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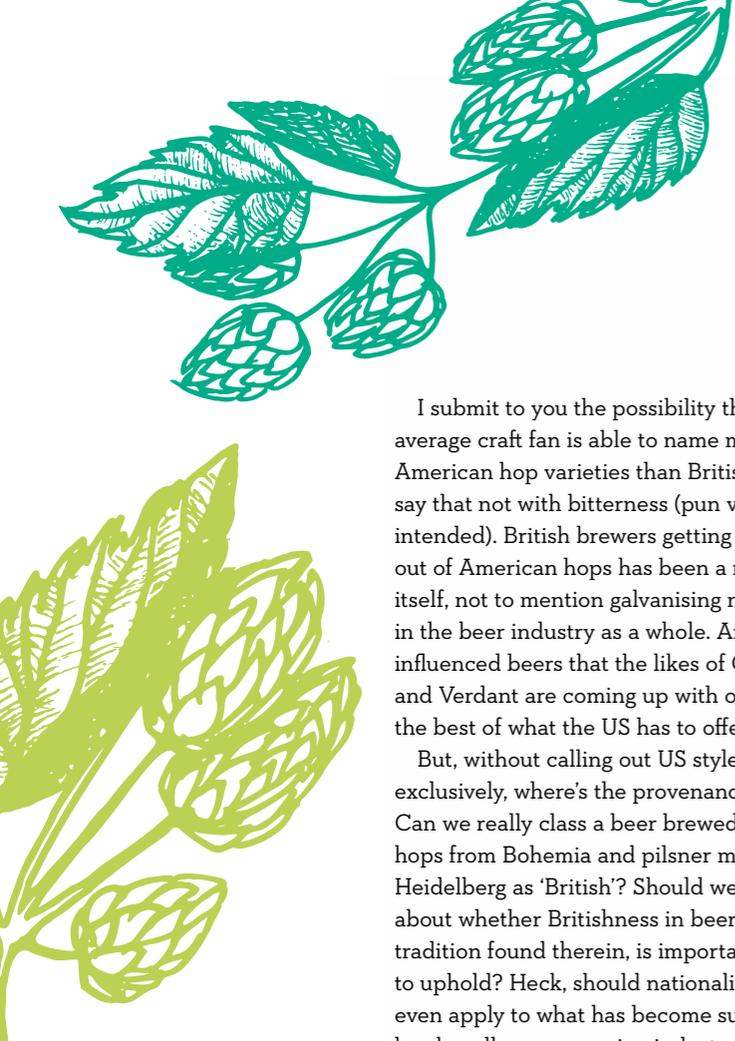
TASTES *of* HOME

WORDS: Hugh Thomas

Somewhere in the middle of the last century, on my great grandfather's farm in Kent, my family dried and packed Fuggles hops into sacks, 65kg a piece, branded with the family name. Partly due to new appetites for lager, the farm became obsolete, and eventually went the same way as many other oasts - converted into a semi-detached four-bedroom dwelling. It became the house I grew up in.

See my grandfather with pint in hand today, and he'll invariably lift his glass and quip, "still supporting the British hop trade". For all his life, it's been an attitude common among rural pub-goers. Those in the cities? Not so sure.





I submit to you the possibility that your average craft fan is able to name more American hop varieties than British ones. I say that not with bitterness (pun very much intended). British brewers getting the most out of American hops has been a revelation in itself, not to mention galvanising new interest in the beer industry as a whole. American-influenced beers that the likes of Cloudwater and Verdant are coming up with often rival the best of what the US has to offer.

But, without calling out US styles exclusively, where's the provenance in all this? Can we really class a beer brewed with Saaz hops from Bohemia and pilsner malt from Heidelberg as 'British'? Should we even care about whether Britishness in beer, and the tradition found therein, is important enough to uphold? Heck, should nationalistic values even apply to what has become such a cross-border, all-encompassing industry?

Recently, as if to albeit unwittingly further the discourse, the Independent published a piece on the '10 best traditional British beers', as put forward by 11 experts in the industry. One of said beers is an American-style amber brewed with US hops. Another is Jaipur - perhaps the most hard-hitting, hop-forward beers on the supermarket shelf. Another is Beavertown's Neck Oil - that quintessentially all-English IPA every CAMRA member stocks in their cellar.

I ain't no Brexiteer, but does it not seem apparent we're losing touch with our own heritage? I'm talking about cask maturing; about low-intensity hops; about earthy and grassy aromas; about gentle, caramel and nutty flavours; about dark copper and tar-like

colours; and about various brewing tropes such as parti-gyle systems which I lack the requisite geekery to elaborate on.

HOPPING FASHIONS

Earlier this year, Brooklyn brewmaster Garret Oliver told the Morning Ad that, at some point in the future, the trend for American hops will level out and "People will start to think 'what does truly British beer taste like, beyond traditional bitter?'". Mid-Brexit, perhaps this isn't such a bold prediction. Take this whichever way you will, but demand for domestic, inherently British goods has soared for the first time in two years.

