

# Distillery to help with barley research at Bread Lab

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Improving the flavor of barley used to make whiskey and finding new varieties for farmers to grow are some of the goals of a new fellowship that will begin next summer at Washington State University's Bread Lab west of Burlington.

Bread Lab Director Stephen Jones said Seattle's Westland Distillery, which makes single-malt whiskey, will fund a full-time Ph.D student at the Bread Lab for four years.

The student will focus on developing unique flavors of barley that can be grown by Skagit Valley farmers, Jones said.

"This is one the of the best places in the world to grow barley," he said. "Barley likes it cool and wet. And you get flavors you wouldn't get elsewhere."

For years, Skagit Valley farmers have planted barley in their fields to improve soil health. In recent years they have grown it for profit, too, because of increasing demand from distilleries and other processors.

Steve Hawley, director of marketing for Westland Distillery, said the fellowship strengthens the partnership between researchers, farmers, the maltsters who turn grains into malt for distilling and distillers.

“That’s the beauty of Skagit Valley — it has all four components,” he said.

He said 30% of the barley used by the distillery comes from the Skagit Valley.

Matt Hoffman, company co-founder and master distiller, said this collaboration is unique.

“It’s usually just a brewer or distiller who orders something in a catalog and they make whiskey with it,” he said.

Louie Prager, who runs a craft bakery in Carlsbad, California, will be the Ph.D student doing the research. He said many in the whiskey industry believe the wood used to age whiskey is more important for flavor than the barley.

“I hope we can prove to the world that the barley does matter and the way the farmers grow it does matter,” he said.

Jones said another goal of the fellowship is to improve genetic diversity in lines of barley. He said when there is more variation in a field, it helps farmers adapt to a changing climate, such as extreme hot or cold weather.

He said the Bread Lab grows thousands of lines of barley.