

# NORDIC MALT – THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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Four years ago, I wrote an editorial (SBR No. 3, August 2012) called ‘Nordic Raw Materials for Nordic Beer’, and allow me as an introduction to quote from this: ‘...in order for such a future Nordic Beer category to be truly good, unique and indigenous – meaning only possible to brew with genuine Nordic raw materials – it is obviously necessary that these genuine Nordic raw materials will be made available to the brewers.’ And ‘...To me there is no doubt that this (...starting something as difficult and resource-demanding as the development of new raw materials from scratch...) requires getting a commitment from some of the “heavyweights” like The EU, The Nordic Council and/or the individual governments and municipalities. From here, the economic funding as well as help to establish effective project organizations will have to be sourced.’



So what has happened since then, 4 years down the road? Luckily, and perhaps not entirely coincidentally, this issue of the SBR features two articles – ‘27th Nordic Meeting on Brewing Technology’ and ‘Second Conference on New

Nordic Beer, 21 May 2016’ in which the current status of the various initiatives that are currently ongoing in the field are described. To me, it is encouraging to note that progressive things are happening not just on the grassroots craft malting level, but also the biggest malting company in our region, Viking Malt, is engaging itself seriously in the production of malts that have a true Nordic identity, also in terms of flavour and taste.

On the industrial malting front, we’ve recently seen a very interesting merger between former Carlsberg owned DMG in Vordingborg and Finnish/Swedish Viking Malt, forming the biggest malting group in the Nordics (and the 5th biggest in Europe, 9th biggest worldwide). Timo Huttunen of Viking Malt, as the merged company is called, gave a presentation of the new company at the NMBT in Åland in May, and here

Timo made it clear that the company has a very open mind – and some very open eyes – on the development within craft malting, and thus the requirements of its craft brewing customers. Not only has Viking Malt agreed to participate in the NNB Malt Project (see below...) but also the relatively new partnership with the Colorado Malting Company, one of the most successful US craft maltings, holds promises of a future with a big, strong local malting company that wishes to play an important and constructive role in the development of the kind of malt offerings that today’s Nordic specialty and craft brewers are looking for.

On the small, craft malting scale, things are also moving. Slowly, some would say, and I agree, but it would be naïve to expect an explosion in a field like craft maltings, as the investments required to get up-and-running are really very significant. Much bigger than what is required to start a small craft brewery – and in contrast to the brewing side of the business, there is no real, existing market for craft malt. No doubt that there is a demand from the breweries, but what is it really they want, and how much are they willing to pay for it? Actually, the current status and the outlook for the future for craft maltings in the Nordics as outlined by Per Kølster in the article on the NNB Conference point out these challenges and suggest that ‘intermediary’ size maltings would both have the technology needed to ensure a high and consistent quality of the malt and be able to sell it at

realistic prices. But there are no such initiatives on the horizon, so we will just have to wait until the necessary investors have seen the promising perspectives in starting such maltings.

The experiments with respect to the malting raw material, the malting barley (and other cereals for that matter) that one would expect as being a highly prioritized part of the business for craft maltings with the aim to produce truly unique malts, are not really happening yet. Currently, such experimentation is limited to digging down into historic grain varieties for the simple reason that there is still no breeding of new malting grain varieties aimed at producing different, new and interesting aroma, flavour and taste potential in the malt. As we all know, breeding of new malting barley varieties does indeed currently take place on a big, commercial scale, but according to objectives – better yields, disease resistance, improved agronomical properties and no aroma/flavour/taste deviation from existing varieties – that are defined entirely by the demands of the big customers, the standard lager brewers, who want nothing but a cheap, consistent and robust quality of their malts, enabling them to brew their brands to the existing specifications, including the established aroma/flavour/taste profiles. And, of course, this is the way things have to be seen →



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from the traditional perspective. But, for those of us who are looking for the malt also giving us new ‘parameters’ as regards aroma/flavour/taste to play with when developing innovative specialty or craft beers, preferably even with a distinct character of the place where the barley/grain was grown, this status quo is frustrating. I have had decent luck with my predictions in the broader area of the development of New Nordic Beer movement over these past four years, and – at the risk of spoiling that statistic – I have no problem predicting that this will soon change for the better.