Will it last? British hop growers hope so. Especially when they're in the process of adapting to the changing tastes of the nation. Take Ross Hukins of Hukins Hops in Kent, for example. "We do have varieties with those floral elements associated with American hops," says Ross. "But the Americans have just been a bit better at selling them." For the past three years, Ross' farm has been growing Bullion, a British hop considerably more intense in flavour than its compatriot varieties like Fuggles or Goldings. He's also cultivating Ernest which, when grown under trial in →



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1959 by the Institute of Brewing & Distilling, was deemed inferior to Fuggles due to its reportedly “strong, coarse, American aroma”.

“I only grow heritage aroma hops,” says Ross. “But with these heritage varieties, you can get results similar to New World flavours. We’re giving British brewers the opportunity to use something different and something British to give them those kinds of flavours, perhaps more subtly.”

Hukins’ Bullion stock sells out (Ross is keen to not over predict demand), but for now it’s too early to determine Ernest’s potential. “We’re about to send it out - the boxes are just behind me - to five beer sommeliers,” says Ross. ‘So that they can be sampled and the tasting notes sent back.’

A BITTER TASTE IN THE MOUTH

Whether or not there becomes a considerable, renewed interest in these varieties, this ‘issue’ goes beyond just hops. The fact is, American craft breweries are making English beer. Ours aren’t. ‘About half of Goldings, Fuggles, and Challenger grown in the UK are going to the States now,’ says Ross. ‘Because they want to make traditional British beers, and you need British-grown hops for those.’

Beyond porters, stouts, some varieties of pale ale, and IPAs - which, if you’re going by the modern incarnations of India Pale Ale, is a misnomer - craft brewers have their money on current trends rather than indigenous styles. Styles that landmark breweries such as Harvey’s and Fuller’s do very well - especially with regards to the classic of all classics, the English bitter. As for craft, there’s Hackney

Brewery’s Best Bitter, and there’s Moor Beer’s excellent RAW. But aside from that, to find a notable exception requires a bit of digging. Or, in my case, a coincidental encounter with Brick Brewery.

‘I’m a Yorkshireman, and grew up on John Smith’s back in the day, when it was properly hand-pulled - not the way it is now,’ says Ian Stewart, owner of the Peckham-based brewery. Brick Brewery’s Kinsale Best Bitter feels, in a way, original. I say that despite the style’s advancing years, and particularly as it features as one of the brewery’s core beers. ‘Everyone’s doing these heavily hopped, New World beers, and I wanted to challenge ourselves a little bit,’ says Ian. ‘Keep it traditional, really. And make the most of English hops as much as we can, as the availability’s there.’

In addition to Challenger and Progress, Brick uses small amounts of a Slovenian hop - Celeia - to offer a floral edge to their bitter. Kinsale’s made in the traditional way, which means, as it’s a low-gravity English bitter, turnaround is a lot shorter than more modern beers. ‘Ours ferments out in about two days,’ says Ian. ‘Whereas American IPAs and pale ales take a good few days longer. That’s before you then have to dry hop them. So from grain to glass it’s probably half the time.’

That said, cask has a lower profit margin. And Brick have to be choosy about who their casks go out to. Particularly in this day and age, when the convenience of kegs is taken for granted. ‘We do experience that sometimes [general managers] have never tapped a cask. They assume as soon as it lands on the cellar floor they can serve it that same day. We

condition it at the brewery, but you’ve got to settle it out for a little bit before.’

The idea of a London-based craft brewery peddling British-style cask beer in large numbers - bitter particularly - may well be a romantic one. Ian, however, suggests one of the hallmarks of traditional British beer could eventually make a return. ‘I think the trend is pretty much set for the foreseeable future, with hop-forward beers. But having spoken to the brewers and people coming to the taproom, I do think ABVs will start coming down. Session IPAs are definitely going to flip the market.’

Landmark brewers like the John Smith’s, the Harvey’s, and the Fuller’s of this world will always be knocking around. But Britain’s craft scene is inciting a feeling of disconnect with the breweries that put UK beer on the world map in the first place. ‘I think there could be a problem that the traditional ways of brewing will die out,’ says Ian. ‘But we do live in a bubble in the cities, where everyone’s into what you’re into. It’s a very finite amount of people.’

Beer is at the centre of British identity. But looking towards London, where so much of that identity is forged, our perceptions of what constitutes as British are a bit muddled. For all the positives associated with the capital’s open-mindedness and multiculturalism, sometimes London forgets to look in on its own heritage. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of every other brewery coming out with an American pale ale or a West Coast IPA. Maybe, then, it’s time the British craft scene took a good long hard look at itself.



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American craft
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Ours aren’t.**

