

New Upstate NY Mill to Boost Production from Local Grain

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ENFIELD, N.Y. — Farmer Ground Flour is building a new mill in Enfield, having outgrown its first home, in an old Agway feed building in Trumansburg, where it started in March 2009.

“Here we could make our mistakes,” co-owner and miller Greg Mol said of the original mill, where he has figured out how to snake a labyrinth of tubes and equipment through the building’s two floors.

The long wooden building has a loading dock running the length of it, but no system to handle quantities of grains for processing, or to store them once processed.

The current site has shown Mol and farmer Thor Oechsner, his partner in Farmer Ground Flour, what they want at the new mill, not only for grain and product storage, but also in terms of equipment flow.

Moving grain from Oechsner Farms in Newfield to the current mill eats up a lot of time. A truckload will fill eight one-ton totes at the mill. Maneuvering the totes through the heights and angles of the building’s floor plan is not simple. While this is an improvement over the original transfer, the new mill will be much better, the owners said.

“We started with 50-pound bags in a pickup truck. Greg had to climb a ladder and pour them into the top of the mill,” Oechsner said. “So going to totes was excellent. But now we’ll go to bulk bins and augers and gravity to do that work.” Another problem that prompted the move is that Mol can’t run the existing sifters fast enough for optimal production. When he runs the sifters at full speed, the building shakes too much for the other tenants.

“Still, this was a great place to start,” Mol said.

While some people start similar businesses with brand-new buildings, hiring milling engineers and buying new — or at least newer equipment than they did — there is an advantage to starting from scratch with little capital and in less than ideal conditions, they said.

That advantage is not just escaping debt. Trying to work within the given constraints, Mol understands how a structure can best serve the purposes of the mill. People who invest a lot of money right from the start could be investing in the wrong design, or tools that won’t suit a market that isn’t yet established.

Experts can't predict how a business will grow, and might not understand the unknown audience for a niche product like local grains.

Experience has been a great teacher, the partners said.

The building for the new mill sits on 1.5 acres of a 38-acre site that is 10 miles from Oechsner Farms and close to Wide Awake Bakery in Mecklenburg, which uses Farmer Ground Flour. Oechsner grew buckwheat on the surrounding fields this summer.

The new mill is a 30-by-80-foot box that is 30 feet tall on one end and a single 16-foot story at the other for storage and offices. Instead of putting in a wooden second floor on the tall side, they're going to build a metal framework. Once harvest is done, Dan Gladstone, who works at the farm, will weld the framework to hold the equipment.

"We wanted a metal floor because that would hold a lot more weight and handle a lot more shaking from the sifter. We didn't build a second floor because it needed to be really strong," Mol said.

The mills will be on the first floor and the sifters on the second. The extra height allows them to place chutes at a good angle for grain flow. The whole milling operation will be encased in an insulated area to help contain sound and vibrations; the heat generated by the mill will heat the rest of the building. While this space will let Mol lay out equipment in a fluid manner, the new system will resemble what he already uses.

"I'm happy with the system, and I'm into simplicity," Mol said. "I can make the flour people are into. A guy from Canada said, I can't find this flour anywhere else.' "

Farmer Ground Flour is known to artisan bakers as a high-extraction flour. In milling, extraction refers to how much flour is extracted from the grains. Whole wheat flours have 100 percent extraction, while white flours are generally 70 to 75 percent extraction. High-extraction flours have more germ and bran than white flour, and are preferred by artisan bakers for the taste and nutritional qualities they lend to bread.

Currently, Mol uses two stone mills manufactured by Meadows Mills, a company in North Carolina. One mill has a set of 30-inch stones, and the other mill's stones are 24 inches in diameter. The mills run in series; two sifters are used for various flour products.

The new mill also will have an additional mill exclusively for grinding corn. Outside, a bucket elevator will be connected to gravity bins that can handle at least 25 tons.

Farmer Ground Flour took out a loan for the project, and has a budget of \$110,000. The building cost \$40,000, and they're trying to keep costs contained by doing the interior work themselves.

Mol and Neal Johnston, who also works at the mill, are spending a lot of time working on the building. Johnston and Mol have worked together to streamline operations at the existing mill, and Johnston's insight and electrical know-how are great assets for retooling, and partially automating, the new configuration, they said.

Farmer Ground Flour mills 10,000 pounds of hard wheat a month, and a number of other products, such as cornmeal, polenta, rye and other wheat flours. Mol predicts the new mill will handle 15 to 20 tons of grains a month.

Oechsner will supply the grain himself or work with other growers. This year, he planted more rye and corn in anticipation of the expansion.

"We'll have to make up for the increase with contracts to other farmers, but I'm adding additional farmed land to my operation, so some will come out of that as well," Oechsner said.

Farmer Ground Flour received a \$75,000 Value Added Producers Grant from USDA Rural Development in February, which will be used to help market the increased output.