

Hop to it

Leafy pub gardens and pints of foaming ale are a big part of being British, but they wouldn't exist without the humble hop plant, the backbone of our beer-brewing heritage. Nick Hammond drinks it all in

Photographs by Joe Bailey

A NGULAR cord lengths march into the distance, gently vibrating like the just-thrummed strings of a giant harp. Each is secured to a 19ft-high top wire and a peg in the ground below. In between, secured upright by this post-ended frame, the vivid green fingerlings of this year's hop harvest curl and twine.

The Worcestershire/Herefordshire border makes for a perfect hop yard—usually. However, farming is farming and nothing is certain. As with grapes in Bordeaux or peaches in Georgia, a late frost can be the difference between profit and loss.

As I stand with Ali Capper on the beautiful parcel of greenery she farms with her husband, Richard, just such a cold snap in recent days is making her shake her head in dismay. 'It's tough,' she admits, eventually. 'Really tough. It's not looking great for our apples—we're going to have to wait and see. It's at times like these that farming is very hard on you mentally.'

The sharp dip in temperatures, with many of the farm's fruit well on in the growing season, could yet have disastrous results. Now, it's a waiting game to see if Nature can still find a way.

The hops grown at Stocks Farm—about 100 acres of them in total, making it one of the biggest growers in the UK—appear to have ridden out the problem a little better than >

Hopping mad: Richard Capper inspects the crop on his farm in Worcestershire



the cider apples. However, it's an intensive crop and there's a lot of work to be done yet, before the essence of this particular *terroir* is being sipped down at the local.

'Hops are perennial, so they die back in winter and begin again come spring,' explains Ali, who's a director of the British Hop Association and a walking encyclopedia of the crop. 'In April, the shoots are tied onto the coir string, which we source in Sri Lanka. We have to wind each shoot onto it by hand, clockwise, unlike beans, which grow anti-clockwise. If we don't, they'll just fall off.'

'By the end of June, they're hopefully at the top of the string growing strongly and, by the middle of July, they will be 19ft tall and growing laterally. The hops come into burr first, then the flower or cone develops. Three weeks later, we harvest.'

6 A rural community and an entrepreneurial spirit have formed something special,

Inside these little green cones of wonder are the precious oils that make a brewer salivate. Lupulin, the oil at the base of the cone, is responsible for many of the discernible flavours you'll find in your favourite pint—the green, hay, fruit or citrus notes that lift a craft ale far above a mass-produced, gas-guzzling lager.

As soon as the crop is deemed ready, it's crucial to secure these oils as quickly as possible. The tall hop plant is cut in its entirety, including the string, and taken to the picker, which will separate the cones from the bine or climbing plant, its lateral growth and leaves. These byproducts are chopped and distributed back onto apple orchards as a natural mulch and fertiliser.

Next, the hops are spread out and dried by hot air that rises from an oil-fired burner below, then bagged up and sent on to the brewery for the next transformation.

Farms across hop-growing country can be identified



Above: The kiln identifies Stocks Farm as a hop-growing haven. **Below:** Ali Capper checks if the 'little green cones of wonder' are ready for harvest. **Below left:** Two beers from the on-site brewery, Unity Brew House



by their kilns or oast houses (kilns in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, oast houses in Kent), each with a distinct design and appearance. The striking example at Stocks Farm is used for just five weeks a year, but would cost in excess of £1 million to replace. The farm looks idyllic, but it's also a place of hard graft, worry and, at times, frenzied activity.

'We have workers living here 24 hours a day during harvest and there's a wonderful buzz in the air,' continues Ali, as we pass through a glorious belt of 50-year-old apple trees and down towards the small brook that runs through the farm. Appropriately, there is a buzz in the air already as myriad flying insects drone past, doing their unheralded pollination work and keeping the agricultural world turning.

Mark Bretherton/Atamny



Sarah Saleh, co-founder of Unity Brew, prepares the next batch of artisanal craft beer

Stocks Farm grows evocative-sounding English strains such as Phoenix, Bramling Cross, First Gold, Sovereign, Pilgrim, Endeavour and Jester. The craft-beer revolution of the past 10 years has seen a boom in the production of classic British hops, as well as a spectacular variety of new and flavoursome alternatives.

However, if you fancy having a go yourself, you might want to think twice. Although there's nothing to stop you growing, say, five acres of attractive hops on your smallholding, can you construct the necessary frame? Do you have access to a hop-picker and a kiln?

'Hops grow in the wild—we often spot them in the hedgerow at the side of the road, so they really are part of our countryside,' extols Ali over a tasty bottle of beer, made with Stocks Farm hops, back in the farmhouse kitchen. 'More people are growing them than ever before, but it isn't a quick and easy crop,' she warns. 'The drying of the cones is arguably the most important part of the process and if you can't do this properly, you're not going to get the best results.'

Stocks Farm does a healthy business in shipping hops to home brewers and, in a won-

derful example of holistic thinking, the first brewery slap bang on a hop farm opened here last year. Unity Brew House, owned and run by Sarah and Hani Saleh, has taken over an old chicken barn and turned it into the ultimate no-frills, foamy-spills brewery-cum-village bar.

A range of truly excellent craft beers is made here, with hops fresher than you can imagine. A small bar, a licence to serve the public on Fridays and Saturdays, a rural community and an entrepreneurial spirit have combined to form something special out here. Pop along at cocktail hour on a Friday and you might well find 100 locals—wellies and dogs amid homeward-bound office workers—sipping, indulging in gossip and a Scotch egg and doing what Britons have seemingly always done: enjoying great tasting, locally brewed ale.

Long live the British hop—and all those with the skills and the fortitude to grow them! Stocks Farm, Suckley, Worcestershire (01886 884202; www.stocksfarm.net). The Unity Brew House (01866 884110; www.unitybrewhouse.co.uk)