



QUEEN OF HOPS

An interview with Ali Capper

By Matt Lane

It's an early start on Stocks Farm in Suckley, a small village at the foot of the spectacular Malvern Hills in Worcestershire. Despite it being the middle of Spring, it's 5°C and sheeting it down. We've rearranged this interview twice because the recent weather has been so poor, but with our print deadline fast approaching, the show must go on. I consider having a moan about it all to my host for the day, but then realise I've just pretty much summed up the average day of a British hop farmer.



Ali Capper at Stocks Farm

We're here to meet Alison Capper (or Ali as she prefers to be known); the queen, and in many ways saviour of British Hops. The original idea was to have a wander round the hop fields but Ali kindly takes pity on us and instead invites us into her kitchen for a coffee where we interrupt her husband Richard from scoffing his breakfast. It was him, Ali explains, that got her in to hops in the first place.

"This farm has been in my husband's family since 1963 but it has been farming hops for at least 200 years. I'm a farmer's daughter but it wasn't on my radar to do anything in farming at all. I did fashion at college and moved to London to work in advertising for 15 years. As that was coming to an end I went on a blind date and met Richard".

The early 2000s would see Ali show off her entrepreneurial flair as she started and sold an online gifting business in what was very early days for e-commerce. It was during this period that Ali and Richard also had two children, but the chaos really started in 2006 when the farm book keeper left and Richard asked Ali if she could fill in for a bit.

"I started looking at the numbers and what we were doing field-by-field. Then I started asking some difficult questions. Things like, why are we growing so much of this hop when this one makes all the money? There are 57 hop farmers in the UK, split into three co-operatives that come together to sell hops. By 2009 I had started getting really involved in our co-operative.

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Ali and Richard weren't the only hop growers asking themselves soul-searching questions about their future. British hop growing had been in decline throughout the 80s and 90s, largely due to the advance of mass-produced lagers which generally contain a low amount of European hops. Verticillium Wilt, a disease affecting hops that still has no cure, also had a devastating effect. Then from the early 2000's the craft beer revolution, which saw the introduction of American and New-world hops; much bigger and brasher than their British counterparts, threatened to make UK hops look dated and surplus to requirements. Not if Ali was going to have anything to with it.

"I also started asking where the new varieties of hops were coming from. My father-in-law's answer was really interesting. He told me we'd wait for someone else to experiment with the new varieties and when they're proven we'll plant them. A very sensible, low-risk strategy. But of course the problem, and it's the same in any business, is that once an idea is established it starts to commoditise. There is only money to be made where there is some risk. So I started to get involved in our hop breeding programme and

by attending Wye Hops (a subsidiary of the British Hops Association) meetings. The farmers around the table were wondering what I was doing there. There were no women and certainly nobody else under 50. Not many under 60 in fact! Every April the directors of the three co-ops would come together and decide the strategy for the year. There were some very bright people there but they weren't very organised. I had started to get the hop bug by this point."

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Getting her voice heard by the governing bodies was one way of affecting change but Ali knew from the outset that she also needed to get the ear of brewers.

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"In 2011 we hosted the first hop walk for the UK's leading hop merchant, Charles Faram. Richard couldn't believe that I was inviting 200 brewers to the farm for the first week of harvest, but we did it and we loved it. I then got invited to a trade show in Germany where I could see British hop merchants marketing and selling their stuff in the export market. I just thought 'Oh my god'. I couldn't see us anywhere, even the British hop merchants weren't selling British hops and nobody was talking about us. German hops, American Hops, New Zealand hops, Slovenian hops, Czech hops... everything but British hops. I came back baffled and underwhelmed about what our industry was doing."

There is a saying round these parts... better to marry a gambler than a hop farmer and as we look out at the rain Ali reflects on another challenge they

face year in, year out. The British weather.

"That same year we had a frost on our fruit. Imagine a warehouse full of beer before Christmas when you do most of your sales, having no insurance and that stock being stolen. That's what frost on fruit is like. At the end of that year we discovered that we had 100 acres of hops that were not making any profit. I had three weeks of Richard saying, "That's it, we're going to get rid of the lot". I can't describe to you how monumental that is. We were very low."

It was at that point Ali decided to take matters into her own hands and vowed to turn around the British hop growing industry.

