

Episode 6: Misty Mountain Hop by Greg Hackenberg

After a bit of a vacation last month, I am back for another installment in this ongoing series and to generally annoy you with more stuff on UK beer. This month's topic is some of the wonderful English hops you may or may not be aware of. Yes, I know..."EK Golding and Fuggles, what more do I need to know?" The answer is "a heap". For you see...much like the US, the UK (and Germany) have been hard at work on a lot of new hop strains in the last few decades that has produced some really interesting varieties. However, in the rush to create beers with a hop impact of a cinder block dropped on a car from a highway overpass, a lot of these hops have gotten short shift in my humble opinion.

You may of course disagree, but you are going to have to hear me blather on about them. I will, however, avoid getting on some sort of rant about "what's wrong with beer these days" and telling you kids to get off my lawn. So here is a rundown of some hops you might enjoy, or might want to avoid. That's up to you.

There are 20 varieties of hops currently grown commercially in the UK. We will be looking at nine of them. If you'd like, here is the link to the British Hop Association which list all the hops <http://www.britishhops.org.uk/>.

First, the classics:

East Kent Goldings: Dual use. Sweet, smooth, citrus/lemon, floral, with an earthy background. 4.5%-6.5% AA

EKG is the workhorse hop of British beers, and it does it all; bittering, flavor, aroma, dry hopping. If you have done any British styles, you are probably familiar with it, but let's review. It was grown prior to 1790 so it is one of the oldest identified cultivars, and often considered in the "noble" category by non-Germans. It is often used in combination with Fuggles or other British hops. Goldings are produced in other areas and the further from the south of Britian, the different they get. "Kent Goldings" are grown in central Kent, and "Goldings" or "UK Goldings" are from the other southern counties. They are relatively interchangeable, but give slightly different results, the East Kent are a bit more pungent. There are a few other names you might run across. "Whitbread Goldings" are a cross between Goldings and a Fuggle and has a different character than either. It is more floral and fruity with citrus and some sat apricot flavors, they are usually combined with other hops. BC "British Columbia" Goldings, I have not tried, as I try to avoid all things Canadian. Actually, no. I like Canadians, but I have not heard many good things about this hop.

Fuggles: Dual use. Soft woody, earthy, mild floral and vegetal notes. Less of an edge than EKG 3.5 to 5% AA

The other workhorse of classic British hops and the other "noble". Fuggle and Goldings blend extremely well adding depth of flavor. It was introduced in 1875 and its use took off quickly, replacing many of the older hops that predated Goldings. The earthy flavor works well with the biscuit and toasty qualities of the British base malts. Other related hops are Styrian Goldings, which is actually Fuggles grow in Slovenia. It is very similar but a bit spicier. Willamette is the American grown variety and is softer and a little less potent.

Now on to the others:

Like I mentioned before, the British have been on the quest for higher alpha acid and interesting flavors just like the American growers. There is a National hop research institute at Wye College, now under control of the British Hop Association where nearly all the hops in the UK are developed. It even holds living examples of heirloom and commercially extinct varieties. A good bit of their research has been going into reviving experimental cross breeds that were rejected at the time that with changing tastes may have potential today.

There are a couple of interesting thing about these hops. First just about all are dual use hops; even those developed as high alpha acid varieties have found a use for flavor/aroma additions. Next, take a look at

some of the flavors in the descriptions; citrus, orange, lemon, spice, tropical fruit... Not just the earthy, herbal, floral that one often expects, especially if your experience is limited to Fuggles and the occasional Goldings. And you'll notice the higher alpha acids.

Northdown: Dual use. spicy, resinous aroma 7.5%-9.5% AA

Released in 1970 to replace UK Northern Brewer. A clean bittering hop, works well with other hops. Classic Flavor and aroma hop in strong and dark ales, particularly dry stouts. Fuller uses them in nearly all their beers. I have not used it, but it is one I am going to try.

Target: Bittering/Dual use. Its flavor is a unique herbal character, earthy, mineral, grassy 8%-12.5% AA

Released in 1972 as a clean bittering hop and it is used as the basis for many beers. But it is also gaining a following for its flavor/aroma. I have only used it for bittering.

Challenger: Dual use. Refined spicy notes, cedar, fruity, orange or tangerine. 7 to 8% AA

Released in 1972. A good dual-purpose hop for both bittering and flavor/aroma. But it blends extremely well with other English hops. It has a firm flavor and provides a long lingering aftertaste. This is one that is starting to be mentioned in the same breath as EKG and Fuggle in the British hop short list. I have been using this one a good bit. This is one I would recommend for some experimentation. The full fruity/citrusy hop flavor component could pair well with some classic American hops and stand up to some of the newer bolder varieties. And the lingering flavor really shines when used as a first-wort-hop addition.

Pioneer: Dual use. Sweet, citrus, lemon/grapefruit. Well rounded bitterness. 8.0%-10.0% AA

Though citrusy, it is less aggressive than American varieties.

Pilgrim: Dual use. Earthy, spicy, citrus/lemon 9.5% - 13% AA

A fairly new hop released in 2001 with a distinctive aroma, more on par with the newer bolder hop strains. Another good candidate for experimentation with US varieties.

First Gold: Flavor/Aroma. Floral, with some citrus, wood and spicy notes. 6.5%-8.5% AA

Released in 1995, this is a fantastic finishing hop, but can also be used for bittering. Something of an EKG with less earth and more spice. Think of it like a cross between British and German noble hops. And it is a wonderful finishing hop on top of EKG or Fuggles.

Bramling Cross: Flavor/Aroma. Earthy, spice, black currants. 5%-7% AA

Developed in the 1920's. It was considered to have an "American" aroma which put off its widespread use for several decades. Definite spice and berry like black current notes. It works extremely well in darker ales, but it is turning up in more types. I use it where there are a lot of darker caramel notes, it seems to pair really well with them.

Progress: Flavor/Aroma. Robust, Fruity, Lime. 5%-7% AA

Developed in the 1960's. Up front fruity aromas and I definitely taste lime. It can be a little difficult to find. This is another one that can add some unusual aromas to your beer.

Sovereign: Flavor/aroma. Soft, earthy, piney and slightly floral. Similar to Fuggles but with notes of tropical fruit. 4.5-6.5% AA

Released in 2006, it is another with a base of classic British hop flavor amped up with delicate tropical fruit notes.

So there we have it. I'll be blathering on about beer and beery topics again next month.