

A man wearing a light-colored cap and a green long-sleeved shirt is working in a hop field. He is leaning over a row of hop plants, which are covered in green leaves and small hop cones. The background shows more rows of hop plants stretching into the distance under a bright sky.

THE LOCAL AGRICULTURE BEHIND OUR LIBATIONS

written by: Tricia Phelps

Michigan now has more than two hundred craft breweries in operation, which means the statewide demand for hops is huge. How huge? Just two Michigan companies, Bells Brewery and Founder's Brewing Company, will collectively purchase three million pounds of hops to brew the two million barrels they're expecting to produce in 2018.

Last year, it's estimated that Michigan-grown hops totaled less than 500,000 pounds, far below the demand of even one large-scale craft brewery. Brewers are eager to use locally grown hops, but they need the reliable consistency, quality and quantity to make it work.

Two northern Michigan businesses, Empire Hops Farm and MI Local Hops, are working together to meet these needs and build the industry through collective resource sharing, high-quality standards and opportunities for farmers to scale up their production.

Dan and Alex Weisen of Empire Hops Farm have built a strong reputation in hop farm management and trellis construction over the last nine years. What initially felt like a frustrating experiment, has become a valuable contribution in this growing industry – thanks in part, to the help and expertise of Joe Brulotte, a third generation hop farmer out of Washington State's Yakima Valley.

"It was a steep learning curve," said Weisen, "and initially we weren't having much luck."

"But, Joe taught us the nuances and pieces we were missing. We built off what he's taught us, tweaked a few things for farming in this climate and now we're having great success."

Today Empire Hops Farm manages over 400 acres of hops throughout northern Michigan, and continues to construct new yards every summer. With all their experience, the Weisens try to be very realistic about the business of hop farming when people approach them about investing in or growing their own.

The reality is that costs are high. Hops require expensive inputs and infrastructure in the field as well as post-harvest processing to dry, bale and pelletize. Just one small hop farmer alone could likely never afford these facilities and equipment. But if the scale is right, and resources can be shared collectively, profits are more likely attainable.

MI Local Hops started their business in 2015 to help fill this need for collective processing. Alex Weisen, of Empire Hops, manages the operations at MI Local and Joe Brulotte is the MI Local Farm Manager. The 30,000-sq-ft stripping and drying facility that is now under construction in Williamsburg, MI. MI Local plans to duplicate the same type of facility on the west side of Traverse City as well.

"We saw the opportunity to bring people together to share common resources," said Jason Warren, CEO of MI Local Hops "We'll share equipment, storage, and purchasing power on chemicals, fertilizers, inputs, etc."

Warren is a fifth-generation northwest Michigan cherry farmer and spent years as the CFO and director of quality at Shoreline Fruit. With that in mind, he's taking steps to improve hop quality by working directly with growers and positioning the processing facility itself ahead of food safety regulations that he expects will impact the industry a few years from now.

Both Empire Hops Farm and MI Local Hops are contributing to a thriving new industry; one that they believe has room to grow and a clear path to get there. By sharing knowledge and resources, developing opportunities for scale, and implementing high level quality control standards, these two companies are ensuring that the growth of northern Michigan's hop industry has only just begun.