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# Magunitas Brewery grows local hops

Roba Charles

Marin's first hops plantation is just beginning to emerge from a field above Marshall. A few fuzzy leaves are indicators of what, if all goes right, will be a towering wall of vines by the end of the year.

The one-third-acre field is an experiment, plantings by Magunitas Brewery. If they survive on the hillside, the plantation will be expanded.

By the end of the year we're going to make a beer from the Marshall hops," said brewery owner Steve Magee. "It's going to be our harvest beer, an estate ale."

Magee added that most beer is made from dried hops that are trucked down from the big hop-growing regions in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. "Drying fresh hops creates a beer with a very different flavor."

"Hops are like basil," Magee said. "It's one thing to cook with dried basil, but if you have fresh stuff there you use it. The flavors are much brighter and nicer."

A hop plant's bud is packed with bitter and aromatic oils, and different varieties have been bred to have different tastes. The traditional "pale" variety lends beer a spicy and delicate flavor, while "cascade" is described as piney and aromatic.

"There are only four different ingredients in beer: water, yeast, barley and water," Magee said. "But you take these four ingredients and there are whole worlds of possibility in final flavor."

Hops first came to be used in beer because their aromatic oils have an antibacterial effect, and acted as a natural preservative before refrigeration was available. Beer was also a practical way to sanitize drinking water.

"India Pale Ale is really bitter because it was developed by English brewers, so they could ship beer to troops in India," said Michelle Palacios with the Oregon Hop Commission. "Extra hops were added to keep the beer from spoiling on the long boat trip."

The fact that the crisp bitterness nicely balances what would otherwise be an almost cloying sweetness in the malt beverage is an extra bonus.

"Without hops it would just be drinking sweet water," said Palacios. "They aren't technically necessary, but hops are now synonymous with beer."

California was once a prime hop production area. The fertile soils around the Russian River, from Ukiah to Guerneville, were ideal for dryland farming of hops, which didn't need irrigation, said UC Farm Advisor Paul Vossen.

"When we didn't have irrigation, people would

grow things that thrive in the climate and with the soil moisture that we have," he said.

Once irrigation arrived and land prices escalated, the dryland crops – such as hops, prunes, pears and apples – were driven out. Drying and production centralized in the Pacific Northwest, and California farmers could no longer compete.

There are still scattered hop plantations where small breweries grow for their own use, Palacios said, but the last large-scale commercial operations left California in the 1980s.

Magee's plot is far from being a large-scale operation. His brewery uses roughly 15,000 tons of hops each year, and if he's lucky 200 pounds – enough for 6,000 cases of beer – will come from the one-third acre Marshall plantation. The comparatively small brewery makes 47,000 barrels of beer each year, as compared to Sierra Nevada, which makes 650,000, and Budweiser, which produces around 100 million barrels each year, Magee said.

Instead, he sees experimentation as an important part of his role as an innovator and owner of a microbrewery.

"Since we're small, it's our job to experiment," he said. "We can try new things very easily. Budweiser would waste 6,000 cases of beer just turning on a tap. It's incumbent on us to pioneer and play and engage in the spirit of adventure."

