Land of hops and glory

Revealed: the intimate connection between the female orgasm, cannabis, the Talmud and the gardens of Kent

Much as I would like to sink a pint or three at the public celebrations of the hop harvest in Kent this weekend, I wonder about the beers. Will they be hoppy enough? Is any beer ever sufficiently hoppy? Not for us hop heads.

The expression comes from America, where the blandness of mainstream beers like Budweiser has led to a hunger for hops among many young drinkers. They are the cultists who head for the hop farms of Oregon and snort hugely aromatic beers with names like Bombay Bomber.

If all this sounds familiar, perhaps it is. Botanically speaking, the hop is a member of the family Cannabinaceae. Breweries on both sides of the Atlantic have exploited this relationship by introducing beers made with non-narcotic hemp. A new British example is the perfumy, smooth-bodied, pleasantly dry Greenleaf Lager, produced at the Aston Manor Brewery, Birmingham, for the Hemp Beer Company.

The hop plant is a vine, its flower like cone the part used in beer. Unless the cone is used within an hour or two, it will shrivel like a flower. It is preserved by being dried in an oasthouse, during which time, the aroma would not disgrace a Grateful Dead gig.

Tasting a hoppy Californian beer recently, I found myself noting "fresh sweat" aromas that were nakedly sexy. Shortly afterwards, I heard that two British breweries (see below) had introduced hop-oil cosmetics.

Contrary to popular myth, beer is not made from hops. It is made with them. Beer is made from grain, and the hop is a spice-like preservative and flavouring. Hops have no influence on the alcohol content of beer. What they contribute is aroma and flavour. Depending upon the variety used, the hoppy character may be cedary, piney or lemony, or reminiscent, for example, of orange zest, aniseed or mint. Hops usually have an appetisingly dry finish, and the power of their flavour is measured in a scale called International Bitterness Units. A beer such as American Budweiser has about 12 units of bitterness, while some of the beers listed below are in the 35-40 range. Many American specialities have more than 50.

The use of hops to flavour beer goes back to ancient times we cultists interpret the Talmud as suggesting Jews employed the hop in brewing - though undisputed proof of its use is more recent: in the writings of a German nun, Hildegarde of Bingen, in the 12th century. St Hildegarde, who is also credited with the first written description of the female orgasm, has become something of a New Age cult figure.

The use of hops in beer vaulted across the Channel from Flanders to Kent in the 15th and 16th centuries with the help of Benedictine monks. The most prized hops in Britain are still grown not far from the coast, by half a dozen farmers with names such as Clinch, Higgs and Bones, in a stretch of countryside about 10 miles long and half a mile wide, between Canterbury and Faversham. This is our Grande Champagne.

There are typically cold winds off the Channel in March and April, the months in which the aroma and flavour of the hop begins to form. Some believe this contributes to the earthy, pithy aroma of the East Kent hops in the family of varieties called Goldings, originally selected from a garden in Canterbury in 1790. The most famous gardens are at China Farm, run by farmer Tony Redsell. He decrees that hops must be chest-high by Derby Day, and require light rain in Canterbury Cricket Week.

They need moisture at their roots, but do not like their feet wet. Clay soil is good, especially if it is drained by chalk, as it is in East Kent. The county has a second growing region, with heavier clay soil, in the Weald, and there are hop gardens in Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire. The hop then vaults again, across Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, to the area around Worcester and Hereford. This westerly region is noted for the Fuggle, a hop with a more aniseedy, almost tropical aroma.

No British brewer uses the plant quite as freely as I would like, but a growing number are highlighting its different characteristics by making hop-varietal beers.

- For this weekend's hop festival in Faversham (information 01795-532206), the town's Shepherd Neame brewery has supplied its pubs with a draught beer called Late Red, named after a particularly fruity, winey sub-variety of Goldings. The beer will also be available bottled in shops.

- The Flagship brewery, of Chatham, makes British Summer Time ale, using Fuggles, Goldings and the junipery Progress hop. The brewery also offers a hop-oil aftershave.

- In Sussex. the King and Barnes brewery, of Horsham, maintains a garden of Early Bird Geldings at one of its pubs, the Dog and Duck, at Warnham. The hops were picked yesterday and by the week of 7 September. The Harvest Ale will be available in local pubs, to be followed by a bottled version at Oddbins later in the month.

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