

People & Places

Family builds market for triticale

James Wahl and his family switch from wheat to cater to brewers, distillers

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

LIND, Wash. — James Wahl and his family have gone a step beyond just growing a crop. They combine efforts to add value and market it, too.

He has switched from wheat to triticale to get away from growing strictly a commodity.

MJW Grain Inc., based in Ritzville, Wash., is a family business. Daughter Maya, 21, a student at Washington State University, is CEO. Son Dane, 19, an aviation student at Big Bend Community College, is production manager. James' wife, Rena, is chief financial officer. James is vice president of marketing.

"We're trying to recession-proof this farm," James said.

Building a brand

James started raising triticale, a hybrid of durham wheat and rye, for Tri-State Seed four years ago. The Wahls now grow 2,900 acres of it.

"We decided the grain itself had legs," James said. "So we went to building this brand."

"As far as marketing goes, it's a pretty great way to show that farming is a family affair," Maya said. "Having the kids involved has shown our customers that we really care on a more personal level about what we do."

Maya is a former state FFA officer. She and her father often talked about raising a value-added commodity and controlling sale of their grain, James said.

"She knows marketing, she's very good at being the front person on something," he said. "And I wanted to help a female entrepreneur. When it comes to ag, women are underrepresented. They're very involved, but they're not given the due they deserve."

Maya believes the brewers, distillers and other farmers she talks to are more willing to listen because she is a young woman. "That's not something they see all the time," she said.

Adding a crop

To further diversify, James recently planted 490 acres of a spring varietal rye.

"From talking to distillers



Courtesy MJW Grain Inc.

From left, James, Rena, Dane and Maya Wahl switched from growing wheat to triticale for their family operation, MJW Grain Inc., in Ritzville, Wash.

and brewers, there's a lot of rye used in the industry," he said.

Rye is known as a noxious weed prone to volunteer plants in some counties, including Adams County, where the Wahls live. Many farmers tend to avoid it, said James, adding that new varieties are easier to control.

"We should be able to control it pretty easily," he said. "I have clients that keep (asking), 'When are you going to raise rye?'"

The Wahls malt their grain at Palouse Pint, the LINC Foods cooperative's malting operation in Spokane.

LINC Foods co-founder Joel Williamson said the Wahls get to interact directly with the customers who use their grain.

"It's a little more risky and probably a little bit more work than the old model, but it's also more rewarding, both financially and knowing where your product is going and how you're a part of that system," Williamson said. "I really do hope it becomes a model for other farmers to find a way out of the tight spot they may be in."

James started offering free 1-gallon samples of triticale malt to breweries and distilleries in Wash-

ington and Idaho. Interest turned into trial runs, and now clients are purchasing it in amounts ranging from 50-pound bags to 1 ton to produce spirits.

James hopes to sell 25 percent of the crop in this fashion this year, more if a major company expresses interest.

The family is also hoping to sell its triticale to a "power bar" company as an ingredient.

Taking control

Maya also hopes their company inspires other farm families to take control of where their product ends up.

"We are really used to selling our grain to an elevator, a large company, and not ever seeing it again," she said. "We have the chance to see it from the moment we plant it in the ground to the moment it becomes a consumer product, like a beer, bread, whiskey or whatever. We have all kinds of ideas."

For Maya, the company is also another way to spend time with her family.

"We all get each other, so there's no questioning for this business, because we've all been on the same page from square one," she said. "And I like them, so it's nice."

Western Innovator

James Wahl

Title: Vice president of marketing, MJW Grain Inc.

Age: 52

Birthplace: Lind, Wash.

Current location: Lind, Wash.

Education: Art degree Seattle Art Institute



Rena Wahl

Title: Chief financial officer, MJW Grain Inc.

Age: 49

Hometown: Moved too often to name one

Current Location: Lind, Wash.

Education: Tri-Cities School of Massage

Maya Wahl

Title: CEO, MJW Grain Inc.

Age: 21

Birthplace: Lind, Wash.

Current location: Pullman, Wash.

Education: Studying agricultural education at Washington State University

Dane Wahl

Title: Production manager, MJW Grain Inc.

Age: 19

Birthplace: Lind, Wash.

Current location: Lind, Wash.

Education: Studying aviation at Big Bend Community College in Moses Lake, Wash.

Website: www.mjwgraininc.com

Calendar

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Tuesday, May 23

Marion County Livestock Association annual meeting. 6 p.m. Almost Home Restaurant, 3310 Market St. NE, Salem, Ore. The agenda includes livestock reports and the election of officers. RSVP to 503-378-0100 or Barbara Nyquist, 503-678-5507.

Saturday-Sunday May 27-28

Alpaca Shearing Day and Sale. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Alpacas of Oregon, 21345 SW Aebischer Road, Sherwood, Ore. Join EasyGo Farm at Alpacas of Oregon and take a break from the Memorial Day Winery Tours to watch the alpacas get their annual haircuts. Get up close, hand feed them and handle their luxurious fleece. Shearing Day is Saturday. On Sunday, learn to felt an alpaca gift. Phone 503-348-6954 to reserve a spot; \$25-\$75 covers your materials and instruction. Hand-spinners, knitters and other fiber artists will find fleece and yarn. Visitors can chat with four long-time livestock breeders who've raised llamas, horses, sheep and goats. www.easygofarm.net/AOOMemDay.

