

Experts See Small Grains Carrying Big Market Potential

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New York Correspondent

RED HOOK, N.Y. — Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County hosted a small grains field day June 24 at Migliorelli Farm here.

“Reinventing the Hudson Valley Breadbasket” drew 40 people under a tent near test plots of wheat and barley.

“When I came here a year ago and I saw a lot of interest in small grains, I scratched my head,” said Justin O’Dea of Cornell Cooperative Extension in Ulster County. “I did my masters in Montana, on 2,000-acre bread-wheat farms, and I thought, ‘how’s this going to work in the humid northeast?’”

The day was just that, hot and humid, with ominous clouds rolling in. But optimism was the dominant atmosphere as researchers from Cornell and others working with small grains described their value-added ventures.

Mark Sorrells, a small grains breeder at Cornell, was impressed with the turnout, saying he’d never seen so many people interested in grains other than a recent field day at Cornell’s farm in Aurora, N.Y. Attendance at that field day, he joked, was only high because of heavy rains.

Sorrells discussed the onsite trials of soft-red and white wheat as well as other trial sites in western New York, where most of the wheat is grown.

Medina is a popular soft-white winter wheat variety that has moderate resistance to Fusarium head blight and pre-harvest sprouting, as well as some resistance to lodging.

Otsego, a soft-red winter wheat, jointly released by Ohio State and Cornell, is the most resistant variety to Fusarium head blight. Cornell is also trialing winter malting barley varieties, Sorrells said, but the spring barleys are also popular because they fit into a ro-

tation.

David Benschler, also from Cornell, discussed organic trials happening onsite and near Ithaca, N.Y., where researchers take notes on lodging, dates the heads appear, and other details.

Part of this work — funded by a USDA Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) grant given to a group of research entities interested in value-added processing — is evaluating grains with an eye to value-added, looking at wheat and spelt, and other heritage grains.

The goal of Cornell’s work is to develop regionally adapted small-grain varieties for local and specialty markets. Some of the biggest challenges in the Northeast include harvest quality, protein content in bread wheats and Fusarium head blight.

Cornell’s Gary Bergstrom, a professor in the department of plant pathology and plant-microbe biology, said fungi is

what plagues most cereal crops, causing primarily foliar infections, with humid conditions and frequent rainfall also contributing.

As a result, Bergstrom recommends good rotations and other cultural practices that boost soil health, along with choosing varieties with resistance.

“We are not going to avoid Fusarium head blight in humid years,” Bergstrom said, noting that winter wheat producers in the western part of the state have backup feed markets for grains that fail to meet the strict standards for vomatoxin in human food-grade production.

It’s also an issue of concern with malting barley, since the process of malting involves sprouting the grain, which is the perfect condition for any existing Fusarium head blight to grow more.

The market for malting barley is of great interest in the state since the January enactment of the Farm Brewery Law. This legislation lowers price barriers to market entrance, tying small-scale beer production to agricultural products like barley, hops and honey.

Robert Perry from the Northeast Organic Farming Association chapter in New York, or NOFA-NY, discussed his work on a mobile processing unit to help develop the infrastructure necessary for farmers to grow grains around here again.

He said growers need to know what they’re getting into before seed goes in the ground, like making sure you have a specific market and access to equipment, along with knowing where to store it. He also said growers should be prepared to describe their cultural practices because buyers are going to want to know how they’ve grown the grains.

A number of people also spoke about the user-end of production. June Russell from the Greenmarket Regional Grain Project, an initiative of GrowNYC, which runs farmers markets in the city, talked about the history of GrowNYC’s involvement in grains.

In 2010, the organization started requiring bakers use 15 percent regional flour within two years. It resulted in farmers market bakers using 60,000 pounds of regionally produced flour per month.

Brooklyn Brewery recently released a new beer, Greenmarket Wheat, which includes raw wheat from North Country Farms and barley from Peter Martens that was malted by Valley Malt.

Miller Don Lewis from Wild Hive Community Grain Project in Clinton Corners, N.Y., talked about his long involvement with grains in the state. His Hudson Valley mill supplies flour to many bakeries, most notably Mario Batali’s Eataly.

“I know the growers are there, the acreage is there, and the demand is there,” Lewis said. “What’s missing is the infrastructure.”

The processing capacity for small farms, he said, used to be met by people who would travel to farms and clean crops as they were harvested. He can see the need for this service again. He also envisions other solutions, such as private or cooperative granary enterprises.

Sam Filler from Empire State Development, described how the Farm Brewery Law and licenses for cidring and distilling, are affecting the local alcohol industry. Each of these laws, he said, encourages experimentation with small batches because they remove the batch labeling rule. The laws also eliminate the tight house rules that still hold for other alcohol production in the state.

Farm brewing interest is big and four licenses are now in place. The first license went to a nanobrewery, Bly Hollow Brewery of Cherry Plain, N.Y., that just opened its small taproom.

Joel Elder from Tutthilltown Spirits — one of the first Farm Distillery Law licensees — and Geoff Wenzel from Keegan Ales in Kingston, N.Y., spoke about their experiences using local grains.

Natalie and Marty Mattrazzo talked about the challenges of bringing FarmHouse Malt online. The couple run a micro malthouse in Newark Valley. Natalie Mattrazzo calculated some approximate figures on how much malt was purchased by breweries in the state, based on the number of barrels produced and assuming 50 pounds of malt barrel. Thirty-two million pounds of malt is the number she came up with; at that rate, there is room, she said, for 20 malthouses.

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