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Chevalier barley: The variety that changed Swedish agriculture

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Article co-author Jenny Hagenblad with a sample of 130-year-old Chevalier grains. Photo by Per Larsson.

In 1820, John Andrews of Debbenham, Suffolk, found a particularly fine specimen of two-row barley in his field. With the help of his landlord, Charles Chevalier, they multiplied the grain and gave rise to the first true malting barley variety: Chevalier. This pioneer variety came to dominate malting barley production well into the 20th century and spread worldwide. But did grains from a single ear *actually* reach such spread or did the identity of the variety change over time?

In *Crop Science*, researchers collected Chevalier samples spanning more than 150 years of barley improvement, including landrace barley and samples stored from 19th century Swedish farms and international genebanks. The researchers genotyped these samples, analyzing genetic diversity.

Their results support the existence of a “true” Chevalier variety but also showed the term “Chevalier” was applied liberally to true Chevalier barley, landrace barley of the two-row type, and seed mixtures consisting of both. The results revealed a pre-breeding role for spontaneous outbreeding events between local landraces and exotic imported plant material. Even though modern plant breeding came of age during the early 20th century, Chevalier barley shows 19th century breeding activities resulted in gene flow and genetic erosion long before the discovery of the laws of genetics.

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Hagenblad, J., & Leino, M.W. (2021). Chevalier barley—The influence of a world-leading malting variety. *Crop Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/csc2.20668>

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