The reasons for my certainty are not only founded on my personal and idealistic vision of the proliferation of the NNB philosophy, but more so on a cynical ‘supply and demand’ market analysis: the craft and specialty beer brewers in our region are rapidly gaining more market share and thus ‘bargaining power’ on the malt market. And they will increasingly because the nature of the craft and specialty beer segments is constant innovation, introduction of new beers onto the market all the time, and demand for more variety and local character in the malts available. And as the demand grows, the suppliers will be increasingly interested in meeting it. If you should, strangely, still be sceptical about my prediction, I urge you to read the article in this issue of the SBR ‘Brewing Local: American Grown Beer’ by Stan Hieronymus. No one having read this could ever again doubt the sustainability of the ‘Brewing Local’ trend!

My reasons for optimism as regards the diversification of the Nordic malting industry and the products this offers to its customers is also fuelled by some actual, recent events. First and foremost, our Norwegian friends behind the Nordic Craft Malt Cooperative, NCMC, have come very far, as has been regularly reported on here in the SBR. Since 2014, the Craft Malt Cooperative/Norsk Håndverksmalt has been developing alliances with regional actors in the growing, handling, malting and brewing industries, working closely with Innovation Norway in developing the opportunity for producing high-grade, quality malt for the food and beverage industry. Headed by Marc Myers, the NCMC has had a heavy focus on creating the necessary foundation for a resurgence of Norwegian craft malt production in the form of a solid business plan, defining quality standards, broad alliances within the craft malt ‘value chain’, etc. Field trials with potential malting barley varieties have now taken place for two years, and the number of growers and brewers engaged in the cooperative is growing on a daily basis. And, remember, Norway has not had commercial malt production since Ringnes closed its maltings in the late 1980s. Kudos from the SBR to Marc and the entire NCMC!

Here in Denmark, the progress of craft malts has been manifested through Per Kølster’s activities at Krogerup (see ‘Second conference on New Nordic Beer, 21 May 2016’ elsewhere in this issue) as well as with the relatively recently established micro maltings at the Refsvindinge Brewery on Funen. And more and more brewers are either growing malting barley themselves, and having it malted abroad, or teaming up with local farmers who see their clear interest in growing crops with a lot higher prices than the alternative commodities. And these brewers are eager to have their malts malted locally and not abroad.

As a direct offspring of the New Nordic Beer movement – in specific, the publicly supported (GUDP) networking project that ended in May this year – there is now a new Danish craft malting project headed by the good people of the large organic farm Gytrup (<http://gytrup.dk/>) in Northern Jutland on the way. Like the NCMC, this project is a networking project involving academia, know-how institutions, breeders, growers, (potential) maltsters and brewers, with the aim, and I quote from the application for GUDP funds for the project, to ‘... work for the proliferation of the concept of local raw materials in brewing, not least malt. The participants form the basic network and cover the entire value chain. The aim is to increase awareness amongst brewers and consumers about the potential of using local raw materials in brewing, and also to inspire new projects within local malt production.’

Sadly, time has not allowed me to investigate the status of activities in Sweden, Finland, Iceland or the Baltics before writing this editorial. But I’m sure that there are interesting activities there too, and I obviously hope to be able to report on them soon.

So, in conclusion, yes, we are still very far from being where we want to be with Nordic craft malt. But things, on lots of different levels and all around us, are moving in the right direction. And there is no doubt that when I four years – or whenever this will happen – from now revisit this topic in an editorial in the SBR, there will be amazing results to report on!

Please remember that we at the SBR very strongly encourage you to comment on anything you wish to comment on in the magazine, but obviously particularly on the editorial. Please forward your comments to [anders@kissmeyer.dk](mailto:anders@kissmeyer.dk) ☺

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