

## Bring Back Local Grains! One Man's Quest in Upstate NY

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Don Lewis fell into flour because of his chickens. Back in the late 1990s, he went to [Lightning Tree Farm](#) for organic chicken feed and saw that Alton Earnhart was growing wheat. The farmer offered him a bag of flour, and this piece of wheat history began.

At the time, Lewis sold baked goods featuring his own honey at New York City's [Greenmarkets](#), so of course he was intrigued by the farmer's flour. As a result, he began to incorporate local flour into all his products, increasing the percentage he used each year and upping the acreage he asked Earnhart to grow. All the while, Lewis educated consumers about ingredients as he offered samples.

In the early 1980s Lewis used samples to discuss the honey he produced. When he started baking bread with local grains, he also used the belly as a point of mental sale.

Since 2008 Lewis has run [Wild Hive Bakery and Café](#), a Hudson Valley shop and eatery that he is now closing in order to focus on his passion: redeveloping a regional grains system.

"I did not open the café to be a restaurateur," Lewis explains. "I opened it to get local ingredients into local stomachs. That was the objective. I feel like the consumer base now is tremendous and awareness is tremendous and what I need to do is to really focus on the supply and processing end."

I first encountered local Hudson Valley grains when my husband brought me an oatmeal ganache bar from Wild Hive. Since I'm a baker and I romance the past I already had a fondness for grains and their history.

By necessity, all flour used to be local. I knew that flour was milled near me on the Poestenkill in Troy, New York. Previously, the Erie Canal pushed wheat production and milling to Western New York, and developments in transportation and technology pushed it further west.

But knowing that anyone was growing grains in New York State now wowed me. I began to pay attention, and learned about farmers and researchers at NOFA-New York's conference in January 2011. Last July, I got to tour the mill at Wild Hive, thanks to [New York Farm to Bakery](#), a project that paired bakers from New York City with upstate millers and farmers.

“A lot of the growers in Upstate New York and the Northeast are [already] growing organic grain for the organic milk industry,” Lewis said. Hearing they can get a better price growing for the human consumption market intrigues them. Humid and potentially wet summers pose challenges to growing grains in the region, as does post harvest handling, but the chance to break out of a commodity system is appealing to farmers. Witnessing the success and strength of Wild Hive's partnership with Earnhart shows that another way of selling is possible.

In 2006, Lewis began to run the bakery entirely on his own flour, and was using 20 tons of locally grown grain annually. He was milling in a storage trailer at his home, and baking in a certified kitchen at home too. In 2008, he moved the bakery in the back of the storefront, and shortly afterwards, moved the mill to a nearby barn.

Amping up his milling capacity at this facility helped amp up farmer production, and consumer demand. [Eataly](#), an Italian emporium in New York City, pursued him and doubled the flour production at Wild Hive; their bakery makes 1000 loaves a day with Wild Hive flour, including a special grind for ciabatta loaves that

Lewis mastered under guidance from Italian bakers. The fact that this big bakery and others are using Wild Hive flour makes Lewis' transition possible.

Lewis is driven to work for regional food security. His work at Wild Hive is a model that's inspired groups in the Northeast to pursue collaborative relationships around growing, processing and baking grains. Infrastructure for harvest, post harvest handling, and storage are the weakest points in these operations. With the help of funding from USDA Organic Research and Extension Initiative granted to Cornell, [OGRIN](#), [NOFA-NY](#) and [PASA](#) and researchers at Cornell are working on these issues for growers, including a mobile processing unit that Robert Perry from NOFA-NY is assembling.

Lewis has been working on these issues between field and flour, too, and now he can tackle them with more focus.

“The most important thing is bringing on new growers and getting more interest in growing in the valley and in the region, and expanding the production abilities for myself and then for others,” Lewis said.

Tools he wants to incorporate into an expansion of the mill include a grain cleaner and other equipment that farmers might not have, but need, to handle grains. Lewis has worked with the [Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation](#), and he expects to again as he expands the Wild Hive Community Grain Project.

The story of Wild Hive won't end now that the bakery and café are closed. The tale will keep opening up futures, just as a bag of flour made one man a miller, and changed another man's farming to include more and more grains. That the miller always bought the grains he asked the farmer to grow gave other farmers confidence in him, and in this market for local grains.

“The supply is there, the distribution is there, but it’s not up to me to do it all. I did all that I’ve done because it needed to be done,” he said. “Now there’s other people stepping up. That’s why they call it a system, not a monopoly.”