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Food & Drink

Fruit and hop-picking enjoy a revival

by Jojo Tulloh

East Londoners once headed en masse to pick hops and fruit in the country. The tradition faded but today an artist is leading a revival

Pickers at work

On a fruit farm in Essex, lines of pickers are spread out across rows of blackcurrant bushes. Under a blazing sun they crouch down to glean the clusters of low-growing berries that the mechanical harvester has missed. The fruit is overripe and, as the bowls fill up, hands and wrists are stained with dark red juice. The berries are being picked (50kg is the target) to the sounds of laughter and conversation. Children, teenagers, parents and grandparents, all unpaid, have come by coach from Dagenham, having signed up for the trip at their local library. A number are visiting the immediate countryside for the first time. The trees are in full leaf, the high summer hedgerows thick with wild flowers. Fruit fields and orchards

stretch to the horizon.

From the early 19th century until the 1960s, thousands of people from east London would migrate to Kent and Essex each summer to pick hops and fruit. It was badly paid but offered the chance of a cheap family holiday: the pickers slept in sparsely furnished tin huts, sheds or sometimes even pigsties. George Orwell, while down and out in 1931, went "hopping" and recorded the camaraderie and "perfect agony" of his hands being repeatedly cut open by the hops' spiny stems. He also noted the spectacle of a grandmother who "kept her grandchildren at it like slaves". Mechanisation brought an end to hop-picking by hand and the link between the Kent countryside and east London communities was broken.

This revival of the tradition has been led by artist Kathrin Böhm as part of a project called "Company: Movement, Deals and Drinks", backed by Dagenham Council and commissioned by arts body Create. The idea is to harvest ingredients from Dagenham and Barking's green belt, and then use them for small-batch drinks made in east London. In the long term it is hoped that local residents, who live in one of the most economically deprived parts of the UK, will take the project on and run it as a business.

Create director Hadrian Garrard says: "We have a mission to find out how artists can be helpful to people but often the problem with socially engaged art is getting people engaged." The gleaning project, he says, is "a perfect fit". Böhm agrees: "This is not a government project but a cultural one – and people seem to respond to that."

Among the gleaners is Ron Prendergast, aged 82. He recalls hop picking as a child. "This is worse," he laughs. "You didn't have to bend down for that – the pole-puller brought the hops down."

The pole-puller was the overseer who weighed the hops and controlled the pickers. When it was time for a lunch break, he would shout out, "Stop! Eat!" says Prendergast. "There was nowhere to wash your hands and the hops left a bitter taste [on your skin]."

Prendergast's memories are overheard by nine-year-old Deborah Odushola and her friends Celine Kaunda, 10, and Winnie Somba, 11. "Tell us about it!" the girls shout. "We went down in a lorry [from London]," Prendergast explains. "We used to sleep on hay and straw ... It was a bit of fun. We used to have pots boiling, hanging on a chain over fires, we'd have sing-songs and then in the morning we'd be back in the fields. But you had to pick your basket of hops or you wouldn't get your ice cream."

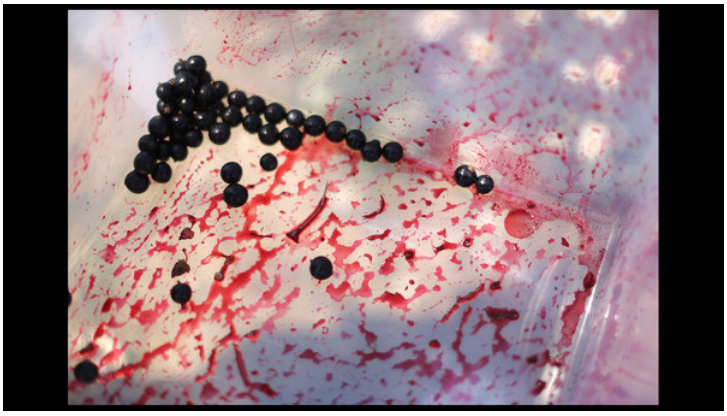
As one-day blackcurrant pickers we are rewarded with cordial rather than ice cream, suffer none of the hardships (dermatitis, "hop eye" and RSI) hop pickers used to endure and experience fully the sense of community working together in the open air brings. It is this aspect that Böhm has been exploring in a series of workshops in juice pressing, soda and smoothie-making at the local library and "hopping" afternoons sharing memories at Valence House, the local museum.

Böhm also wants the picking to generate a large stock of drinks: the target is 20,000 bottles of drinks, including elderflower and blackcurrant cordials; 6,000 bottles of soda (in flavours such as strawberry, and dandelion and burdock); and 9,000 bottles of a one-off beer. The drinks will be sold in a community shop in Dagenham and at London's Frieze Art Fair.

The timing is good: the new breed of food entrepreneurs (many of them based in east London) are often open to sharing their skills and equipment. The sodas are being made and bottled by Square Root, a small independent drinks company in Hackney Downs. The beer will be flavoured with green hops picked in September by volunteers and brewed by Evin O'Riordain at his Bermondsey brewery, The Kernel. All of them are being paid for their labours but they have also proved keen participants and are happy to allow volunteers into their workshops. In doing so, another link is made to Dagenham, a suburb previously isolated from the change occurring in other parts of the city.

Böhm belongs to Myvillages, an artists' collective interested in the interaction between urban and rural spaces. In a previous project, "The Vorratskammer" (Pantry) the artists spent a year filling a larder with food, beer and schnapps made in and near Berlin, which fed 8,000 people.

"Our work is sometimes invisible and definitely easy to oversimplify," Böhm says. "We are interested in everyday culture, to go into a place and discover what has gone on there in the past. Part of the point of this is the practical work – doing, not just talking."

Jojo Tulloh is the author of 'The Modern Peasant' (Chatto & Windus); myvillages.org, www.createlondon.org

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