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CENTERPIECE

Regenerative agriculture: Kernza crop finding niche in fields, products

By Dana Melius Special to the Free Press
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1 of 4



Chef Karyn Tomlinson, left, of Myriel restaurant in St. Paul, and Brad Gordon, Great River Greening’s southern Minnesota program manager, address attendees at Saturday’s “Kernza at the Creek” event at Seven Mile Creek County Park.

Photos by Dana Melius, special to The Free Press



Twin Cities chef Karyn Tomlinson may have been far removed from her popular St. Paul restaurant, Myriel. But she felt right at home.

Saturday's event at Seven Mile Creek County Park brought together a diverse group of farmers, environmentalists and curious onlookers to talk about the potential of Kernza. The trademarked perennial grain, used in some of Tomlinson's products and menu items, is hailed for its potential as a new alternative farm crop.

Its deep root system also encourages environmentalists who see soil and water quality benefits, as well as carbon storage. For Seven Mile Creek, which often floods and drains into the nearby Minnesota River, planting Kernza on the western bluff's farm fields could help slow that flow.

"It's really cool to see all these different worlds coming together," said Tomlinson, the featured speaker during the four-hour session, sponsored by Great River Greening and Cargill, the Minnetonka-based global food corporation.

Tomlinson's roots in Dassel keep bringing her back to the farm fields around the Hutchinson area, where she has developed strong ties with the region's agricultural sector. Although Minnesota's farmers have developed a heavy reliance on corn and soybeans, Tomlinson also sees innovation.

While Tomlinson and others eyeing alternative crops understand "this slow process of change," she stresses that "change happens through relationships."

“When my grandmother died, I told myself I should really stay connected,” she recalled. “There was this little network of farmers doing really cool things. So I put together this community dinner and said, ‘There’s really something cool happening here.’”

Tomlinson started much of that relationship building just before COVID hit. But the challenges also presented new opportunities. With the hog slaughterhouses closed during the pandemic, Tomlinson bought four hogs at \$80 a head, had them butchered, and was on her way toward opening her restaurant two years ago.

“That was kind of the beginning of a beautiful relationship,” Tomlinson said. “Now I have access to incredible ingredients.”

Tomlinson sees many similarities in Nicollet County and throughout the Minnesota River Valley, where producers and environmentalists tend to coexist. So does St. Peter area organic farmer Ben Penner, who advocates for and promotes Kernza development and expanding markets.

But trying something new in this traditional corn-soybean world of agriculture can be slow, acknowledged Tomlinson. That’s why building relationships is important, she said.

“Trying new things, trying new crops, can feel very risky to farmers,” Tomlinson said.

Penner's been into organic farming for more than a decade. But he's had to supplement that farm income by offering custom combining and also serves as a consultant, advocating for alternative crops like Kernza. In March, Penner joined others in Washington, D.C., to counter the "get-big or get-out" mentality.

"I planted 18 acres of it two weeks ago for an area dairy farmer," Penner said. "I plant it straight into the corn stalks."

Cargill's interest in cover crops, particularly winter camelina, that promote sustainability, carbon storage and improved soil health has encouraged Penner, as did Cargill's sponsorship of the Kernza at the Creek event.

Penner believes Kernza's agricultural and specialty food markets will continue to grow over the next five years, along with other cover crops.

"Cargill is very, very interested," Penner said. "It will be big. I've never seen Cargill acting the way they're acting."

Perennial Pantry of Northfield was among vendors at Saturday's event. Joe Caplan, the director of research and development for the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) company, said Kernza is a prime ingredient in their products.

"It's caught on a lot in the past few years," Caplan said "But there's a lot of work to do."

That's why the Kernza promotional event at Seven Mile brought in such varied interests, according to Brad Gordon, Great River Greening's southern Minnesota program manager.

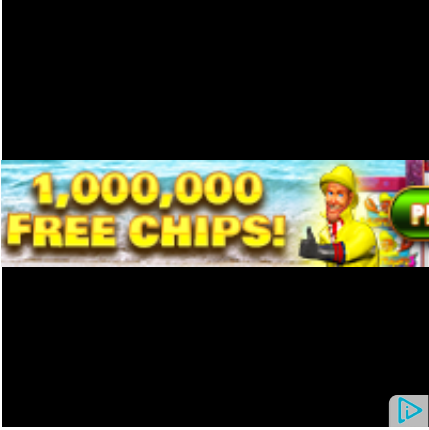
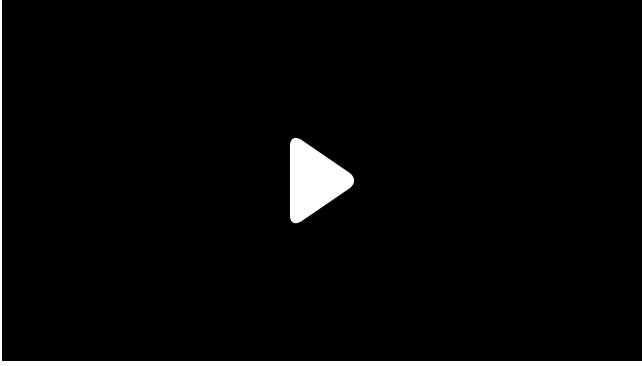
"We started working down here (at Seven Mile) about 10 years ago, working with area farmers," Gordon said. The relationship with farmers on the bluff, where drainage flows down the hills into the creek, is critical, he noted.

"But we need to build a market," Gordon said. "It's the first perennial crop in the world. But It's still in that early development stage. The acres need to climb at the same pace as the markets."

Until then, those diverse voices will continue to develop relationships. One such voice is Scott Mackenthun, area supervisor of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource's Hutchinson field offices, which assists with brown trout stocking at Seven Mile. He sees the importance of cover crops like Kernza, which can help with habitat restoration and improvement.

"What we do on this landscape really affects what we see in this stream," Mackenthun said. "We've got this nice cool water. Let's keep it that way."

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