

Hopping technique with cult status

It was the first, and most successful, brewing technique that the craft beer movement bestowed on us and it also marks the beginning of a revolution in the appreciation of beer worldwide: dry hopping has attained cult status. Arriving on the scene at the same time as a wave of new hop varieties in the early 1980s, it has since paved the way for excitingly bitter and beguilingly aromatic beer styles such as American IPA. Although the high bitterness values do not actually result from dry hopping, it is the intense hop aroma derived from this method that makes these new beers so appealing.

The technique had its first heyday in England, where numerous mentions of it can be found in records from the 18th century. It soon established itself as the standard technique for ale exported to India and, following the success of the India pale ales, became well-known in other parts of the British Empire in particular, but also on the Continent. After the First World War and with the ascendancy of bottom-fermented beers, dry hopping was largely forgotten until it was revived by the new American brewers in the late 1970s.

Part fascinating, part challenging, this first wave of innovation was the clarion call for everything the craft beer movement stood for – which at the time was a highly provocative message: “The first mouthful may be a shock because you’re no longer accustomed to so much flavour in a beer. But taste – particularly for hop bitterness and aromas – can be learned and cultivated.” That struck a chord. We have all seen how the new flavours produced by dry hopping have captivated the taste buds of many open-minded beer drinkers, and beer itself has been transformed from an everyday drink into a delicacy that does not necessarily appeal to everyone straight away. What has followed in terms of brewing techniques and flavours, such as barrel ageing, wild yeast fermentation or sour beer production, may have been equally fascinating, but has nothing approaching the revolutionary effect of dry hopping.

It has been an inspiration to the entire brewing world: there’s hardly a single craft brewer whose portfolio doesn’t include an IPA, or a start-up brewer who doesn’t kick off with a dry-hopped beer. For years now, the Brewers Association has acknowledged IPA as the backbone of the craft beer segment – accounting for over 25 per cent of sales and thus far ahead of all the other varieties. In Germany, where craft beer accounts for only a small share of sales, the figures are less impressive. Here, too, however, not only start-ups but also regional brewers and national brewing groups can be seen to be turning to dry hopping, for its use is not limited to hop-forward craft beer styles. Dry hopping can be used not only to produce extremely hopped, character-forming flavours, but also to subtly raise the flavour profile, for example, in a pilsner, a wheat beer or a Belgian “tripel”. Moreover, dry hopping increases flavour and foam stability and enhances drinkability – to mention only a few features.

A sure sign that it has cast off its niche image is the wide variety of brewing equipment available. Just as the craft breweries have grown from micro to medium-size and even large-scale operations, dry-hopping techniques have become more professional. It has taken several decades to get from simple manual hop addition to sophisticated technology, but today brewers are spoilt for choice. They can opt for a technique that allows the falling hop particles to float in the storage tank, or one that constantly circulates the green beer from the storage tank through

an external container filled with hops, or one that mixes beer or water with hops in an external container and then adds this suspension to the beer – not to mention the technological possibilities for separating the hops from the beer again.

In times of the Corona pandemic, which has made it necessary for the Brewers Association to publish best practices for disposing of beer, nobody can reliably predict how the beer sector will develop. However, we can foretell with a fair degree of certainty that the iconic brewing technique of dry hopping will remain, for not even a virus can put us off dry-hopped flavour profiles, and even the most recent trends, like the reinterpretation of Mexican lager, were already benefiting from an additional dose of hops in the cold process area before Corona came along.

For some time now, the BarthHaas Hops Academy has been considering adding online courses to its offering. In view of the current situation we've decided to start, beginning with the most popular subject among our seminars – dry hopping. Our webinars on dosage timing, base materials, technique, flavour design and yeast interaction will be available into the month of June. We're looking forward to using this channel to share our knowledge and love of hops with brewers, homebrewers and beer sommeliers alike. For further details and registration visit www.barthhaas.com