hops. Her family has grown hops for three generations, and brother Philip's farm dates from the 1500s. He has just sold it. The farm buildings will be turned into country homes, or weekend properties, to be occupied by people who may support local butchers, bakers or brewers, or might not.

Some of the hop yards may be cultivated by another local grower, but for how long? They will certainly be able to sell hops to Wiz and Annie, but the sisters' brewery is tiny.

English varieties of hops are required only by ale brewers. When we spoke a year ago, Philip was open to be persuaded that he had a future as a "grand cru" hop grower. Since then, the sale of Bass and Whitbread, and the threat to Britain's biggest regional brewer, Wolverhampton and Dudley, has convinced him otherwise. Ales are also becoming less hoppy. As to the lagers increasingly consumed in Britain, most use the cheapest possible hops, in quantities that are barely detectable.

It was too late to protest to Philip, but I did anyway. "Yours were some of the finest English hops," I sighed. "Were? They still are!" he responded, a little hastily. As of today, that is true. Smell the hops while you can.

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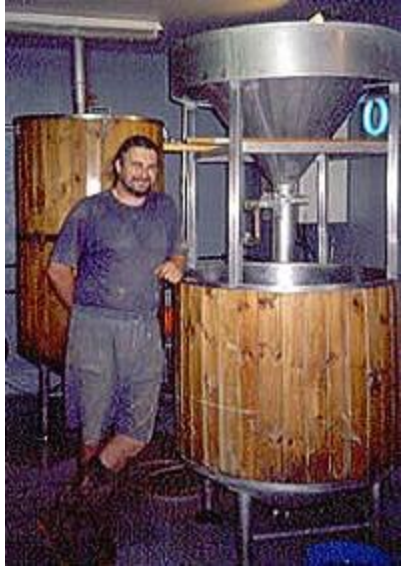
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Seen from the Talbot Inn, the hamlet of Knightwick is deep in the Teme Valley. The hop yards of Lulsley Court are about a mile away.



Brewery partner Wiz Clift smells the hops...one last time?



Chris Gooch first worked as a stockman on the farm. His degree in biochemistry came in useful when the Talbot needed a brewer for its Teme Valley ales.

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