

Featured Grain: Rye

Rye, one of the cereal grains, is a cousin of wheat which originated from wild species native to Turkey and is mostly associated with central and eastern Europe where it emerged in the archeological record as early as 1800 BCE. Rye is cold tolerant and can thrive in poor soils. It was brought to the U.S. by European colonists where it helped establish agriculture in the mid-Atlantic and the northeast. Corn & rye bread was a regional specialty in the early years of the republic until wheat was established in the Ohio Valley where it could be produced cheaply and efficiently and quickly took over the bread market. Prohibition was the last straw (so to speak) for rye and growing for grain was no longer viable as products made with rye fell out of fashion.

In the last century the most common use for rye in our region has been for cover cropping, since the crop is winter hardy and has a complex root system that helps keep precious topsoil from eroding over the winter and spring. But there has been a resurgence of interest in rye, and its suitability to the climate in the Northeast is leading a strong contingent of bakers, brewers, and eaters to create amazing breads, brews, and spirits from the nutty savory grain. This growing market means farmers can turn their cover crop into a cash crop!

This month we're highlighting two varieties of rye grown in the region--an open pollinated variety called Danko and a hybrid called Brassato.

Danko is an open-pollinated variety of rye, meaning that the offspring of two Danko plants will have roughly the same traits of their parents. This is the oldest method of seed saving, as farmers selected the healthiest heads to replant the following year. A hybrid variety, like Brasetto rye, was developed as a cross between two different varieties of rye that were selected for desirable traits of each of the parent plants. However, the cross isn't stable and the offspring of hybrid varieties often don't consistently carry the characteristics that made their parents so successful, and new seed must be bought every year.

Brasetto is one of three hybrid rye varieties currently grown in the U.S. and Canada and was developed by a company called KWS, a German seed breeding company. Hybrid varieties tend to have higher yields, up to 30%, and the plants are shorter and have stronger stalks which decrease the risk of lodging, when plant stalks break or tip over. Hybrids like Brasetto have also been found to have larger falling numbers, meaning bakers can get larger, fluffier loaves than an from an open-pollinated variety.

Danko was developed by the Polish Plant Breeding Institute and is a shorter plant than most open-pollinated rye varieties, giving it a slight advantage over other varieties in regards to lodging resistance. It also has around 10% higher yields than these other varieties. Danko is the variety currently found at the Greenmarket Grainstand, grown by Thor Oschener and distributed through Farmer Ground Flour. It's become popular with Greenmarket Bakers and distillers alike.

Recipe: Empire Rye Red Hook

Celebrate Empire Rye this month with an Empire Rye Red Hook, a take on the classic Manhattan with dash of maraschino liqueur and a big hit of local grain!

2 oz. Empire Rye Whiskey

½ oz. New York State sweet vermouth (Atsby Vermouth's Armadillo Cake)

½ oz. maraschino liqueur

Tools: mixing glass, bar spoon, strainer

Glass: cocktail

Combine ingredients in a mixing glass and fill with ice. Stir well for 20 seconds and strain into a chilled glass.

