Marketing and events co-ordinator, Lauren Reid, brings Alberta Barley to agriculture events across the province.

**BRINGING AGRICULTURE TO THE BIG CITY**

*By Sydney Duhaime*

Like most people born and raised in the city, Lauren Reid, marketing and events co-ordinator for Alberta Barley, was a relative newcomer to agriculture.

“I didn’t come from a farming background,” the Calgary native explained. “As a city kid, you don’t often think about where your food comes from.”

However, after a year at Alberta Barley, Reid has quickly learned how much of an impact agriculture has on the daily lives of Albertans. “From seeding to harvest, and how our food gets to the grocery store, it’s incredible how complex and multifaceted the whole process is,” said Reid. “However, as a consumer, these were the things that rarely crossed my mind.”

Nowadays, Reid is working to change that. As the face of Alberta Barley at events across the province, she has the unique opportunity to interact with the general public and introduce barley to kids and adults alike.

“We attend a lot of educational events across the province,” Reid explained. “Our largest educational events are Agrium’s Ag-tivity in the City during the [Calgary] Stampede and Aggie Days in Calgary and Lethbridge, and City Slickers in Stony Plain.”

These events are a great way to connect with kids and parents and explain how their food gets from farm to plate, Reid said. “It’s an opportunity to dispel myths about agriculture and talk about the health benefits of barley. People are often surprised at how versatile barley is and that this local food can be used for more than beer and soup.”

But the benefits don’t end there. With the lines of communication open, consumer events are also a great way to exchange knowledge and ideas with an inquiring public. After all, people have questions—and the world of agriculture is always happy to provide the answers.

“These events bridge the gap between farmers and consumers,” said Reid. “They provide a place where farmers and consumers can come together to have a conversation about their food.”

For more information on Alberta Barley’s upcoming events, visit albertabarley.com.
Canmore Breeding: A Brief History

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2002
Two varieties, Ponoka and H92013289Z, were crossbred. Their offspring was then self-pollinated and grown in a climate-controlled chamber.

2003
The new seeds were grown in bulk first at the Lacombe Field Crop Development Centre and then in California. Two hundred heads, the portion of the plant that contains the seeds, were selected to continue testing.

2004
The selected seeds returned to Lacombe to be grown and stored for the next season.

2005
These seeds spawned two more generations and were planted into rows. The top 30 rows were selected for harvest and studied for their feed and malting quality.

Creating new barley varieties can be a deeply personal experience for breeder Patricia Juskiw. “I always say that these plants are like my children, and I’m disappointed when they don’t do well,” she said, laughing. “And I’m also very happy when they do go to market and become something.”

One of the “children” doing well is the Canmore variety, which, thanks to the help of Alberta Barley, had its marketing rights licensed by Canterra Seeds in 2013. Japan’s Sanwa Shurui partnered with Alberta Barley to find a suitable barley variety to make shochu, a distilled alcoholic beverage that outsells the popular sake in the Land of the Rising Sun.

“It’s a very popular liquor,” said Garson Law, Alberta Barley’s research manager. “But there isn’t enough barley grown in Japan to meet the demand, so there is an excellent opportunity for Canadian barley growers.”

The shochu barley project, funded by Alberta Barley, was an excellent opportunity to combine the Commission’s top priorities: research and market development. Started in the early 2000s, the project aimed to look at 15 to 20 varieties of barley for the spirit each year. While some varieties have shown promise, Canmore is the only one that has reached the level of commercial development.

“The Japanese market represents a potentially very large export opportunity for Canadian barley,” Law said. “The aim of the shochu project is to determine varieties of Canadian barley that would be suitable for this specialty market.”

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Brent Derkatch, director of operations and business development at Canterra Seeds, said Canterra was very impressed with the barley variety. “The variety has a very strong agronomic package and it yields really well—in fact, it’s one of the highest-yielding barley varieties available,” he said. “It also has very strong straw, meaning it has improved lodging resistance, and this is a very important characteristic for farmers. Additionally, quality tests so far have shown it to have very plump kernels with more starch, which is desirable for shochu manufacturing.”

With the project, Alberta Barley and its partners are developing modern ways to look at a traditional beverage. “We’re trying to determine what properties create a great-tasting, fermented product,” Law explained. “It’s the big unknown, the crux of our research project.

“This is a centuries-old process that has always been conducted at the local level by independent distilleries. For the first time, we’re looking at the underlying chemistry behind shochu, and that’s exciting,” said Law. “In the past, we didn’t have the analytical
capacity to study those components, but now we do.”

By developing different barley varieties, the industry is delivering a product that will meet demand and cater to consumers’ preferences.

“Consumers and end users demand the best—they appreciate quality ingredients more than ever,” said Derkatch. “We are starting to see more interest from companies like Sanwa Shurui to get involved in the development and production of their ingredients—they are also seeking to understand the quality characteristics of their ingredients and how that impacts their product. In the long run, that means varieties like Canmore are viewed more as ingredients and less like commodities.”

Though Canmore was originally tested for both malt and shochu production, it ultimately did not meet the requirements for malt. However, Canmore offers a great mix of starch, protein and other components that make it ideal for distilling into an alcoholic beverage such as shochu.

“I was shocked; I couldn’t believe the alcohol yields we get in this variety. But it also has good-quality traits; it has good pearling traits and good flavours,” said Juskiw. “It really worked out.”

Law explained that while the current market is small, growing barley for shochu could be a good opportunity for farmers. “It’s a niche market, but there may be farmers out there looking to get into something a bit different.”

But he noted that there needs to be export infrastructure in place in order for growers to benefit. “Canmore could pave the way for that,” said Law.

As for Juskiw, she believes Canmore wouldn’t be where it is without Alberta Barley’s help. “Canmore itself, and it being released as a food barley, wouldn’t have been possible without Alberta Barley—they helped it get registered,” she said. “Once it was registered, it was kind of like getting an award of merit—pretty exciting.”