

Grist for the Mill

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Bringing local grains home

By Lola Milholland
Photo by John Valls

The Port of Portland handles more than 47 percent of all wheat exports for the United States. It's the largest wheat and barley export gate in the nation, and the third largest in the world. Under our tires, as we cross Portland's bridges each day, barges are being loaded to transport wheat out to the Pacific Ocean, where the vast majority will head to Asia to become noodles, buns, pastries and light, airy white breads.

Wheat farmers have little control over their own livelihoods: Every day, the price per bushel on the commodity market is determined anew in Kansas City, Minneapolis or Chicago, depending on the wheat variety. Distribution to far-flung customers then depends on the smooth flow of an elaborate transportation network. A recent strike by the International Longshore & Warehouse Union at the Port of Portland, which brought grain shipments to a standstill, revealed the network's volatility.

Quietly and collaboratively, a collection of farmers, bakers, brewers, distillers, researchers and investors are creating new channels outside of the commodity market for local grains. In the last few years, they've begun stirring up a tidal shift in how local businesses source the primary ingredients in everything from beer and bread to whiskey and animal feed.

Their work is giving farmers the opportunity to prioritize factors beyond yield, including good environmental practices, and the quality and flavor of the grains. This transformation marks a turning point for the local food economy, where locally grown vegetables, fruits and nuts are widely available, but grains remain a commodity we purchase blindly. In the face of an entrenched system, a newer — and older — way of doing business is breaking ground.

The Farmers

Colin Barricklow's short red beard stands on end on this freezing day in Tumwater, Washington, just south of Olympia. Barricklow is keeping his eyes open for a neighbor who raises organic pigs and poultry to arrive with a truckload of composted manure. In the meantime, he's showing me the 1938 all-crop combine that he purchased from a neighbor for next to nothing. It's a hulking, rusty orange machine that he attaches to his tractor to pull through his half-acre plots of rye, triticale, hard red wheat and hull-less oats. A combine literally combines three actions—reaping, threshing and winnowing—into a single process that cuts grain stalks, separates out grain seeds, also called berries, and spits out dried stems and leaves to return organic matter to the soil.

In 1996, Barricklow and friends founded a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. In the first year, the farm had three members. Today, he and his wife, Genine Bradwin, have expanded Kirsop Farm to support 200 CSA members on 15 acres of certified organic vegetable row crops and 25 acres divided between pastured poultry, heritage turkey and cover crops. They also sell at the Tumwater and Olympia farmers' markets. Around the farm are dozens of hand-painted signs with variations on the Kirsop Farm logo: a bunch of carrots on its side with curlicue blue flames blazing from the carrot tips.

Kirsop's most beloved and profitable crop is carrots, which thrives in their sandy loam soil, but in the last three to four years, Barricklow and Bradwin have been learning how to grow

grains. "They fit really well into rotation with row crop vegetables," Barricklow tells me. "They break up disease cycles and give nutrients to the soil." At Kirsop, they plant what are known as winter grain varieties in the fall, harvest the following August, plant the same field in a cover crop like field peas or clover, and then introduce row crop vegetables the following spring.

Kirsop is one of dozens of diverse vegetable farms west of the Cascades that are adding grain crops into their rotations, thanks in part to staunch encouragement by Washington and Oregon State University researchers, who have turned to history and their own trial plots to showcase how well grains flourish in the rainy, fertile valleys from British Columbia to Southern Oregon.

Barricklow and Bradwin have become self-sufficient in their cover crop seeds and are providing an increasing share of their organic feed for poultry, which frees them from the often exorbitant, always unpredictable expense of buying from an outside source. Starting this year, they began taking whole grains to the farmers' markets. In their barn, bags of hard red wheat berries bear the Kirsop carrot insignia and instructions on how to make wheat berry salads and porridges. "Our local food economy is thriving. We're just getting around to the grains," Barricklow reflects.

