





# Everything's coming up Rosen

WORDS MAGGIE KIMBERL

*Once dominant in North American distilling, Rosen rye was almost consigned to the whiskey history books in the late 20th century, but is now being resurrected by a group of distillers and growers dedicated to the varietal*

**I**n 1909, Dr Frank Spragg at the Michigan Agricultural College received a sample of a pedigreed varietal of rye, sent to him from Russia by the father of one of his former students, Joseph Rosen. Spragg cultivated the rye in research lab conditions until there was enough to begin planting commercially in 1912. He named the varietal Rosen after his student, and it quickly became the pride of Michigan agriculture. By 1920, Michigan's rye output was greater than that of any other state in the US and hundreds of bushels of Rosen rye were being sold to producers in other states for growing. By 1942, Rosen was called out by name in a Seagram's Grain Manual as being superior for whiskey production. However, the success was short lived; by 1970, there was no one left growing Rosen rye, and the only remnant of the once highly sought-after grain was in the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) seed bank.

It was more than four decades before Rosen rye's second act would begin, led by the Delaware Valley Fields Foundation, a nonprofit focused on grain production that supports farmers growing crops for the commodity markets. "Back in like 2015, I was looking for something to benefit the state of Pennsylvania," explains the organisation's founder, Laura Fields. She toured Pennsylvania to meet distillers, farmers, and millers, speaking with them to understand what the issues were and how her foundation could help. "I was travelling across the state all through 2015 and 2016, and some of the first people that I met were [Stoll & Wolfe Distillery founders] Dick Stoll and Erik Wolfe, who had released Bomberger's at the time," she recalls. "I sat down with them and asked, 'What would help you guys to bring rye back to Pennsylvania?'. They had released Bomberger's as a bourbon, and Dick said to me, 'We have everything that we need. We've



**Opening pages:**

Growing Rosen rye on a Penn State University agricultural extension project.

**These pages, clockwise from bottom left:**

Erik Wolfe and Dick Stoll; A cask of Rosen rye whiskey; Checking the grain with Delaware Valley Fields Foundation; Harvesting; South Manitou Island.

got the still going, but what I would really like is the raw materials, and I'd really like to be able to get my hands on Rosen Rye, which is what he used when he was master distiller at Michter's."

Stoll was the last master distiller of the former Michter's Distillery in Schaefferstown, Pennsylvania before it closed its doors in 1990 (the brand has since been resurrected in Kentucky, and rye whiskey remains a core part of its offering). The distillery had used Rosen rye until 1970.

"Dick used to work with Rosen, but he didn't know anyone that grew it and he wasn't involved in the sourcing of

it," recalls Stoll & Wolfe co-founder Erik Wolfe. "That was sort of where it ended as far as I knew at that time, but little did we know that Laura was going to take that and run with bringing back Rosen for us to actually be able to distil. To be able to not only return to Dick distilling, but to return him to distilling Rosen rye, was definitely an awesome thing that we were honoured to be a part of. For us to have been able to come full circle like that, with that particular grain, and to be the first people to be able to distil it again was very cool.

"And for us, that was the beginning of the journey, and then at the same





time when we started with the Rosen, we never really thought about the possibility of being able to grow that Rosen here locally on a farm that's been our family since 1740."

In a Michigan Agricultural College report he authored in 1921, Dr Spragg wrote that early distributions of Rosen rye seed "were lost to pedigree by being planted alongside common varieties." Rye, like many grains, is open-pollinated and tends to be a voracious pollinator, meaning that cross-contamination of pedigreed varieties happens if different varieties are planted closely together. Pedigreed ryes need to be planted a significant distance apart – five to 10 miles – to avoid cross-contamination and maintain the integrity of each variety's genetic make-up.

In Michigan, the main cultivators of Rosen rye for decades were the Hutzlers and the Becks on South Manitou Island. The farming families that inhabited the island won awards for the purity and quality of their Rosen rye and made a pact not to grow any other varieties of rye on the island and risk cross-contamination, under penalty of death.

