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## Washington Island wheat, ale blend for success

Capital Brewery began making Island Wheat Ale in '05

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WASHINGTON ISLAND — It all started when Leah Caplan needed wheat for her bread.



Tom Koyen harvests Island Wheat on Washington Island. The Wheat is used for Island Wheat Ale. File/Gannett Wisconsin Media

Ken Koyen unravels the story of how he and his brother, Tom, who have lived on Washington Island all their lives, agreed to plant wheat for Leah Caplan, a chef who came to the island in 2001 to make her own breads and start a culinary school for the Washington Hotel.

Caplan is a native New Yorker who answered an ad from Brian Vandewalle, owner of the Washington Hotel. Vandewalle, an economic developer and owner of Vandewalle and Associates, a Madison company with sustainable-living projects throughout the Midwest, restored the 1904 island hotel in 2001 and was looking for a partner to share his vision to revive agriculture on the island.

He also opened the Washington Hotel Coffee Room in Madison that overlooks Lake Monona and serves island specialties.

In 2005, Vandewalle's associate, Brian Ellison, a Madison landscape designer, suggested they take a sample of the wheat down the road to the local microbrewery, Capital Brewery.

That was also the year the Koyen brothers had a bumper crop and didn't know what to do with it all.

Capital Brewery was looking for a new wheat brew but didn't know of any local suppliers.

The two got together.



Island Wheat Ale hit the shelves in 2006 and became Capital Brewery's top seller. File/Gannett Wisconsin Media

By 2006 the light, mild Island Wheat Ale hit the shelves becoming the brewery's top seller.

"We always had in mind a product that would revive the agricultural market on Washington Island," Caplan said. "The same starch that would have come from potatoes is coming from the wheat."

About 900 acres on the island is now planted in wheat with flax as a rotational crop, and the Koyens grow the lion's share. Koyen grows oats and soybeans as well as the wheat and flax.

Caplan uses her culinary skills to craft other products that have spun off the local agriculture, including vodka, gin and whiskey, soaps, lotions and dog biscuits. Her gin uses wild juniper berries and botanicals as well as island wheat.

Vandewalle and Ellison have brokered the deals between the farmers and distillers giving birth to new product lines like Death's Door vodka. Death's Door vodka, gin and whiskey (aged and un-aged) have since emerged using Koyen's organic wheat.

Before their business interests merged, both Vandewalle and Koyen were restoring parts of history in their own way.

The same time Vandewalle was refurbishing the Washington Hotel, Koyen was dismantling an old granary he found in Zander, north of Michicot.

Koyen brought the granary back to the island piece by piece on the ferry, restored it and rebuilt the granary next to his established K.K. Fiske's restaurant.

He hewed his own slabs for the floorboards from trees on the island in his own sawmill behind the bar. It seats 300 people who he often feeds and entertains at his island fish boils.

Sitting at the bar he made of Birdseye maple, people can drink Island Wheat Ale made from wheat he's grown and see the old grain shaft elevator that runs through the upper loft of the bar.