



Hops lined up in the tasting room



Testing the hops fresh out of the kiln to ensure they've been properly dried (note the swanky footwear)



Zak Schroerlucke shows off a fresh Amarillo hop



Beau Evers points out that when the bales of hops are stored away, the air temperature is recorded

# HOP MAKING SENSE

Relix has teamed up with Kyle Hollingsworth and SweetWater Brewing Company for a different type of jam session, which will yield a new collaborative beer *By* **DEAN BUDNICK**



**S** KYLE HOLLINGSWORTH AND I took our seats at a table covered with newly picked hops and equally fresh beer, our journey was finally underway. It had taken us three and a half years to arrive at this point, which is why we were savoring the moment—and, of course, the beer. Did I mention the beer?

In February of 2014, I traveled to the Hard Rock Hotel in Riviera Maya, Mexico to cover The String Cheese Incident's destination event while writing a *Relix* story on SCI's first new studio album in nearly nine years, *A Song in My Head*.

During a break in the band's mid-afternoon rehearsals before their first performance, Kyle and I shared some quality wort talk. We were both homebrewers, although Kyle had long since stepped up his game and left his five-gallon kettle behind to pitch yeast in the big leagues. He had not only proven himself to be an adept musical collaborator, but also an adroit brewing partner, working with Boulder Beer, Stone, Cigar City and many others to release nationally distributed seasonal ales.

I had never done anything like that but I did have one brief, shining moment in the sun. (Perhaps that's a poor metaphor because homebrewers are quick to decry the deleterious impact

of direct sunlight.) Back in the mid-'90s, I devoted most of my summer brewing efforts to wheat beer, which seemed to be the ideal option for warmer weather. This was long before hefeweizens were quite so popular and easy to procure—now, of course, with minimal effort, you can locate a Belgian witbier and perhaps even a dunkelweizen or a weizenbock.

By the time of Phish's Great Went in August 1997, I had refined my recipe to the point where I was moderately proud of it and ready to share. I bought a new 10-gallon kettle so that I could “mass produce” it in time for the festival. The results were actually quite decent and are even memorialized in print—if you dig out the very first edition of *The Phish Companion: A Guide to the Band and Their Music* (2000), you can see a photo on page 650, in which Mockingbird Foundation founding board member Jack Lebowitz is holding up my Great Went Wheat. (There's no fancy graphic art on the label, just my cramped handwriting, which I like to think inspired the minimalist design aesthetic of the illustrious Maine Beer Company—which, maybe not so coincidentally, is located in the same state as the Phish fest.)

So there are my beer bona fides, such as they are, in all of their 10-gallon glory. By contrast, when Kyle was working on Boulder Beer's Hoopla Pale Ale, Stone's Collective Distortion IPA (with Alice Cooper guitarist Keri Kelli) or Cigar City's Happening Now Session IPA, they were using fermentation tanks on another scale, brewing by the barrel not the gallon. (There are 31 gallons to a barrel and by way of comparison, one of my favorite local craft brewers, Westerly, R.I.'s Grey Sail, led by “yeast wrangler” Josh Letourneau, utilizes tanks

that range in size from 20 to 120 barrels.)

I was fascinated by the process through which Kyle and company created a beer on such a scope, from ingredient selection to pilot brewing and final production. I wondered what it would be like to participate in such an endeavor and eventually came to the realization that there are plenty of *Relix* readers who would similarly want to share in the experience or, at the very least, get some eyeballs on the action (and of course, some taste buds as well).

So, Kyle and I decided that we would try to find a brewing partner for a three-way collab. Our goal was to chronicle the various stages and then encourage everyone to seek out our exceptionally tasty creation at their local grocery store or “paaackie” (as my native New Englanders say).

The two of us were good to go, all we needed was to identify said brewing partner (which was easier said than done). We continued to toss ideas back and forth until Kyle finally nailed it: SweetWater.

While I've only had a few opportunities up in the Northeast to sample the offerings from the Atlanta-based brewery (although they continue to expand their flavorful reach), I knew plenty of folks who are fans of their work, which includes 420 Extra Pale Ale, Goin' Coastal IPA and various seasonals and limited brews like the recent Torikumi, which is a wasabi-infused blonde ale.

SweetWater opened in 1997, and the fact that they proudly trumpeted their “20 years of Heady Beers” certainly marked them as a fine fit to me. What's more, they clearly had an appreciation for the musical side of things, as evidenced by their annual SweetWater 420 Fest. The 2017 installment at Centennial Olympic Park featured music by Widespread

Panic, Trey Anastasio Band, Ween, moe., and dozens of other acts on multiple stages, as well as an official after-party at Terminal West, headlined by none other than the Kyle Hollingsworth Band.

It's safe to say, Kyle had the proper contact info.

So we set up a call with head brewer Nick Nock and “Minister of Propaganda” Steve Farace to explain what we had in mind. They got it right away and, what's more, they were game.

So here we are.

Or there we were, in early September at Crosby Hop Farm in Woodburn, Ore., invited to meet their team, tour the facilities and set the whole process in motion. (Crosby, which is powered by 100 percent renewable energy, has been growing hops since 1900.) During our sampling session, we met Blake Crosby, who represents the fifth generation of his family to oversee their 350 acres of hops. He had some suggestions for us, as did Zak Schroerlucke and Beau Evers, two members of his team with an encyclopedic knowledge of the brewing landscape.

As for the SweetWater folks, I knew we had found the right collaborators when Steve greeted us wearing a Dead & Company hat, while Nick and his wife MJ were happy to share memories of past performances by the good ol' Grateful Dead that, it turned out, all three of us had attended.

Of course, while music talk segued in and out of our conversations, we were there on a mission: to sample some hops, to talk about recipes and to enjoy some beer.

Don't worry you'll have your chance to enjoy *our* beer early in 2018.

Until then, I'll be your ace cub reporter.

I'm hyped up already (and hopped up as well). 🍻



*Clockwise from top left*

*Kyle Hollingsworth inhales some fresh hops while an anxious Crosby staffer asks him to don a safety vest*

*Stripping the hops from the vine and cleaning away the leaves*

*Kyle, Dean Budnick and Nick Nock reveling in the fresh Amarillo*

*After visiting the farm, it was time to sample beers and talk recipes*

*The conveyor carries away the leafy excess*

*Visions of hop mountain!*

