

Reintroducing Rosen Rye to Pennsylvania Farms

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Hearty grains dating back hundreds of years disappeared from farms because of cross-pollination and the popularity of higher-yielding and more profitable commodity crops.

A few of these heritage grains, like Rosen Rye, are making a comeback through the work of Laura Fields — founder of the Delaware Valley Fields Foundation's SeedSpark program — and a group of Pennsylvania farmers and craft distillers.

The foundation supports the growth of small farming in the commonwealth and educates the public about issues these farms face competing with large commercial growers.

In looking for an initial project that would resonate with farmers and bring them new business and visibility, Fields reached out to a growing number of Pennsylvania craft distillers.

She knew they used rye grain in their production process of brown and white spirits. So she asked herself, "Why not a heritage grain from in-state farmers?"

Fields first heard about Rosen Rye from Dick Stoll who was the master distiller at Michter's in Schaffersstown, Pennsylvania. Before Michter's closed, Stoll, along with Erik Wolfe, opened Stoll and Wolfe Distillery in Litzitz, Pennsylvania, in 2016.

The two were looking to obtain Rosen Rye grain to produce a premium rye whiskey. Stoll had used Rosen Rye to make a superior whiskey at Michter's and lamented



Submitted by Bob McDonald

Dancing Star Farm's Bob McDonald in a growing field of Rosen Rye.

it no longer was being grown in Pennsylvania.

Stoll's need sparked the foundation's first project as she formed the SeedSpark program and began the challenging process of reintroducing Rosen Rye to Pennsylvania farmers.

It took Fields three years to build a seed bank sufficient enough to introduce Rosen Rye to a few farmers who were willing to follow the simple but important guidelines for

growing and harvesting.

She explained Rosen Rye fields need to be isolated so they are not contaminated through cross-pollination and the harvested grain itself has to be protected from dirt and contaminants so it can be sold directly to distilleries and used in the distilling process.

Rosen Rye was grown in Pennsylvania to supply many of the nearly 200 distilleries in the state before prohibition began in 1920. It was grown again following the end of prohibition in 1933.

It was used by Michter's (which was the oldest active distillery in the nation dating back to 1753) until it closed in 1990. The grain quickly became forgotten without interested buyers and farmers moving to higher-yielding commodity grains.

Rosen Rye is unique. It arrived in the United States in 1909, when Michigan Agricultural College (now Michigan State University) received a sample of a pedigreed varietal rye from Russia sent by the father of former student Joseph Rosen.

The college's Dr. Frank Spragg named the rye after Rosen, and the seed was cultivated on Michigan's South Manitou Island until there was enough to begin planting it commercially in 1912.

To reintroduce the grain in Pennsylvania, Fields obtained 5 ounces of seeds from the USDA seed bank. She worked with Greg Roth at Penn State's Agricultural Extension, to propagate enough seeds so they could be planted commercially.

She provided the first batches of propagated Rosen Rye grain to Stoll so he could make a Rosen Rye whiskey. The remainder was given to Robert McDonald of Dancing



Submitted by Stoll and Wolfe

Stoll and Wolfe's signature Keystone Rosen Rye whiskey.

Star Farms, in Imler, Pennsylvania, to further propagate the Rosen Rye seed.

Fields said McDonald was growing heirloom corn varieties and it made sense to work with him, since there was nothing on his farm to cross pollinate or interfere with the Rosen Rye.

McDonald saves 100 pounds of seeds each season to replant and has stockpiled enough seed to plant some 200 acres in the event of seed contamination.

McDonald farms 400 acres and a quarter of it is Rosen Rye. He also contracts with three farmers who each grow 100 acres of the grain.

"We're currently selling about two-thirds of what we grow to distilleries," McDonald said. With its 20 pounds of Rosen Rye it received in 2019 from Fields, Stoll made two spirits.

The first offering in 2020 was an unaged 100 proof white whiskey that sold out immediately. The second offering was a barrel-aged, brown spirit released in 2022 as Keystone Rosen Rye. These were the first Rosen Rye whiskeys to be made in the United States in more than 50 years, explained Fields.

Stoll, who was the last of the old-time Pennsylvania distillers, passed away at age 86 in 2020, but his partner Erik Wolfe continues to produce quality whiskey with the reintroduced Rosen Rye.

Field said Rosen Rye grain is more expensive than a genetically modified rye but noted it makes a superior rye whiskey.

"We believe using Rosen Rye is an opportunity for them to produce a unique product that will sell at a premium price with Rosen Rye



The USDA 5-ounce packet of Rosen Rye seeds Laura Fields used to start the reintroduction of the heritage grain to Pennsylvania farmers.

grown exclusively in the state and purchased directly from local farmers," added Fields.

SeedSpark gifts the initial Rosen Rye seeds to farmers so they can propagate their own seeds that will become acclimated to their land and growing conditions.

Fields works with Pennsylvania farmers who become part of the SeedSpark project and agree not to sell their propagated seeds outside the state.

"We want this to be a special grain grown only here in Pennsylvania to increase the business of small farmers so they can supply it directly to end users," Fields said. "We're working with about 12 partners (farmers and distillers) across the state now to make this heritage Rosen Rye something special and sought-after by distilleries nationwide."



Photo submitted by SeedSpark

Laura Fields with the late master distiller Dick Stoll of Stoll and Wolfe.



Photo submitted by SeedSpark

Laura Fields at the first milling of Rosen Rye in 2020.



Photo submitted by SeedSpark

Penn State's Mark Antle and Greg Roth in an early Rosen Rye field before harvesting.