

NY Miller Cultivating Interest in Local Grains
Published by Lancaster Farming, September 2012

CLINTON CORNERS, N.Y. — “If it’s in here, it’s in here,” Don Lewis said, pointing first to his belly and then to his head.

He was referring to bread samples he gave away to help build consumer awareness of locally grown grains.

“It has to be in your stomach to get into your head.”

The miller stood outside the barn that houses Wild Hive Farm Bakery and Café’s milling operations, discussing his work with a handful of farmers that were visiting as part of a recent NOFA-NY field day.

“This grain project is a little more than 12 years old,” Lewis said.

The Wild Hive Community Grain Project had its genesis in a quest for organic chicken feed. Lewis went to Lightning Tree Farm in Millbrook seeking animal feed, and discovered that farmer Alton Earnhart was growing wheat.

That was in the late 1990s. At the time, Lewis was selling his breads in New York City. Honey from his own hives starred in his home-style breads, which he sold at farmers markets and other outlets. While buying feed at Lightning Tree Farm, he found a bin of flour, and his curiosity was piqued.

The flour wasn’t for sale. Earnhart had grown it for personal use. Earnhart grew organic feed for animals, and farmers said he couldn’t grow wheat in the Northeast. He took this dismissal as a dare.

Earnhart gave Lewis a bag of flour, and he began incorporating it into his baking. The results were so satisfying that Lewis asked Earnhart to grow wheat for him. That first year, Lewis incorporated 8 percent local grain into all recipes, rather than segregating the local grain into one product that consumers could choose to buy or ignore.

Gradually, Lewis asked Earnhart for more and more wheat, expanding his milling and baking operations along the way. By 2006, he was able to run his bakery entirely on the flour he milled, using 20 tons of grain annually.

The bakery moved from a commercial kitchen he’d built into his home to the back of a café he opened in 2008. The mill started out in a trailer outside his house, migrated to a barn, and then to the current barn in 2009.

Prior to that expansion, Lewis had a good customer base for his flours. Commercial bakeries in New York City were getting interested in his flour, but local grain production couldn’t quite meet the demand.

“Our climate is spotty,” said Lewis, referring to the challenges of wheat maturing in the humid and wet late summer, conditions that can lead to fusarium head blight and the associated contamination of vomitoxin. “Hedgerows make fog lay in a bowl and kill a crop. I’ve seen it happen.”

As his needs grew, some seasons he had to reach outside the Hudson Valley for regional wheat and grains; the tonnage he used helped predict amounts he could ask farmers to plant for him.

Demand really grew when Eataly NYC, an Italian food emporium in New York City run by food giants Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich, pursued Lewis and his flour. This more than doubled flour production at Wild Hive, and wheat production in Hudson Valley fields, and elsewhere throughout the state.

Wild Hive’s success is generating interest in farmers nearby and elsewhere.

“It hasn’t been difficult,” Lewis said when asked if sourcing grains regionally was tough. “People who are already growing for animal consumption or commodities are ready to break away.”

Growers in central and western New York are also providing him grain. Last year, he said, three new growers within 40 miles of the mill were trying something new with grains.

People at the field day were curious about getting into grains, too.

CaraLeigh Wilson and Sten Wilson of nearby Point of View Farm raise Finnsheep. Primarily, the animals are pastured, but they need grain during late gestation and early lactation; the farm purchases about a ton a year from Lightning Tree Farm.

“I’m probably about one to two years away from adding some grains,” CaraLeigh Wilson said, noting that she’ll start small. “Knowing that there’s a community in this area that’s working on this makes it more viable.”

The big stumbling block for growing grains is infrastructure for post harvest handling, from cleaning equipment to storage facilities. Such tools are on Lewis’ list as he plans to dive deeper into the community grain project.

“There used to be people who had mobile roving cleaning units. Not having access to a cleaner could be the tipping point for a farmer that wants to grow grains for human consumption,” Lewis said.

The difference between growing feed for animals and grains for food is in handling at harvest and post harvest. When growers call Lewis with grains, he

asks a number of questions: Is it dry? Is it clean? Was the combine clean when you harvested?

A couple of years ago, one farmer brought him wheat that was 20 percent rye; the farmer hadn't cleaned his planter between planting rye and wheat. Lewis announced recently that he's closing the café to focus on the work of the community grain project.

"The grain system is going to bring food security back to this region," Lewis said. "The Northeast is really blooming. Meat production, milk production, and vegetable production are very strong here."

Staple grains are a crucial part of the puzzle, not just in the Hudson Valley but throughout the Northeast, where a number of other groups are now working on re-establishing regional grain systems.

"(The café) was the showcase to help reach the consumer and help them understand, that's why it was there," Lewis said of closing the café and bakery. "The most important thing is bringing on new growers and getting more interest in growing in the valley and in the region."