

Beer is named after Michigan State plant breeder

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EAST LANSING - In his teaching days at Michigan State University, Russell Freed always pitched the benefits of being a plant breeder to his students. They could meet presidents, make an impact, even live longer.

The MSU professor emeritus and international agronomist has one more to add to the list.

"You can even have a beer named after you," he said. "Being a plant breeder is exciting."

New Holland Brewing Co. honored Freed, 71, earlier this month with its newest beer, Russ's Revival.

The pre-Prohibition-style lager will be released next month in the Lansing region and at New Holland's Pub on 8th in Holland.

The lager features a malt made from the century-old Spartan barley, a once-popular malting grain created at Michigan Agricultural College, which became MSU. Freed was instrumental in reviving the grain, which had virtually disappeared from the state decades before, so that it could be used once again in Michigan's flourishing craft beer industry.

"He resurrected that barley strain," said Steve Berthel, New Holland's head pub brewer, who made the beer on Nov.

See BEER, Page 16A



COURTESY PHOTO
Steve Berthel, head pub brewer for New Holland Brewing Co., holds up a sample of Russ's Revival, a pre-Prohibition-style lager named after MSU professor emeritus Russell Freed, at the company's Pub on 8th in Holland.

Beer

Continued from Page 15A

11 with Freed and other researchers present. "These people are the unsung heroes of the industry."

Russ's roots

Freed launched his career in 1972 in Indonesia working for the International Rice Research Institute after graduating from MSU with his doctorate in crop sciences.

He worked with poor farmers, helping them to increase yields and profits to "enhance their quality of life." The job would take him to the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Over the years, he sent students to the U.S. for advanced degrees, so they could come back and help more farmers improve their farming techniques. Freed said.

In 1980, he returned to MSU to head its wheat-breeding program, where he helped develop the Augusta and Frankenmuth varieties. By 1982, he started teaching international agronomy - agronomy is the science of soil and crop management - and took over the university's oat and barley breeding programs.

In that role, he worked on developing a malting barley for Stroh's in Detroit. But the research stopped in 1985 when Stroh's closed its Detroit brewery.

Freed said he was aiming for a variety with "high yield and good malting characteristics."

"We only worked for three years," he said. "It takes 10 years to develop a new



COURTESY PHOTO
Russell Freed, MSU professor emeritus and international agronomist, poses with Spartan barley. New Holland Brewing Co. named a beer brewed with malt from the barley after him because of his efforts to revive the grain.

variety."

He had more success with oats. In the 1990s, he developed two strains, Ruby and Ida, named after his wife and mother, respectively.

"Ruby didn't last long, but my mother's is still being planted today," Freed said.

Freed retired at the end of December, but not before leaving one last mark on the industry.

Russ's Revival

MSU researchers in the Upper Peninsula have been looking for a better malting barley to supply the state's craft beer industry since 2013.

The problem with the types of malting barley predominantly grown in Michigan today - Pinnacle and Conlon - is that they originated in North Dakota and are

ill-suited for Michigan's wet, humid climate. If the barley gets wet after harvesting, it often sprouts prematurely before it can be malted. Some maltsters end up throwing out half their shipments for that reason.

When researchers at MSU's Upper Peninsula Research and Extension Center in Chatham heard about Spartan barley, they could only think of one person who would be able to find a sample, if it even still existed.

"If anyone could get their hands on it, it would be Dr. Freed," said Ashley McFarland, director of the research and extension center. "He did not disappoint."

Freed tracked the only pure strand of Spartan barley to a U.S. Department of Agriculture gene bank in Utah. They sent five grams to MSU's main campus,

and he grew 80 plants in the greenhouse behind the Plant and Soil Sciences Building off Bogue Street. He harvested those plants and sent the seeds up to Chatham, where McFarland's team grew them in the spring of 2015.

When the research team ran into a budget shortage, McFarland said, Freed paid for the seeds to be shipped to Arizona so they could be grown over the winter to increase the number of seeds.

"Without Dr. Freed, we would not be brewing beer," McFarland said. "He was always very positive about the project."

Spartan barley was shipped to MSU's Kellogg Biological Station in Hickory Corners, northwest of Battle Creek, to be grown this past summer. The barley was malted this fall by Pilot Malt House in Byron Center. New Holland got the first shipment of the malt because it was the first to express interest in the grain.

Berthel said Russ's Revival will have a rich, malty taste balanced by spicy, Michigan-grown hops. It will be about 6% alcohol.

Freed remains modest about his role in reviving Spartan barley, giving credit to researchers in Chatham.

"I was certainly surprised they were going to name it after me," he said. "It's a good feeling, but I didn't really do much. How many people can say they have a beer named after them?"

Freed admits he's not much of a beer drinker, but that will change.

"I'm going to buy a bunch of it," he said. "At my advanced age, I need a revival. There will be a smile on my face when I imbibe on that thing."

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