

UNHOPPYNESS

Beers and lunch with a home brewer BY JENNIFER DONOHUE

Willamette Brewery's Imperial IPA was already on the table when I arrived. Jason Carriere looked happy to have it, so I decided to get one of the same. It was no surprise that it was delicious. With our drinks in hand and our lunch ordered, we talked about the state of the beer industry for the home brewer.

Carriere owns Valley Vintner and Brewer, a home brewing supply store on Willamette and 17th in Eugene. He had much to say about the supply side of small scale brewing and about how the home brewer has to adjust to the changes in hops prices and availability.

He knows all about the chemistry and the artistry of brewing small batches of beer for home consumption. He has been brewing beer for many years. He also has a B.S. in neuroscience and psychology, along with a master's degree in environmental studies. In addition to his work at Valley Vintner & Brewer, he works in the Biology Lab at the UO.

His first words are "hops crisis." Hops, the most important flavoring for beer, have become a hard to get commodity for a number of reasons.

Prices are 400 to 500 percent higher than last year and hops that cost .99 cents per ounce are now up to \$2.50 to \$3 per ounce.

The current crisis is caused by the market: A glut in the hops market kept them undervalued throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. Hop farming is labor, water and capital intensive, Carriere tells me. It effectively costs more to grow hops than what consumers were paying for them. This drove many farmers to turn to more lucrative crops or those that were being subsidized by the government. During this same time, the demand for hops continued to rise as the craft beer industry expanded and the affinity for hops was beginning to develop in the average beer consumer.

Now that the price has begun to correct itself, farmers are expected to return to hop farming, says Carriere. There already has been an increase in hop acreage, but unfortunately it takes three years for a viable harvest after planting rhizomes (root cuttings).

Increasingly, many hops strains like high alpha acid varieties are being trademarked. While this permits a certain quality assurance, it also limits the total amount of a variety that is available, according to Carriere.

Even given the current situation, many farmers, retailers and brewers are optimistic about the future of the hop market. Given that it takes three years for a viable harvest, many beer makers are growing hops themselves. Sales of the root cuttings of hop plants have been off the charts.

While Oregon used to be a good place to grow hops, climate change and climate change related pest issues have moved the best growing area up to Yakima, Wash. We all know how gas prices figure in to rising costs when products must be transported longer distances.

For organic beer lovers, transportation costs really factor in to the prices. While organic hops are available from many of the hop growing regions in Europe and Australia, the bulk of organic hops come from New Zealand, the only place one can get organic hops. The same pests and diseases, like powdery mildew, affecting hop growers in Oregon become even more difficult to combat with organic practices, which prevents large-scale organic hop farming, according to Carriere. Furthermore, he says, with current organic standards, the amount of hops used in a batch of beer is almost always less than 5 percent, so there isn't much incentive to brew with organic hops.

Bigger macrobrewers have contracts for hops supplies a few years out, so they can make a claim for portions of the hops supply ahead of time, regardless of the ebb and flow of what is produced. Microbrewers receive the next level of hops availability. Home brewing supply stores receive what is left over after the big guys get their share.

Much extra work has to be done to locate and keep a supply on hand. Carriere and his staff do their best to keep the prices lower than the market increase so it's not too high for the home brewer.

So what is the home brewer to do about the hops shortage? Well, hops are used to balance the sweetness from the sugars in the fermenting process with bitterness. Other herbs that are more available are being cut in with hops. Some of these include heather, yarrow and skullcap.



Valley Vintner & Brewer employee Michael Zarkesh shows off the hops

While it may seem strange to lessen the hops flavor in the brew process, it does offer a chance for the artistic side of the experimentation and creation to emerge.

What does this Carriere have in his own home brew stock? Well, with an upcoming friend's wedding he has 30 gallons of a "session" type beer, similar to Deschutes Mirror Pond, with five percent alcohol and moderately hoppy. I have had his home brewed beer before. Can I get an invite to that wedding?

Freshness of the beer is often the reason the home brewer chooses to take on this process where art and science are blended. If you want to try to make your own beer too, it doesn't cost much to get started, but there is some labor involved.

Valley Vintner offers a basic package for \$100 that includes all the equipment, a guidebook and a 50 percent discount off the first batch of supplies. They also offer a demonstration on the last Saturday of each month. Go to www.brewabeer.com to learn more about the store and the process.

As we talk, we move onto our second beer. Bear Republic Eastbay Ricardos Red Wheat, oh, the names. But it is yummy. I have temporarily forgotten about some crisis ...

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