

# IS A FUTURE BREWING FOR LOCAL HOPS?

**COUNTY'S HARVEST OF BEER INGREDIENT IS TINY,  
BUT IT MAY SHOW PROMISE**

By Peter Rowe 12:01 a.m. Sept. 6, 2011



Star B Ranch in Ramona has diversified into growing hops, a vital ingredient in beer that is typically grown in the Pacific Northwest or Europe. At the end of this year's harvest, Eric March examines the crop.

Peggy Peattie • U-T photos

### **Small plant, big picture: hops in global terms**

Acres of hops, worldwide: 125,512

Acres in U.S.: 31,247

Largest hop farm in U.S.: 1,800 acres

Largest hop farm in San Diego County: 2 acres

Harvest, worldwide: 111,746 tons

Harvest, U.S.: 32,477 tons

Harvest, Ramona's Star B Ranch: 350 pounds

Price for Ramona-grown hops, 2011: \$15-16/lb.

Price for some European-grown hops, 2007: \$27/lb.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture; Hop Growers of America; Star B Ranch; Stone Brewing

Miguel Ramirez shakes hops from the vines at the harvesting shed at Star B Ranch in Ramona. Ensuring a steady supply of hops is critical to San Diego brewers, who are happy to see even the small local plots.

San Diego County, experts say, is not suitable for hop farms. One problem: someone forgot to tell the hops.

Last week, local farmers harvested the last of the green, gumball-sized cones that lend aroma and bitterness to beer. The crop is tiny — the county's largest operation, Ramona's Star B Ranch, is limited to two acres that yielded 350 pounds. In Julian, the one-acre Hoppportunity Farm may contribute 200 pounds.

In the global hop industry, which annually processes more than 100,000 tons, this is a drop in the harvest bucket. But this is a 550-pound rebuttal to conventional wisdom.

"This far south," noted Scott Stamp, owner of San Diego Brewing Co., "history shows that hops don't do that well."

"But our plants here are producing," noted Ken Childs, Star B's manager. "So much for that theory."

In San Diego's growing brewing community, these pint-size ventures have keg-sized potential. Local brewers are renowned for their passionate love of hops, but with most of these crops grown in Europe and the Pacific Northwest, it's been a long-distance romance.

"We've been pretty far removed from the farmers," said Lee Chase, a former Stone brewer who now makes beer for Blind Lady, the tavern he co-owns in Normal Heights. If a local hop industry blooms, San Diego brewers could work closely with farmers: "You could see the year-to-year differences and try to manipulate the crop to your liking."

Calling these fledgling efforts an industry, though, stretches the point like a pair of XXL Sansabelts. The yields are so small, they don't register in the crop report from the county Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures. Area homebrewers, let alone our commercial breweries, annually consume far more than 550 pounds of this ingredient.

Still, brewers trek to Star B and Hoppportunity like pilgrims to Lourdes.

"We're like chefs — any time there's a new spice, there's a rush to experiment with it," Stamp said.

San Diego Brewing has used Star B hops in several beers. How's this experiment going?

"Too early to tell," Stamp said.

## **HOP-CENTRIC**

Beer is usually made from four ingredients: water, yeast, malted grain — often barley — and hops.

Of that quartet, yeast is easy for San Diego breweries to obtain. White Laboratories, one of the nation's largest suppliers of brewer's yeast, is headquartered in Miramar.

Local water supplies? Sufficient, although droughts may limit this resource.

Barley? The grain is grown in the county, but brewers need it to be "malted," soaked and germinated to produce the sugars beer requires. Southern California, though, lacks a commercial malt house.

Hops? Local breweries use dozens of varieties from the Pacific Northwest, Europe and New Zealand. Craft beers, brews made in small batches via traditional methods, are noticeably hoppier than mainstream lagers like Budweiser and Coors. Although a typical 31-gallon barrel of pale ale needs a scant 3 pounds of hops, and a barrel of a "hop bomb" like Russian River's Pliny the Elder only 6 pounds, hop farms around the world have struggled to keep up with demand.

Shortages caused a price spike in 2007-08, with some varieties commanding \$27 a pound and higher. Rates have since dropped — Star B now charges \$16 for a pound of Cascades, a variety often used in

India pale ales. But shortages still haunt breweries. Last week, Alpine suspended production of Duet, one of its IPAs, due to a lack of Simcoe, a Northwestern hop.

Ensuring a steady hop supply is especially critical in hop-centric San Diego. Hopunion, a Washington-based hop broker, co-sponsors an annual “Alpha King” contest for the “best hop-laden beers in the land.” In the competition’s 12 years, it has been won four times by San Diego County brewers: Tomme Arthur in 2004 (as Pizza Port Solana Beach’s head brewer) and 2008 (as head brewer at Port Brewing in San Marcos), and Jeff Babgy in 2005 (when he was with Oggi’s, Vista) and 2010 (Pizza Port Carlsbad).

So even small local plots crawling with these aromatic vines stir big dreams.

“We need all the hops we can get,” said San Diego Brewing’s Stamp.

## **JULIAN GOLD**

A few years ago, retired schoolteacher Phil Warren found wild hop vines growing around the patio of the Julian Chamber of Commerce. He asked if he could dig up the plant’s roots.

“Yes,” a chamber official replied, “as long as you clean up the patio.”

Warren accomplished both tasks, then planted the root and other hops in a small corner of his brother’s 40-acre spread.

“Boy,” he said, “they just shot up.”

Warren believes these are survivors of a long-departed 19th-century brewery, founded by Julian miners. For more than a century, vines had sprouted every summer, spreading until the first cold snap killed the cones and caused the root to go dormant. This wild hop, now being domesticated at Hoppportunity Farm, has been dubbed Julian Gold.

In 2008, Star B’s Childs and his son-in-law, Eric March, wanted to diversify their buffalo-raising business. On the suggestion of Eric’s wife, Amie, they planted two acres of Cascade, Nugget and Willamette hops. The latter isn’t thriving, but the other two types have been bought by homebrewers, and pros from Stone, San Diego and Karl Strauss.

Does our soil and water, our long summer and brief winter, stamp these hops with a unique character?

“My initial response,” March said, sniffing a handful of Nuggets, “is this has more of a peach or apricot smell rather than the citrus aromas you get from the same hop in the Northwest.”

“That’s the San Diego terroir,” laughed Blind Lady’s Chase, using the French term describing the qualities of a geographic site that shape the wine, coffee and other products rooted in that soil. “It might even be a little spicier because we’re closer to the border.”

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