"Richard didn't have any idea what I was talking about. "We're farmers!" he said. But I just felt this industry could be run so much better. We were so polite and British about selling hops. So I struck a deal with Richard. He said I had three years to turn it around or all the hops were being pulled up. I did a presentation to the board of the British Hop Association on what I thought the industry needed to do. It was very simple. We needed to rebrand. We needed a website. We needed consistent information and data on British hops that brewers could access. We needed new hop varieties. We needed to do some Marketing; that's a difficult word in farming."

She designed, with a mate down the road (whose remuneration was a case of beer), the British Hop Association

logo and got to work. She had a website built. She worked with Peter Darby, one of the UK's finest minds on hops to consolidate and centralise all the necessary information and data on British hops. She became the voice for British hops at a time when British beer was entering a resurgence, ensuring British hop farmers wouldn't be left behind during the craft beer revolution.

"Anybody that wanted to talk about British hops, I would go and talk to them. If anyone wanted to film, we'd welcome them. It helps that Richard is such a tidy farmer!"

The story of British hops is a special one, but talk of provenance and

heritage aren't enough.

"I love hops. Their nearest relative is cannabis and I'm sure there is something addictive about them, but if you're talking to a brewer, the argument needs to be scientific-based. Everytime I asked brewers and farmers what's special about British hops, I got all sorts of answers but there was a common thread. Drinkability. In the base of a hop flower when you open it up there is yellow pollen. That's called the Lupulin gland. There are about 400 hop oils in there. One of them is Mercene. If you take a British hop and you grow it here and overseas, in the UK you will get a lower level of Mercene. Mercene is an indicator for Monoterpenes and Monoterpenes give



Richard Capper



you aroma intensity. Citra, Cascade, and Nelson Sauvin hops have got very high single flavour notes when you look at the profile of their hop oils. British hops have got a much flatter profile. Our hops have delicate complexity and that means they are brilliant for session beer."

Ali goes on to explain, in glorious detail, how this is all due to terroir, a term unfairly hogged by the wine world.

"It's a combination of soil and climate. We're not the only maritime hop growing region. The others are Oregon (USA) and Nelson (New Zealand). Everywhere else is either a continental climate; colder in the winter and hotter in the Summer or in the case of Washington State, semi-arid, it's an irrigated desert. On British farms we don't irrigate anything! The weather makes an enormous difference. Our yield can vary between 20% and 25% and that makes it quite hard to budget. The wrong weather at the wrong time can give you real issues."

Another challenge modern hop farmers face is finding a willing and able workforce. Families travelling to the countryside to pick hops in their leisure is a distant memory, but as Ali explains, that's a large factor in why hops are grown where they are.

"Today, UK hops only grow in Kent and Sussex and Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The history to that is partly to do with land quality. It's

where the fruit in the country grows as well, but it's also about access to labour. Back in the day when every hop was handpicked, families came on holiday from the Black Country to Herefordshire and Worcestershire and from London to Kent and Sussex. That's why the



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industry is concentrated in these two regions."

Ali's fight for British hops has led her to become Chairman of the NFU Horticulture & Potatoes Board, Director of the British Hop Association, Trustee of the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust and a Director of Wye Fruit. She's a busy lady, but she hasn't finished with hops just yet.

"I said I wanted to set up a next generation hop growers group. Everyone laughed. I knew there were some twenties and thirty-something people working on these farms. At the first meeting 22 people turned up. I took them to Meantime Brewery. I took them to St Austell Brewery. We went

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Ali out in the hop field at Stocks Farm

to Fullers. I want them to think about and shape where our industry is going next. Ten years ago breweries were asking for hops for Milds and Bitters, essentially just more of the same. But now brewers and drinkers want something different and we have to be ahead of that. Since our work started, Charles Faram have begun their own hop breeding programme and from that two famous new varieties have been developed; Jester and Olicana and we were involved in that from the start. Right now I've got a spreadsheet of about 50 really interesting varieties that we're developing."

Ali succeeded in the challenge set out by her husband in 2011. In three years she did much more than just prove hops were a viable business option for their farm. She has put British hops back on the map.

"It's a completely different space now. When I took this task on in 2011 there were about 20 different varieties that we were growing commercially. Now there are 31 but more importantly there has been a big change in how we're marketing and promoting our hops."



Stocks Farm is Britain's only hop farmer to sell directly to homebrewers. If you want to buy high quality, fresh, British hops head over to www.stocksfarm.net.