

http://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/news/agriculture/new-distillery-dry-hills-gets-grant-from-the-state-plans/article_b14e4330-58fe-5613-b255-48080f86a50d.html

New distillery Dry Hills gets grant from the state, plans to open early 2016

By Michael Wright Chronicle Staff Writer Nov 29, 2015

Tired of seeing surveys on articles? Become a subscriber!

[Log In](#)

or

[Subscribe](#)

×

Each year come harvest time, potato growers pick out the ugly ones and often use them as compost or feed them to cows. Jeff Droge, whose family has grown spuds in the valley for years, wanted to have more fun with them.

“Making vodka sounded like a lot more fun than feeding cows,” he said.

Now, that idea is getting close to becoming a reality. Droge and his family founded Dry Hills Distillery and plan to open their doors near Four Corners in February, specializing in potato-based libations like vodka and gin. The company got a boost last week from the Montana Department of Agriculture, which announced it was giving the business a \$48,000 grant.

The grant came from the Growth Through Agriculture program, a grant and loan operation created by the Montana Legislature meant to “strengthen and diversify Montana’s agricultural industry through development of new agricultural products and processes.”

The gift to Dry Hills was just a portion of more than \$400,000 in grants and loans announced Wednesday and will help them buy a potato peeler and a dicer, tools that will help speed up the distilling process.

Droge, who will manage the distillery with his wife, said they had been toying with the idea for a decade or more.

The family has a farm in the Churchill area, the same place they have been since 1905. Their website says the farm was known as the Dry Hills, which gives the distillery its name.

There they grow wheat, barley and potatoes, the latter being the inspiration for the distillery.

They grow seed potatoes, and a certain amount of what comes out of the field isn't fit for sale to other potato growers for a variety of reasons, like being too heavy or crooked. Droge's older brother has a farm near Harrison as well, and between the two places they grow about 1,000 acres of seed potatoes a year.

He estimated they toss aside about 5 percent of what they grow, which adds up to a substantial amount of potatoes. Potato vodka isn't such a crazy idea, but they don't plan to stop there.

Now they've got a building near the corner of Jackrabbit Lane and Norris Road and a plan. They've worked with the Butte-based Headframe Spirits to get their mixes right and have tested a few batches.

They have plans for a potato gin, a wheat whiskey and eventually a bourbon, all made from crops grown on their farms.

"We decided we wanted to be 100 percent farm to bottle," he said.

Droge said they hope to begin bottling in January. That way they can have some of their product on the shelves when they open the tasting room in February.

Michael Wright can be reached at mwright@dailychronicle.com or at 582-2638. Follow him on Twitter @mj_wright1.

Michael Wright

Michael Wright covers the environment and wildlife issues for the Chronicle.