

Whole-grain pasta key part of local wheat movement

Tara Duggan, Special to The Chronicle

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Five years ago, Oliveto restaurant in Oakland already had a menu full of local produce, meat and fish, but owner Bob Klein wanted the pasta to be local, too. He brought wheat seeds back from Italy and found nearby farmers to grow them.

He discovered, however, that the cost of cleaning and milling the grain on such a small scale was prohibitive. Local flour would be much more difficult to access than lettuce or eggs.

"As it turns out, grain is way more complicated than anything else," said Klein. Still, he became so committed to locally grown wheat that he created Community Grains, a line of whole-grain dried pasta, flour and polenta made from California-grown grains.

Now, other new companies are starting to make dried pasta from California flour, responding to Bay Area consumer demand for local foods. At the same time, more small growers are planting wheat, trying to preserve its identity rather than following the standard procedure of mixing it in grain elevators. Manufacturing pasta just might be what makes that locally grown wheat more viable.

"We see the whole-grain locavore movement in Northern California, and we feel like we're a drop of water in front of a tidal wave," said Don Luber of Pasta Sonoma in Rohnert Park, which manufactures pasta for Community Grains and many grocers who he said are clamoring for pasta made from local and heritage grains.

The italian connection

Currently, California cultivates 750,000 acres of wheat. One-quarter of that is exported, including to Italy, which in turn exports pasta back to the United States.

It's one reason Renato Sardo, former head of Slow Food International in Italy and now an Oakland resident, decided to use California wheat for his new company, Baia Pasta, which will begin making Italian-style artisan pasta at its Jack London Square facility later this month. In March, he and partner Dario Barbone plan to plant their own durum wheat - the classic pasta variety - near Mount Shasta.

Bread to pasta

Monica Spiller of Whole Grain Connection in Mountain View has been working on local wheat since the 1990s, when she began test-growing heritage varieties, called landrace wheat, that have thrived in the area. A longtime whole-grain advocate, Spiller always encouraged home cooks to bake their own bread. But one day at the Sunnyvale farmers' market, she did a pasta-making demo to show another use for farmer Fritz Durst's fresh-milled, whole-grain flour.



"Everybody was looking at the stand and saying, 'Where's the pasta you're selling?' " she said.

Spiller realized that pasta might be a more direct route to the home cook's heart. She brought samples of Durst's Sonora and Ethiopian Blue Tinge wheat to Pasta Sonoma, which now uses the grains to produce pasta under the Whole Grain Connection label. The pasta is sold at Country Sun in Palo Alto, as well as in store brands for Sonoma Market and Oliver's Markets in Sonoma County.

"It's so simple," she said. "I've always been working on the bread, and the pasta is suddenly a magic solution to the need to eat enough whole grains."

A grain trust

When Klein first wanted to get local flour for Oliveto's pasta and encountered roadblocks, he brought together a group of flour experts to create Community Grains.

"It wouldn't make sense to just make pasta," he said. "It had to be everything on the chain; it had to be relationships with farmers, with millers, with food producers. We even have a science committee."

Community Grains uses California flour stone-ground by Certified Foods in Woodland. Now that production is up to 30,000 pounds of pasta per month, the company is working with Front Porch Farms in Healdsburg to grow identity-preserved organic wheat. Community Grains products are available at many Bay Area stores, including Whole Foods, Andronico's, Berkeley Bowl, Draeger's, The Pasta Shop and [Monterey Market](#).

Baia Pasta's focus is on artisan quality more than whole grains, but it uses whole durum and spelt in some pastas. Sardo also wants to create a pasta using semolato, a mixture of whole wheat and white durum that was standard in Italian pasta until flour refinement became widespread in the 1950s. (Go to www.baiapasta.com for a list of where the pasta will be sold.)

It's that refinement that many local grain advocates are fighting. Joseph Vanderliet started his mill, Certified Foods, in 1992 in response to the way white flour was produced, with the bran and germ, which contain most of wheat's minerals and vitamins, removed.

White flour seen as wasteful

"I was upset with the amount of food that was wasted in order to make white flour," said Vanderliet, whose stone milling process keeps intact the relationship of the bran, the germ and the endosperm.

Yet, despite consumer interest in local flour and healthier grains, whole-grain pasta can still be a hard sell.

"We're known for silky white noodles," said Klein of Oliveto. "How does a restaurant, an Italian restaurant - we're not a health food restaurant - deal with whole-grain pasta?"

Chef Jonah Rhodehamel decided to embrace the rougher-textured hard red winter wheat pasta by serving it with hearty meat sauces to complement its bold flavor.

Pasta made with local flour tends to cost \$6 to \$8 per pound, which is comparable to artisan brands imported from Italy. The price is due to the specialized equipment and the relatively tiny scale of production. But that could change.

Said Luber of Pasta Sonoma, "The artisan-crafted, whole-grain pasta is the easiest sell I've ever had in my life."