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Ugly potatoes find new life in vodka

By Madison Dapcevich, Special to Agweek on Jun 6, 2016 at 9:39 a.m.

Bozeman, Mont. – Every Tuesday night the Droge boys would get together for brothers' night where they would joke about making a more lucrative product from their family crop of seed potatoes.

Five years of joking about distilling vodka turned into a reality this spring.

"I think every potato farmer out there has looked at a cellar full of potatoes and said, 'We need to be making vodka out of these things,'" says Dry Hills Distillery co-owner Jeff Droge.

The Dry Hills Distillery received a grant from the Montana Department of Agriculture from the Growth Through Agriculture program, a grant and loan operation created by the Montana Legislation meant to "strengthen and diversify Montana's agricultural industry through development of new agricultural produces and processes."

The grant helped the company buy a potato peeler and dicer.

Jeff's wife, Erica, celebrated her birthday on March 23, with the official opening of the distillery tasting room, where the couple sampled vodka and gin.

Taking off

Craft distilleries are quickly gaining traction in the state, according to the Montana Brewers Association, a statewide association of breweries organized in 2008 to promote the production and sales of quality Montana made beers.

Between 2010 and 2014 there was a growth rate of 433 percent (from three distilleries to 16).

Headframe Spirits recently announced an expansion of their Butte, Mont., facilities, making them the largest distillery west of the Mississippi.

Potatoes are made up of 80 percent water. The low level of starch has discouraged distillers from using purely potato-based products in the past. Using raw potatoes instead of dehydrated flakes or powders is more difficult, but worth it to the Drogés.

Family grown

The Droge family has been growing wheat, barley and potatoes in their Churchhill farm since 1905. Droge estimates that approximately five percent of their grown seed potatoes is tossed aside each year because they are not fit for sale for a variety of reasons. Between farms, the family raise under 1,000 acres of certified seed potatoes, approximately 3,000 acres of cereal grains and 1,200 rotated acres of grain, potatoes and peas.

“Knowing our seed source is what we’re passionate about,” Jeff says. “The ability to say on the back of every vodka bottle that we know what field those potatoes came from is huge.”

Vodka from the distillery has a bit of a character with a sweeter nose off the bat and a full body character with a smooth finish.

Dry Hills Distillery currently sells their vodka and gin in 12 different liquor stores across the state, and in several different bars in Bozeman. Including Jeff and Erica, the distillery currently employs eight people.

“Obviously, we started the company because of the potato,” Jeff says. “The potato is the reason we are sitting here today.”

While the potato-based vodka and gin products hold the spotlight, Dry Hills Distillery is currently barreling a home-grown wheat whiskey and plans to be the first completely home-grown bourbon distillery in the state.

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