His neighbor arrives with the truck bed of composted manure, letting off plumes of steam in the freezing air. It's an even trade—several sacks of Kirsop's overripe winter squash for the pigs in exchange for composted manure for the fields. The two are exploring how to expand the partnership by integrating Kirsop Farm's grains into the neighbor's animal feed rations. "In our community, lots of market directions are opening up," Barricklow reflects. "We're baby stepping in."

The Millers

This coming school year, on a Junction City back road, a sign lodged in a field of wheat will read "Bend-LaPine School District." Throughout the growing season, the district's 16,000-plus students are invited to visit the plants that will become their pizza dough, tortillas, rolls and more. This will be the second year that the cafeteria has sourced local flour from Hunttons' Farm.

For decades, Tom and Sue Hunton grew grass seed on the family's nearly 3,000-acre farm. In 2008, when commodity prices plummeted with the recession, they decided to try growing food crops for local eaters — a more dependable and immediate market. Despite the tremendous infrastructure in Oregon for transporting grains internationally — in 2011, 85 percent of the 74.5 million bushels, or approximately 4.5 billion pounds, of Oregon wheat was shipped abroad—there was virtually nothing for storing, handling and processing grains at a smaller scale for local distribution.

In July 2010, thanks to a loan from distributor Hummingbird Wholesale, a Lane County economic development grant and their own savings, the Hunttons purchased the Engsko, a Danish gristmill with 38-inch-diameter stones, to provide freshly milled flour for local grocery stores, bakeries, school districts and home bakers. They named their new operation Camas Country Mill, and when it opened in April 2011, it was the first flourmill of its kind in the Willamette Valley since the Great Depression. The Hunttons now have the rare ability to trace grains from field to flour sack.

"It's just a huge learning curve," Tom Hunton says while laughing. "For somebody that's totally from a production background, where you accept the price that someone else offers you, it's a whole new paradigm. We have to recognize what the market says, and then say, 'but this is worth more!'"

By 2012, the mill was producing nearly one million pounds of flour. Almost all of the grain comes from the Hunttons' fields, where you'll find everything from hard red spring and winter wheat — not typically grown in the Willamette Valley—to ancient emmer and spelt, Red Fife, dark northern rye, buckwheat, teff, oats, Tibetan purple barleys, garbanzo beans and half a dozen varieties of lentil. Tom and Sue are seeking grain varieties for yield, disease resistance and acceptability by industrial equipment—the three common standards—but also for high nutritional content, soil health, integration with crop rotations and flavor. They've effectively transformed from a one-crop conventional grass seed farm into a model for diversification

and biodiversity.

The flours they mill at Camas Country are not like standard, white all-purpose flour, which is scrapped of its bran and germ, milled and fortified with synthetic approximations of the vitamins and minerals native to the bran and germ. Everything they mill is whole grain.

“Whole grain flour is probably less than 10 percent of the flour market,” Tom reflects. “We’re all used to white, unbleached flour, and a light, white airy loaf. Our tastes have gotten away from whole grain nutrition.”

The Hunttons have purposefully sought out diverse customers, not only to give their business greater stability, but also to fulfill their personal desire to reach local eaters, regardless of their income. The rye berries have become popular with micro-distillers; their flours are utilized in bakeries throughout the region; they grow and package a lentil and barley soup mix for Food for Lane County, a local food bank; and three school districts — Bend-LaPine, Bethel and North Santiam — are receiving their hard, white whole-wheat flour, which looks deceptively like standard white flour, thanks to the natural light color of the grains.

“Many people can’t always afford something as fresh and nutritious as this,” Tom says. “To be able to deal directly with food banks and schools—that’s our food for the soul.”

Tom loves the ancient emmer, spelt, purple barleys and lentils for their nutrition, but asked for his favorite grain that they grow? “Undoubtedly it’s the heirloom Red Fife,” he says unhesitatingly of the Canadian heritage variety, first planted in 1842, which they grow. “For whole-wheat flour, it’s certainly got yield limitations. It’s a difficult one to work with. But it rewards you greatly with the flavor.” In a local grain economy, great flavor adds value for the farmer.

