

Leah Caplan: Door County island's bounty reaps benefits for economy

Leah Caplan, Capital Times guest columnist
September 8, 2007

When Brian Vandewalle and I set out to establish the Washington Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary School on Washington Island in 2002, our vision was about more than just rebuilding what had been the center of community life on a small island off the Door County peninsula. We knew we wanted to create and find markets for as many value-added products -- ones that originated on the island in some way -- as possible. What we didn't know was exactly what those products would be.

Wheat had been grown on the island back in the 1800s, but not since. Our first year on the island, we asked Tom Koyen to plant 30 acres of wheat, which we'd use in our restaurant's signature wood-fired brick-oven breads and pizzas.

Tom had done some potato farming while growing up, but had moved on in search of a more steady income. Just five years later, there are 800 acres of wheat fields across the island. Tom and his brother Kenny hire others to help them harvest and plant the crop. Tom retired from his job to oversee this activity and get back to his (and essentially the island's) agricultural roots.

Yes, we're now making many thousands of loaves of bread a year, but not 800 acres' worth. That first harvest yielded more wheat than we could use, so we approached the Middleton-based Capital Brewery to suggest that their next beer should be a wheat ale -- made with island wheat, of course. We sensed they'd appreciate the wheat's origins and would help tell its story.

Our timing was perfect since Capital had already been thinking of crafting a wheat beer. Today Island Wheat Ale is the brewery's top seller.

We still had excess wheat, so we developed our next value-added product: Death's Door Vodka. As a chef, I wanted to create a spirit that complements and celebrates the cuisine of the Great Lakes and captures the maritime history of the region and the hard work of the farmers who grow the wheat.

This summer we launched Death's Door Gin, infused with another ingredient harvested on the island -- juniper berries -- as well as other Wisconsin-grown botanicals.

For Washington Island Brands -- the Washington Hotel, Restaurant and Culinary School; the Washington Hotel Coffee Room at Lakeside Fibers in Madison; and Death's Door Spirits (vodka and gin) -- it's not enough to see how much we can grow for ourselves and how self-sufficient we can be. We approach the renaissance of wheat farming on Washington Island from an economic development perspective. The economic impact of island wheat on communities both on and off the island is a critical component of our business model.

Island wheat and other grains -- the flax, oats and barley that we're rotating out with the wheat to keep the island's fields healthy and chemical-free -- are being cleaned and stored in New Holstein. (We're brainstorming value-added products to make with the grains.)

The malting for the Island Wheat Ale is done in Chilton.

Soaps and lotions using spring and winter wheat grown on the island are made for us in Stevens Point.

The more artisan and other local businesses that emerge to create new and innovative value-added products with the bounty of Washington Island, the better. It's our sustainable economic model for expanding the reach and definition of the local food chain.

Leah Caplan, of Washington Island Brands, will join Dan Barber, chef and co-owner of Blue Hill at Stone Barns in New York, and local farmer Scott Williams of Garden to Be in Mount Horeb at the Food for Thought Festival's Friday night forum.

The Food for Thought Festival will be Friday, Sept. 14, and Saturday, Sept. 15. Friday events will be from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at Agricultural Hall on the UW campus. Saturday events will run from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard off the Square.

The 2007 Food for Thought Festival will include:

- ∞ A forum from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. Friday, Sept. 14, in Room 125, Agricultural Hall, 1450 Linden Drive on the UW-Madison campus. The keynote presentation will be by Dan Barber of Blue Hill Restaurant and Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture.
- ∞ Events from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 15, on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard off the Square. There will be more than 60 exhibitors, kids' activities, music, games and raffles, and the first ever "Cooking With the Stars" cooking competition.