

I stepped out of the Seattle-Tacoma international airport and the cool air hit my face. Butterflies swirled in my stomach with the thought of my trip to come. Shangri-La for true hop heads: a visit to the main American hop growing region during harvest time. Yakima! I reflected on my long and strange trip to get here.

I grew up in IPA heaven: San Diego California. I was surrounded by the joys of hop-forward beers from the likes of Stone, Ballast Point and Ale Smith among many others. The scene helped inspire me to start brewing my own beer at home: the greatest hobby ever invented. Over the years I would visit the breweries and chat with some of the brewers. Talk would turn from brewing to hops and I would hear about their trips up to Yakima for the harvest, when they would choose the hops they wanted to brew with for the next year. I always dreamed of experiencing the selection and harvest time myself.

Love threw me a serious curve ball and I ended up leaving San Diego behind, moving instead to Johannesburg with my South African wife. It was a new start and after 10 years of homebrewing and almost 300 batches of beer under my belt, I was determined to find a career in the craft beer sector. And that's how I became a hop merchant with Africa Hops. Each year, the parent companies, Simply Hops

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and Barth-Haas offer an amazing opportunity to their clients: a paid-for trip to the hop fields of the USA. Years after those hop-forward conversations, I was finally headed to Yakima.

After a 30-hour journey, we hit the ground running with a visit to The Holy Mountain Brewing Company to meet the organisers and the 20-or-so other brewers from all over Europe. It's time for a much-needed beer. I quickly realise that there will be plenty of beer, with visits to further breweries and a bar boasting more than 100 taps on the agenda before hitting the hay on that first night.

The next morning, nursing slightly sore heads, we piled onto a bus and started the 2½-hour drive east to Yakima. It was fascinating to see the climate and the landscape change as we drove. The mountains block most of the rain from getting to eastern Washington so as we passed by the peaks, the green trees were replaced by a desert-like landscape. We dropped our bags at our hotel then headed out to Virgil Gamache Farms to see where Amarillo is grown.

AMARILLO COUNTRY

As we took the tour, farm owner Darren Gamache told us the story of how some of their growers found a wild hop plant growing on their property back in 1997. The plant was given the decidedly un-catchy name of VGXP01. The hop growers learnt that the aroma of this new hop exactly matched the flavour in beer once used – one of only four known varieties that boasts this distinction. They also found that the time of year they harvested the hop would greatly affect the flavour and aroma the hop would produce. Early harvesting produced a candy-like, lemony flavour; harvesting mid-season gave more pronounced grapefruit and orange notes, while the late harvested cones had a mixture of garlic and onion for a dank profile. They decided to market this new hop under the name Amarillo.

The farm was started in 1913 and many of the original buildings are still in use, although they're now fitted with new equipment. I will never forget Darren taking us to a room filled with freshly harvested hops and seeing the conveyor belt drop hundreds of pounds of cones in to a room to dry. The smell and sight were a sensory overload and I couldn't help but imagine all the great beer that would eventually be brewed using their product.

Outside we saw the massive tractors bringing in the newly cut hop vines to be sorted by hefty machines. The buzz and constant motion of this massive equipment was awe-inspiring. Darren told us how they had to build these massive sorting machines for the farm since they were producing most of the Amarillo in the world and they needed to harvest within such a short timeframe each year. They have just four weeks to complete the harvest and even over that time the flavours of Amarillo begin to change. Seeing the massive warehouses where they kiln the hops to dry them to the right moisture content was amazing. It was all I could do not to jump in for a quick hop swim.

HOP-SNIFFING

After the tour we assembled in the conference room for our first sniff test of hops. The sniff test – also known as hop-rubbing – is when you take dried hop cones and rub them in your palms exposing the oils in the hops then bring your palms up to your nose and inhale. This gives you an idea of the aroma and flavour the hops may bring to the finished beer. On the sniffing menu were Amarillo cones from five different farms: two from Yakima, two from elsewhere in Oregon and finally a test that had just come from a farm in Germany. Virgil Gamache owns the rights to grow Amarillo and they issue a limited number of licences to allow other farms to cultivate the hop. The owner of the farm asked us to test all the samples and give him some feedback.



 **INNOVATIONS**

Barth-Haas are constantly coming up with new hop-related products. Their latest innovation is Flex, a great alternative to CO2 extract. It's much more viscous than CO2 extract, making it much easier to add bittering additions.