The Bakers

The brick oven at Tabor Bread rises from the floor to the ceiling. Every afternoon around 3 p.m., 22-year-old baker Cory Mast loads in some fourteen stacks of oak, maple and alder pieces. At 7 p.m., the staff lights them on fire, and when he arrives the next morning, the mammoth oven is scorching hot. Its warmth lasts throughout the day, accompanied by the steady whir of a piano-sized Austrian stone mill in a room behind the checkout counter. The brand-new bakery, which opened last year on the corner of 51st and Hawthorne, is Portland’s first to rely exclusively on wood fire and to mill its own flour. Their whole grain sourdough loaves are toothsome, addictively tangy and different from anything else around.

“Whole grains have so much oil and nutrition. The minute you crack it open, it begins to change,” Tabor Bread owner Tissa Stein tells me. She moved to Portland from Petaluma, California, where she helped start an acclaimed wood-fired bakery, Wild Flour Bread. On her trip north, she recruited Mast, whose training with a baker from San Francisco’s Tartine and natural affinity for sourdough had prepared him well to develop Tabor Bread’s recipes and run production.

“I don’t think you can match the flavor of bread baked with freshly milled flour. It’s a little...” he hesitates, “more.”

Between 9:30 and 10:30 a.m., Wednesday through Sunday, Mast pulls fresh loaves from the oven. In a bandana and white T-shirt, he swings his wooden bread peel to retrieve racks of muffins, trays of scones and rounds of crusty loaves.

Before the bakery opened, while Mast researched local grain growers, he discovered Camas Country Mill. The Hunttons now deliver whole grains to the bakery to be milled in-house for the majority of Tabor’s breads.

“When you’re working with local grains, you have to accept a certain amount of variability,” Mast relates. Large mills blend for consistency and what they call flour “performance.” Grains are mixed to create optimal blends for various uses—low-protein flours for cakes and pastries and high protein flours for bread. But as an artisan baker, if you want to differentiate your product, you’re stuck with the same flour — which has the same flavor — as everyone else. At Tabor Bread, the distinctive, heady aroma in the air has strength of character that evokes another century, when every household had its own sourdough and

every field of wheat, its own flavor.

Mast has written the Tabor Bread menu to call out the wheat variety in each loaf, aiming to help shoppers expand their grain vocabulary and discernment. Tom Hunton's favorite Red Fife appears in a domed, scored boule—acidic, springy and complex. On the wooden cooling rack, the plump boules sit beside kamut baguettes; hard, white spring-wheat batards; and rye Pullman loaves.

"Baking with local flour takes more attention and responsiveness. Every day, the dough is different; the starter is different; the oven is different," Mast says. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The Community

On a piercingly bright, icy January day, the STAR community center in south Tacoma is filled with nearly 200 people from Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and Idaho, gathered for the Cascadia Grains Conference.

"Before the First Transcontinental Railroad, before the Oregon Trail," Richard Scheuerman, a history professor at Seattle University, tells us, "members of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company were growing fields of grains on this very spot."

For decades, Professor Scheuerman has been mining archives and performing interviews with literally the oldest people he can find to learn about the first grain varieties brought over from Europe that flourished in the Pacific Northwest. He is one of a dozen presenters leading discussions throughout the day on everything from ancient heirloom varieties and musky local whiskey to rebuilding small-scale infrastructure and the role for co-ops in a new grain economy. Among this cadre of bakers and chicken farmers, barley malters and agronomists, there is a common vision for an inclusive system that better provides for resilient local communities. Professor Scheuerman shakes a jar of Red Fife wheat kernels at us like a rattle. "It's an exciting time to be in this work!"

Lola Milholland works for Ecotrust on food and farming initiatives. She first wrote about her desire for local grains in 2008, when she tried her hand at making homemade instant noodles. She thanks her mother for sharing her sourdough starter and her friend Amanda Peden for keeping it alive when Lola neglects it.

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