Wednesday-Friday May 31-June 2

2017 Oregon Cattlemen Mid-year Meeting, Wildhorse Casino, 46510 Wildhorse Blvd., Pendleton, Ore. The annual 2 1/2-day midyear event is where Oregon cattlemen and women gather to get updates on the latest news in Oregon agriculture, hear from top industry speakers and reconnect with fellow ranchers. http://orcattle.com/.

Thursday, June 1

Four-Part Farm/Ranch Succession Planning Workshop. 6-8:30 p.m. Canby High School, 721 SW Fourth Ave., Canby, Ore. A free four-part workshop on succession planning with one-hour personal counseling sessions for your family after each workshop. Light dinner 6 to 6:30, workshop 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Course 4 on June 1 is Passing on Management Roles. RSVP required. Organized by Clackamas Small Business Development Center and Rogue Farm Corps. Cost: Free. http://bit.ly/2opTHqO.

Friday, June 9

Farm Practices to Support Beneficial Insects. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. SOREC Teaching Farm, 569 Hanley Road, Central Point, Ore. This is Day 1 of a two-day class to raise awareness of on-farm beneficial insects and birds and how to identify them. Learn about the role they play in farming hand-in-hand with nature and how to create "farmscaping" to attract and promote active benefi-

cials. Day 2 is June 30. Cost: \$15 one/\$25 two from the same farm. Website: http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarmDream.

Wednesday, June 14

Six-week Forestry Short Course. 9 a.m.-noon. Federal Building meeting room, Seventh Street and College Avenue, St. Maries, Idaho. This course will be six successive Wednesdays. The \$38 fee includes resource material. Register by phone at 208-245-2422 before June 7.

Thursday-Friday June 15-16

2017 Interpera Congress. Wenatchee Confluence Technology Center, 285 Technology Center Way, Wenatchee, Wash. The conference features presentations from world experts on emerging pear varieties, high-density planting, root stock, harvest and packing house mechanization, integrated pest management successes, export trade flows and successful practices for building consumer demand. http://ncwctc.com.

Friday-Sunday June 16-18

Glenwood Ketchum Kalf Rodeo and Bull Bash. Glenwood Rodeo Grounds, Trout Lake Highway, Glenwood, Wash. The Bull Bash starts at 7 p.m. June 16, followed by the rodeo, which starts at 12:30 p.m. June 17-18. Website: http://business.gorge.net/

glenwoodrodeo.

Tuesday, June 20

Trees and Taxes workshop. 5-7:30 p.m. Coos County Extension Office, 631 Alder St., Myrtle Point, Ore. This class is for anyone with forest management expenses, recent forest income or planning for future income from their forestland. Tammy Cushing, Extension specialist in forest economics, management and policy, will explain topics many landowners are unaware of and the special provisions in the Internal Revenue Code that pertain to forestland and income generated from the land. This session will help improve the records you keep on your forestland as well as minimize the taxes that you pay for income generated by your forest. Pre-registration is required by June 16. For questions, call Shawna at 541-572-5263. Website: http://extension.oregonstate.edu/coos/.

Tuesday-Wednesday June 20-21

Center for Produce Safety Research Symposium. Hyatt Regency Denver Tech Center, 7800 E. Tufts Ave., Denver, Colo. Agricultural water will kick off the program agenda. This session will focus on four CPS-funded research programs that will help stakeholders better understand the factors involved in sourcing, sampling, testing and treating specific types of agricultural water.

Thursday, June 22

Oregon Angus Field Day. 4-10 p.m. Quail Valley Ranch, Prineville, Ore. Cattle on display, contests with prizes, a meal and a time to visit. For more information, contact Becky Tekansik, Quail Valley Ranch, 541-699-8562, or Dick Hubman, president of the Oregon Angus Association, 541-601-5495.

Thursday-Friday June 29-30

3rd International Conference on Livestock & Nutrition. 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Avani Atrium, 880 Phetchaburi Road, Bangkok, Thailand. The Bangkok Livestock Nutrition Conference welcomes attendees, presenters and exhibitors from all over the world. The theme is "Leading Innovation in Livestock for Sustainable Farming." Cost: \$699. Website: http://livestocknutrition.conferenceseries.com/.

Friday, June 30

Farm Practices to Support Beneficial Insects. 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Day 2 of this two-day class will offer a tour of Wandering Fields farm in the Applegate area. Participants will practice identifying beneficials and observe how a blend of hedgerows, cover crops, flowering seed crops and native plants creates a system of biological pest management. Participation on Day 1 on June 9 is a requirement to attend the tour. Instructor: Dana Kristal and local experts. Cost: \$15 one/\$25 two from the same farm. Website: http://bit.ly/JacksonSmallFarmDream.

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