

Made in Holland



# Dutch Hop Head

By Molly Quell

Many people, unfortunately, associate American beer with Budweiser and Miller; beers which, in my opinion, must be served iced to be palatable. Few outside the craft beer world know that the United States was ground zero of the craft beer resurgence in the 1980s and now produces some of the best beer in the world. Dutch brewer Ramses Snoeij caught that wave while living in the United States and has taken the lessons he learned there back to his brewery in The Netherlands.

By the end of the 1970s, the number of American brewers was down to forty-four and predicted to dwindle further to just five by industry experts. The early 1980s, however, saw a resurgence of homebrewing and, by the time Snoeij arrived in the United States in 1986, the craft brewing industry was gaining momentum.

Snoeij was among those enthusiasts. "I'm a hop head," Snoeij said while standing in the sun outside of his 400m<sup>2</sup> brewery, *Ramses Bier*. "The first time I smelled hops, I spent the whole evening with my head in the bag."

His namesake brewery is located in Hooge Zwaluwe in the southern part of The Netherlands, a town so small that, after disembarking at the town's only bus stop, I walk about five minutes before Snoeij passes me on his bike as he is heading back to his brewery with lunch for the staff. It's not a coincidence; there's really only one major street.

It was bottling day when I arrived at *Ramses Bier*. It wasn't supposed to be bottling day. In fact, we had planned this interview specifically around their bottling schedule. But, as anyone who owns a small business can attest, schedules can be difficult to adhere to.

The beer being bottled is called *Betty Wang* and it is an IPA brewed with seven different hop varieties which represent the seven different brewers involved. However, only six are listed on the beer's label: *Katjlam*, *Oedipus*, *Ramses Bier*, *Rooie Dop*, *het Uiltje* and *Van deStreek*. All of them are small Dutch brewers. The seventh brewer reportedly spent the evening sleeping on the pallets of malt in the storage area.

I sympathize with the anonymous 'Sleeping Beauty'. The group started brewing late at night after they had spent the entire day working at a nearby beer festival and didn't finish up until early the following morning. I had worked at the same festival and crawled into bed around the time they were starting and couldn't move for ten hours. But Snoeij reflects on the experience positively: "It felt like the atmosphere in America, where everyone is family," he said.

Earlier in 2014, along with a number of those brewers with whom he had collaborated, Snoeij traveled to Oregon on invitation from the Oregon Brewers Festival. Ten Dutch brewers were invited and given a special section at the festival where they dispensed their beer while wearing bright orange shirts. "I was flattered to be invited by Mark [Strooker]," he said. Strooker is the owner and head brewer at *Rooie Dop*, a Dutch craft brewery located in Utrecht. He wasn't unfamiliar with the area. In fact, Snoeij had learned to brew in that especially hop-happy area of the United States. Oregon now leads the nation with the highest number of craft breweries. "I drove out West with a [now-ex] girlfriend and ended up in Eugene, Oregon," he said. "There was good food, good beer, and it wasn't too expensive," he continued. And, it was there that Snoeij



found his way into a brewery and learned to make beer. He had been living on the East Coast. His father had relocated to the Boston area, and Snoeij joined him when he went there to study at the age of seventeen. This was in 1986, two years after the brewery Sam Adams had opened in Boston. "I was near where Sam Adams started, almost from the beginning," he said. The *Sam Adams Brewery* was started in 1984, during the burgeoning years of the craft beer resurgence. But Sam Adams was famous for its lager, not an intensely hoppy style of beer.

It was different on the West Coast where Snoeij relocated to a few years later. The climate of the Pacific Northwest is conducive to growing hops and was strongly shaped by California-based Sierra Nevada. Ultimately, the West Coast influence resulted in American craft beer becoming well-known for the intensity and quantity of its hops.

Hoppy beer styles originated in England, with hops being used as a method of preservation of beer for transportation from England to its then-colony India. In the early 1980s, however, a pioneering brewer named Ken Grossman, founder of Sierra Nevada, discovered an American hop called Cascade which had an intensely bitter flavor. His pale ale started a movement of hoppy-beer enthusiasts in the United States.

Snoeij earned his degree in environmental science and returned to The Netherlands where he worked as a biology teacher. But he kept brewing. His background in biology led him to grow his own yeast which he purchased from a nearby hospital.

He began, as many brewers do, making small batches and selling them locally. "The local rugby club really liked

them. The players told me that they didn't get hungover from my beer. It's not true, but it's good for me if they think that," he said.

With cuts in the education sector in The Netherlands increasing right along with the popularity of his beer, Snoeij made the decision to brew full time. He now operates out of a warehouse near Breda.

Part of that American vibe he is hoping to recreate is the spirit of collaboration. During the trip to the Oregon Brewers Festival, the Dutch brewers were given a tour of a hop farm. They were sold on the product. Now they have gotten together to order their hops from the farm. There are no hops grown in The Netherlands.

Ingredients aren't the only hindrance. "When I moved back to The Netherlands, I couldn't find any brewing equipment. I had to go to Belgium." Even now, much of the equipment in his brewery is custom built, mostly by his CTO [Chief Technology Officer].

He finds that there is a higher level of knowledge about brewing in America as well. "When I started, I didn't know how much hops to put in the beer. But there aren't very many people here to ask. I brewed last year at Sailfish, in Florida. The energy there is different than in Holland. It feels good," he said. Snoeij is hoping for more collaboration and more knowledge-sharing in The Netherlands in the future. He hopes this will lead to better beer.

In The Netherlands or in America, Snoeij is ultimately just looking to have a good time while making good beer: "In a brewery, there's always a good vibe, no matter where you are in the world," he said. 🍷