

Excitement returning to Donegal tillage

New varieties and outlets are encouraging grain growers in the county

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Growing cereal crops in Ireland can be a challenge at the best of times, but even more so in Donegal given our wetter climate and shorter growing season. The main cereal crops grown in the county are spring and winter barley, winter oats and some winter wheat. A small acreage of spring wheat is also sown, but mainly for wholecropping, as the grain maturity can run too late.

Alternatives such as beans are effectively a non-runner for the same reason. So, apart from oilseed rape and potatoes, our options are limited.

Traditionally, Donegal cereal grains are for the animal feed market. Over the last 10 years, apart from exceptional harvests in 2012, 2018 and 2021 (when the green barley grain price was €200/t), an average grain price of €150/t has left a very small margin after machinery and fixed costs, such as hired labour, car, ESB, phone, and insurance.

If these crops were, as in most cases, grown on rented or leased land, it was really a case of minimising losses.

Agricare and Boortmalt

However, in the last couple of years, growing malting barley has become a viable option for Donegal growers.

This is due to an initiative led by Jim and Gareth Devenney from Agricare and Crop Specialists based in Newtowncunningham, Co Donegal, who, in conjunction with Boortmalt, planted Prospect spring malting barley in 2018 on a trial basis on a number of local farms.

The quality of barley produced from these trials for both brewing and distilling led to Pixel and Craft winter malting varieties being sown in autumn 2018.

The acreage sown and the number of malting barley growers involved has increased annually since then. For the 2021 harvest, 150ha of Craft winter barley and 300ha of Splendour



Liam Robb.

spring barley resulted in 2,900t of grain reaching Boortmalt's brewing and distilling standards (50% distilling and 50% brewing).

All the grain was tested and collected at the Agricare facility in Newtowncunningham and transported to Boortmalt in Athy within 24 hours of delivery.

The area of winter malting barley sown this autumn has more than doubled, with 315ha of Vessel planted for the 2022 harvest. This is a dual-purpose variety with the potential to reach both the brewing and distilling standard.

"It is rewarding for growers to see all their hard work, from planting to harvest, produce a high-quality end product and this has put some excitement back into growing cereals in Donegal," said Gareth Devenney.

Potential and risk

A testament to the potential for growing malting barley in Donegal is the increase in the area sown and the number of growers involved annually over the last three years.

The financial risks of growing malting barley compared with feed barley are minimal. While the seed cost may be a little higher and yields may be marginally lower, the increased price for grain reaching the brewing or distilling standards more than makes up for the difference.

In 2021, when world and Irish grain prices were high due to adverse weather events across the EU, Russia and Ukraine, the price differential between feed and malting barley was in the region of €30/t.

There is little to no difference between malting and feed barley with



Peter Lynch and
Gareth Devenney.

regard to straw yield and income.

In terms of actually growing a crop of malting barley, as opposed to feed barley, the only critical difference is the timing and rate of nitrogen application.

Looking to the future, a successful winter malting variety is vital for Donegal growers to spread the risk, as weather conditions can be challenging for spring crops.

"Malting barley is not going to replace feed barley as the main cereal crop in the country, but it is another crop option for growers to spread the risk on their farms. This is especially so in Donegal, where viable crop options are limited in cereal rotations."

Liam Robb

Liam and his brother Cieran of Drumbuoy farm, Newtowncunningham, are tillage farmers growing mainly spring and winter barley. They have grown spring beans successfully in the past, but lack of demand from local mills due to the small volumes available to them made the venture short-lived.

As part of their crop rotation, they grow some oilseed rape for Donegal Rapeseed Oil Ltd, as well as some fodder beet for supply to local beef and dairy farmers. As alternative crop options are limited in Donegal, Liam sees malting barley as a viable option to spread some of the risk in growing cereal crops.

"The husbandry is much the same and any yield penalty is more than made up for with the price differential between malting and feed barley."

"There is minimal risk in growing malting barley, because if the grain doesn't make the brewing and

distilling standards, it goes to the feed market."

Peter Lynch

Peter is primarily a tillage farmer, but also has a beef finishing enterprise on his farm in Garshooey, Newtowncunningham. His rotation includes winter and spring barley, winter wheat, winter oilseed rape and potatoes.

He grew only winter and spring malting barley varieties for the 2021 harvest and sees malting barley as a means of minimising the financial risk of growing cereal crop.

"Malting barley is a viable option to increase the farm gate price for grain and it reduces my exposure to the feed market price."

"It is a no-brainer, because if it doesn't make the brewing and distilling grade, it can go for feed."

Peter has kept 30t of Splendour grain from the 2021 harvest for supply to the Croll Distillery (Drioglann Chroithlí) for the distillation of their single malt whiskey.

The Croll Distillery (Drioglann Chroithlí)

This new business venture began distilling whiskey for the first time in 2020, having refurbished the old Croll Doll factory based in the Gaith Dobhair area of West Donegal. This is the first whiskey distilled "legally" in the county in 180 years, since William Leatham's Burt Distillery ceased production in 1841 (as seen in the picture, the original chimney tower is still standing).

The Croll Distillery will produce a single malt whiskey and a single pot still whiskey, which will be ma-



Burt distillery.

tured in ex-bourbon American Oak, Oloroso Spanish Oak, Pedro Ximenez European Oak or ex-Cognac French Oak casks for a minimum of three years before they can be called Irish whiskey.

Head distiller Julio Diana states that 35% of the barley used in 2021 was grown in Donegal, but their aim in 2022 is to increase this to 100%.

Kieran Davis, one of the three co-founders of the company, explains: "We are very keen on the provenance of local grain being used for local whiskey and we are very keen to build a working relationship with local growers facilitated by Jim and Gareth Devenney."

"Using Donegal-grown barley for Croll Whiskey will be an important marketing tool and will also have environmental benefits in reducing our emissions and our carbon footprint."