

Where good beer is going and why



Fast-growing home-raised hops are already here. ALBA-backed Ana Melissa Garcia wants to scale things up significantly. Ninkasi Brewing Company's Ground Control is a limited-release imperial stout brewed with ale yeast sent into space.

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by David Schmalz

The Soviet Union may have been the first to put a human in space, but the United States is dominating the only Space Race that matters: launching brewer's yeast toward the stars.

Oregon-based Ninkasi Brewing Company spearheaded the operation, loftily-titled the Ninkasi Space Program. After an initial launch failed last July, Ninkasi redoubled its efforts last October and successfully recovered six vials of brewer's yeast that flew nearly 80 miles from earth and spent four minutes of weightlessness in the exosphere before the rocket carrying it, SpaceLoft-9, coasted back down to the New Mexico desert.

Ninkasi's website states the aim of the mission: to "brew delicious craft beer."

Ground Control is the result, a limited-release imperial stout brewed with Oregon hazelnuts, star anise, cocoa nibs and ale yeast sent into space. The brew hit stores April 13, and according to Post No Bills bartender Kye Ricks, mission accomplished.

"It was nice and chocolaty, very rich and had a slight roasted flavor," he says.

If you want to pick up Ground Control at Post No Bills, too late: Their two cases sold out in less than two weeks. Locals looking to slake their thirst with space suds should shoot to Roger Food and Liquor in Marina, which still had 10 22-oz. bottles (at \$21.99 a pop) in stock May 26.

At a dollar an ounce, space brew isn't likely to take off anytime soon, but there are other beer trends afoot to keep an eye on in 2015:

THE CAN REVOLUTION CONTINUES.

Canned beer first hit U.S markets on Jan. 24, 1935, when canned Krueger's Cream Ale and Krueger's Finest Beer went on sale in Richmond, Virginia. By the end of the year, 37 breweries followed Krueger's lead. But early cans didn't have the liners cans have today, often creating a slight metallic flavor in the beer. The old days created a stigma, but an increasing number of craft brewers are beginning to see the light. Colorado's Oskar Blues Brewery began canning their beer in 2002, and since then a slew of other breweries have entered the aluminum fray: Sierra Nevada, New Belgium, Anderson Valley Brewing, Santa Cruz's Uncommon Brewers and San Francisco's 21st Amendment among them.

The benefits flow: Cans come lighter and cheaper to ship, and don't let in light that can turn beer south. Plus, you can't drink from glass on the beach.

GROWING YOUR OWN HOPS IS GROWING.

Carmel Valley's Chris Nelson, aka the Beer Geek, doesn't brew his own beer. But he does grow hops.

"I think they look nice, and they're just fun," he says.

Nelson has been growing hops on and off for years – first in Seaside, now in Carmel Valley – and gives them to friends when the harvest is good. Marina homebrewer Steve Zmak is among the recipients.

"Being able to say the beer's made with a local hop is a nice little feature," Zmak says.

Zmak has tried growing his own hops in Marina, with little success.

"It was almost a complete failure," he says. "There's just not enough sun."

But when conditions are right, Nelson says it's incredible to watch.

"They're like a weed," he says. "Sometimes they grow a foot a day. They go crazy."

Locally-grown hops have also turned up in more than just homebrews.

Peter B's brewmaster Kevin Clark harvests hops grown at Rancho Cielo, which he uses to make Otto Ale, a beer named after the dog of Rancho Cielo founder and County Supervisor John Phillips.

Ana Melissa Garcia, former co-owner of Salinas' Bakery Station, began classes at the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association this January. Learning to grow hops commercially, she says, was one of the main reasons she enrolled in the nine-month farmer education program.

"Beer is like liquid bread," she says. "There's a shortage in organic hops nationally, and it intrigued me."

When her initial search to find local hops growers proved fruitless, Garcia's intrigue grew.

When she finishes her program this fall, Garcia plans to grow organic vegetables on a small piece of land southeast of Salinas, where she will devote two acres to growing organic hops.

"I'm going to start small and build it up," she says.

If all goes well, Garcia hopes to sell her hops to brewmasters, but first she has to decide which of the many varieties to plant. Beer, she says, will guide her. "I like ales," she says.

DANK GETS HOTTER.

Just when it feels like our love affair with hop-heavy beers can only wane, it heats up. But the hops that launched IPA, "C-hops" like Cascade and Chinook, are no longer on the edge of flavor exploration. That honor goes to dank hops, which carry pungent, tropical notes that might resemble guava and papaya, onion, garlic or even gasoline. In his online brewer's log, Alvarado Street brewer J.C. Hill writes the popularity and demand for dank hops is ever on the rise, and drops this proclamation:

"The craft beer consumer will likely remember 2015 as 'Year of the Dank.'"

INDIA PALE LAGERS COMBINE BIG FLAVORS WITH CRISP FINISH.

IPLs are fermented like lagers and then hopped with a pungent hop varietal, and the result is a beer that dances two directions on the palate. The flavors, less assertive than IPAs, have an overall lightness that allows subtler hop flavors to come through without the full-bodied IPA blast. So far, many IPLs are only produced for limited release, but given that it fills a new niche in our hop-obsessed times, expect that to change. Clark at Peter B's thinks IPLs are only the beginning. "As palates get fatigued on IPAs, I think lagers in general will pick up," he says. "There are so many different styles of lager out there. It's still untouched."