



# Otterly perfect

*Deep in the Blackdown Hills stands a small family-run brewery that is taking Devon by storm. Joe Woodward visits the clean, green world of the Otter Brewery*

While we regularly read about sales of real ales falling, head into your local and the very opposite seems to be true.

Tax breaks in the 1990s to allow small breweries to compete with the big boys suddenly meant that brewing once again became a profitable concern. As a result, a whole host of micro-breweries seemed to spring into being overnight, and local pubs were inundated with barrels of whimsically named bitter, pale ale and stout; great news for supporters of proper English beer.

Of course, not all beer from these micro-breweries are good; in fact, many of them are downright bad. We've probably all had that slightly dubious feeling after two pints that



owes nothing to quantity and an awful lot to quality, but luckily, here in south Devon, we've got one of the better brewers right on our doorstep – the Otter Brewery in Luppitt, near Honiton.

Established in 1990 by husband and wife team David and Ann McCaig, the Otter Brewery was always meant to be something a little bit different. Unlike many of those who started up micro-breweries in the 1990s the McCaigs have a fine brewing pedigree, coming from three generations of brewers and having worked for industry giants Whitbread and Marstons themselves before setting up Otter. You could almost say that brewing was in their blood, and with their wealth of experience they aimed to create



Above: Yeast, produced locally, is poured into the fermenting tank  
Main picture: The four main Otter beers stand proudly in a row

not only really good beer, but to do so in a way that reflected, and protected, the environment and culture in which it was made, firstly by 'going green' and secondly by emphasising the family nature of their new business.

The Otter Brewery's impeccable green credentials were explained to me by Patrick McCaig, David and Ann's son and the brewery's Marketing Manager. It starts close to home with the raw materials for the brewing process all coming from local sources; spring water from the head springs of the River Otter, malting barley and hops

*“The Otter Brewery was always meant to be something different”*

from local farms and yeast produced at the brewery, making the actual production process as green as it can be. Then there is the other end of things, the waste disposal “Spring water is what really makes the brewery tick, but it takes five pints of water to produce one pint of beer, that's four pints in brewing and chilling to every pint served across a bar. Our aim was to return

those four wasted pints to their original source”. To do this they turned to one of the oldest methods in the book – the willow bed. Over 8000 willows were planted around five ponds on the slope below the brewery, and the waste water runs from one pond to the next through the willow 'filter beds'. As it passes, the willows suck out all the grimness from the water, converting them into nutrients to help them grow. The end result is a lake of pristine spring water, all ready to rejoin the water course.

It's not just the water that is ploughed back into the local eco-system; the yeast and barley waste manages to make itself useful too. In an almost communist fashion, the yeast left in the brewery's system after fermentation is sent away to be gobbled up at a local piggery in Upottery, while the brewer's grains are sent down into the valley to feed the good cows of Luppitt. In return, the brewery receives a bit of free meat and gets its hedges trimmed now and again; the exact nature of the exchange, according to Patrick, is agreed “in a bartering session over a few pints at the Luppitt Arms”.

As the company has grown, so have their environmental aspirations. Their new state-of-the-art brewery, a treasure trove of ➤

## BEHIND THE SCENES



Above: Old beer kegs are steamed cleaned before being reused. Top: The freshly cleaned kegs are pumped full of good, healthy, Otter beer

gleaming stainless-steel pipes and booming vats, went into operation in 2005, allowing Otter to become as high-tech and efficient as small brewing really gets.

On top of this they are building a new cellar, or in Patrick's words a "21st-century eco-cellar". Packed with features to help reduce the brewery's carbon footprint, including a living sedum roof, two thirds of the building will be sunk underground, making a new naturally cooled cellar so they can do away with electric cooling systems all together. The next plan is a wood-chip fired boiler to replace their current oil-fired number; no wonder the brewery was one of the winners at last years Devon Environmental Awards.

While the brewery's capacity may be expanding it still feels very much like a small company. The employees, most of whom live within 20 minutes of the brewery, are treated, and act, like part of the family, something that extends to the brewery's stockists too. It's not purely altruistic of course – by taking a personal interest in their business partners the brewery gets plenty of feedback, both from customers and landlords, enabling them to keep a tight grip on the quality of their product.

It seems to have worked. Each of the four regular beers produced by the brewery, Otter Bitter, Otter Ale, Otter Bright and Otter Head have won acclaim at one point or another, while their range of one-off specials – from McOtter on Burns Night, to Otter Guevara, brewed for a Trade Union meeting – are always widely anticipated. While pubs as far afield as London – not to mention the stockist in the USA – have cottoned on to Otter beer it is Devon that remains the brewery's heartland, something that, with the McCaig's local approach to brewing is unlikely to change anytime soon. Which is good news for us down here, after all from Tarka to Guevara, Devon just wouldn't be the same without an otter. □

**The Otter Brewery**  
Mathayes, Luppitt  
Honiton  
Tel: 01404 891825  
[www.otterbrewery.com](http://www.otterbrewery.com)