

Large Crowd Shows Interest in Eco-Friendly Perennial Grain Crop - Kernza™

By Alan Kraus, Conservation Program Manager, Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP)

A standing room only crowd of about 150 interested farmers, city residents, beer consumers, and possible investors gathered at Imminent Brewing on Tuesday December 11th to hear University of Minnesota Agronomy Professor Dr. Jake Jungers' present "The Power of Perennials & Kernza's Path to Commercialization." Tuesday's event, organized by Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP) and hosted by Imminent Brewing in Northfield, was the December edition of Conversations On the Wonders of Science (C.O.W.S.) - a monthly community lecture café coordinated by Carleton College.

"The interest and enthusiasm around perennial agriculture from the Northfield community was amazing," said Dr. Jungers. "It was exciting to hear farmers, lawmakers, business owners, and consumers discuss how new crops like Kernza might enhance the local economy and the environment."

With help from a grant from the clothing brand Patagonia, CRWP partnered with Imminent Brewing and the Milltown Mashers home brewing club in Northfield to create six different Kernza™ beers. Attendees were able to sample these beers and then choose their favorites. Imminent Brewing will brew a large batch of the winning recipe and make it available to the public in February 2020. Folks in attendance also enjoyed two delicious cracker recipes created by Martha Schuelzle owner of Martha's Eats and Treats in Dundas, MN as well as Karmelita Kernza™ bites created by Birchwood Café from St. Paul, MN.

Grain crops such as corn, soybeans, wheat, oats, and barley are *annual* crops, meaning that they need to be planted each year. This means that many of the fields where annual grain crops are grown will spend at least some time during the year with no living plants covering the soil surface. These bare fields lose soil and fertilizers through water and wind erosion, especially in the spring. According to Dr. Jungers, the new *perennial* grain crop Kernza™ could solve those problems and provide grain for food use and forage for livestock while also keeping the soil covered year round.

Kernza™ is the registered tradename for intermediate wheatgrass (scientific name *Thinopyrum intermedium*), that was developed by The Land Institute located in Salina, Kansas. Despite the common name, it is not a species of wheat but rather a grass species related to wheat. The grain has a sweet, nutty flavor making it a good fit for cereals, snacks and brewing. The kernel is smaller than wheat and has more bran and fiber, but fewer carbohydrates. Kernza™ also produces vegetative forage (biomass) for livestock, and because it's a perennial it regrows year after year without having to plant new seeds annually. It also provides year-round soil coverage, reducing erosion and improving water quality. Through a Minnesota Department of Agriculture Sustainable Agriculture Demonstration Grant, CRWP and the University of Minnesota are partnering with farmers Dan Honken in Rice County and Kaleb Anderson in Goodhue County to grow Kernza™ and study how grazing the biomass of Kernza™ in

the fall will affect the next year's grain production of this perennial crop. Information from this 3-year study will help farmers learn about the financial benefits available to them from the grain and forage production of Kernza™.

As part of Tuesday's event, a panel that included farmers Kaleb Anderson and Dan Honken as well as Dr. Jungers, University of Minnesota's Kernza Commercialization Director Colin Cureton, Imminent Brewing's Stephen Vander Wal and local entrepreneur Christopher Abbot of Sprout Laboratories responded to questions from the crowd.

In addition to the researchers and city residents in the audience, there were also several farmers there to learn about this new grain crop.

"The public interest and soil benefits of Kernza™ make it interesting. Next comes value, production methods, and a reliable market. It's going to take group effort but it seems like this area will see some production of the grain and forage soon," said farmer Mike Peterson.

Below: A crowd at Imminent Brewing showed interest in learning about the new perennial grain - Kernza™. Photo credit: CRWP



Above: Kernza™ panelists L to R: Jungers, Vander Wal, Anderson, Cureton, Abbot,
Honken Photo credit: CRWP