These days, growing Rosen rye without cross-contamination isn't nearly as difficult as it once was because so few farmers grow rye all the way to pollination and harvest. Instead, the majority of rye grown in the United States today is grown as an overwinter cover crop that is tilled under in the spring before the more profitable crops are planted.



After speaking with Stoll, Fields started looking for a source of Rosen rye and chased a number of leads – including someone in Seattle trying to grow the variety for baking – but each came up empty. In the end, she managed to source a couple of packets from the USDA seed bank to start growing. Around the same time, she heard that a professor at Penn State University, extension grain crops specialist Greg Roth, was growing some in a greenhouse.

"I called him right away and I was like, what's going on with this? And he said, we were just trying it out to see what would happen with it. I went to see him and he showed me and said, we're not doing anything else with it. And I was like, oh, why not? He goes, it's not funded. And I said, well, what do you need? And he's like, X amount of dollars." Fields cut him a cheque on the spot. With their partnership cemented, Roth began growing in earnest in 2016. "We made sure that every single year we were propagating, making sure that there's no cross-pollination, making sure we're isolated, all of those things," Fields adds.





## Production Rosen Rye



The first Rosen rye whiskey distilled in the United States since 1970 was distilled in 2019 at Stoll & Wolfe in Lititz, Pennsylvania.

"It was so amazing to be able to return Dick to distilling Rosen," recalls Wolfe. "It is a lot of pressure with somebody who is your mentor and somebody who you respect so much and you're trying to continue their amazing legacy. The whole time in my mind, it's like, just do not mess this up, do not disappoint this man, right to the moment of handing him the hydrometer flask to take the sample, and when he actually registered the smile, that moment seemed to last an eternity, but certainly one that I will treasure forever. The only mortal thing I ever saw Dick do was pass away, and he was more aware of his own mortality than any of us, but no pressure in terms of all the learning we had to do and still continue to do. He was such a great guiding force. It was really such an honour to learn from somebody like that."

But Pennsylvania wasn't the only state witnessing a Rosen revival at this time. Ari Sussman, whiskey maker at Mammoth Distilling in Traverse City, Michigan, had uncovered the state's connection to Rosen rye and helped her employer to obtain Rosen seed from

the USDA seed bank to begin cultivating in the state once again. After working with Michigan State University and the National Parks Service, which now owns South Manitou Island, the first Michigan Rosen rye in 70 years was planted at the Hutzler Farm in South Manitou Island in October 2020.

Meanwhile, Pennsylvania farmers and distillers had got a head start on the recultivation of Rosen rye; Liberty Pole Spirits was able to make a small batch of Rosen Rye Whiskey in 2020.

"In October of 2020, we received enough Rosen for one fermenter," recalls Liberty Pole Spirits co-founder Jim Hough. "Our typical production, we run three cooks a week, fill three fermenters, and then the following week we strip and double distil those three fermenters. In the Rosen case, we could only fill one fermenter; one fermenter gets us one barrel. We put a 53-gallon barrel of Rosen rye away in October of 2020. So, it's now about two and a half years old." The following year, with more Rosen cultivated and available, Hough secured enough for a full week's production. The distillery filled all three fermenters and put away roughly four and a half barrels.

Hough used the same mash bill for the Rosen that he does for his standard

rye whiskey: 61 per cent unmalted rye, 13 per cent malted rye, 13 per cent wheat, and 13 per cent malted barley. It's a Monongahela-style rye whiskey, a traditional regional style named for the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania.

While Rosen rye has been cultivated again for distilling in the US since 2016, the cultivation process from the small amounts of seed available from the USDA seed bank is painstaking, and it can take at least four years to get enough to distil a small batch of whiskey. But in the next five to 10 years, consumers will have the opportunity to purchase whiskey made from this flavourful historic grain once again. ●

### These pages, clockwise from top left:

Erik Wolfe and Dick Stoll at Stoll & Wolfe Distillery; Distilling equipment on South Manitou Island; Planting rye with the Delaware Valley Fields Foundation; Stoll & Wolfe Keystone Rosen Rye Whiskey; Harvesting Keystone Rosen rye, in partnership with Delaware Valley University.

