

AT THE



HOP

FRESH BREWS TASTE OF THE SEASON

WRITTEN BY
KEVIN ALLMAN

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Winemakers have Beaujolais Nouveau—the fruity, barely fermented red wines sold in November six weeks after harvest. And Northwest brewers have fresh or “wet” hops beers, made from hops picked straight off the vine and added immediately to the mash. The result is a light, fruity brew that aficionados describe as “green,” “grassy,” and “chlorophyll-y,” and it’s made in small batches each autumn in Oregon, Washington, and Northern California.

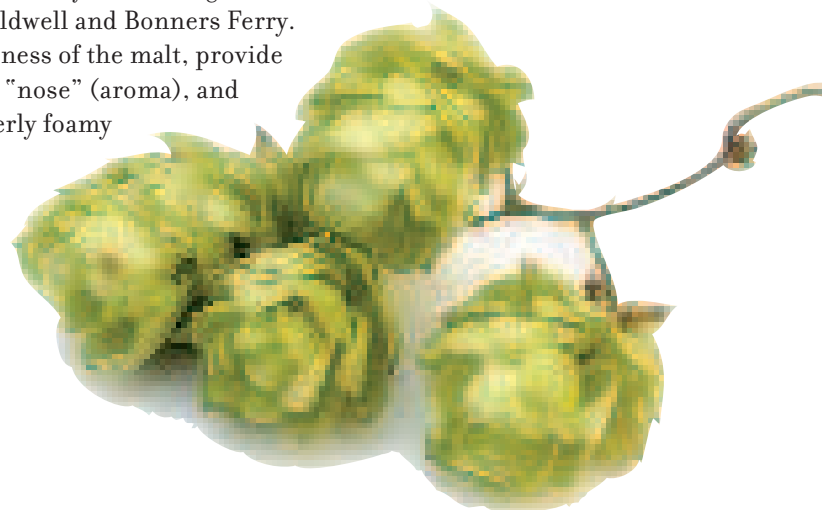
Wet hops are prized for their floral, piney qualities, according to Brian Butenschoen, executive director of the Oregon Brewers Guild. “If you drink a fresh-hop beer,” Butenschoen says, “you would notice it had more of the aroma and flavors of the wide variety of hops in Oregon, from citrusy (tangerine to grapefruit to orange scents) to more resinous (or floral, piney, and earthy) aromas.”

WHAT’S A HOP?

The “holy trinity” of beer making is malt, yeast, and hops, which, when added to water and fermented, provides a series of specific components to the final beer.

Hops, which look like tiny green buds in the shape of cones, are actually the flower of the *humulus lupulus* vine, a perennial that’s found growing wild in areas of North America, Europe, and Asia. In the Northwest, according to the Hop Growers of America, hops are cultivated in four predominant regions: the Willamette Valley in Oregon, the Yakima Valley in Washington, and the Idaho valleys of Caldwell and Bonners Ferry.

Hops cut the sweetness of the malt, provide shelf stability, add “nose” (aroma), and help create a properly foamy or creamy head.



Hop To It!

For more information about hop growing and fall hops festivals, spend some time at these web sites:

- ❖ Hood River Hops Festival
hood-river-hops.com
- ❖ Hop Madness!
hopmadness.com
- ❖ Oregon Brewers Guild
oregonbeer.org
- ❖ Hop Growers of America
usahops.org

There are approximately two dozen major American cultivars of hops, many of which carry uniquely Northwestern names (Willamette, Mt. Hood, Chinook, Cascades, Northern Brewer). In Oregon and Washington, they're cultivated on hillsides or along trellises or strings, where the mature plants can grow to 25 feet long. Hop flowers appear for pollination in July, becoming fully ripe about a month later and giving off a distinctive woody-grapefruit perfume. The hops die off completely at the first sign of cold temperatures, leaving a short, late-summer window for harvest.

After harvest, the majority of hops are dried, either in the sun or by using an oven or professional dehydrator. But not all. Some hops go straight from the vine, wet and green, directly into the brew kettle, producing the fall fresh hops beer.

ALL BREWERS, LARGE & SMALL

Many Oregon and Washington breweries have begun making their own fresh hops beers (which vary from year to year), including Rogue Ales (Hop Heaven), Deschutes (Hop Trip), and Lucky Labrador (The Mutt). Last year, the Lucky Lab held its own day-long "Fresh Hop" festival at its Northwest Portland brewpub.

But it's not just the big breweries that have discovered the grassy, perfumey flavors that fresh hops can impart. Mitch Scheele, a home brewer in Albany, Ore., has been making fresh hops beer since he started brewing 10 years ago. Unlike many other home brewers, he grows his own hops as well.

"I grow four or five strains of my own, and harvest usually toward the end of August," Scheele says. "Other home brewers are often generous with the crops they grow. Most of the hops are dried and frozen for use later, but I normally spare a pound or so for a wet hop brew."

It's a less exact science than traditional brewing; commercially sold dried hops are marked with alpha acid ratings to assist brewers in preparing the proper proportion of hops to water, malt, and yeast. And each hop harvest is slightly different, which adds a level of trial and error to the process.

"A few years ago there were only a few decent ones," says Scheele, "but now many more craft brewers have jumped on the bandwagon, with excellent results. It's a seasonal thing, since it's difficult to keep and store fresh wet hops. You also have to use a lot more of them—six or eight times as much—so most hops are dried for later use. All those hops fill up the brew kettle, so you don't get as much beer from your batch."

Butenschoen of the Oregon Brewers Guild agrees. "They [fresh hops] have a lot more water in them. Dry hops are more shelf-stable and last longer. But they have less of the aromatic oils which contribute to both the aroma and flavor of the beer; some of the oils are driven off during the kilning [drying] process."

"They definitely taste different, and often have a 'greenish' or grassy taste," says Scheele. "If [the brewing] is done right, it will be as well-balanced and flavorful as any regular beer, but with a fresh twist."

HOP & GLORY

What would an Oregon harvest be without a festival? There are several festivals that celebrate the humble hop, such as Hop Madness!, now in its fifth year, where Scheele shows up to collect freshly picked hops and do some on-site brewing.

Each September, just as temperatures turn cooler, hop-growing, home-brewing, beer-loving Northwesterners gather for the weekend-long celebration, where attendees can tour hop farms, meet other brew enthusiasts, and—of course—sample some of the area's best wet hop beers. The 2007 Hop Madness! is set for Sept. 1-2 at Willamette Mission State Park (just outside Salem), and its centerpiece, as always, is the Best Damn Hoppy Beer Contest. Brewers submit at least 24 ounces of their best homebrew, and prizes are awarded from both a judges' tasting and a People's Choice selection.

Another celebration of the hop takes place in Hood River in October. The Hood River Hops Festival, now in its third year, features two dozen local breweries and a few wineries, in a family-friendly celebration in downtown Hood River near the Full Sail Brewery. And according to Butenschoen, several other hops festivals are scheduled around Oregon on weekends during October, including at least one in the Portland metro area (check www.oregonbeer.org for finalized dates).

If there's one disadvantage to fresh-hops beers, it's that they're a true limited edition; when they're gone, they're gone—until next harvest. Come September and October, visit a local hops festival...or just go down to your local pub and hoist a pint of Oregon's own brewjouis nouveau. *eP*

Kevin Allman is a Portland writer. His website is kevinallman.com.