

Farm Fresh

by Ann M. Colford and Leah Sottile
www.inlander.com

September 9, 2004-- Like most Inland Northwest wheat farmers, Fred Fleming of Reardan spent August working dawn to dusk — and often later — to get his crop harvested. But while the majority of local farmers grow soft white wheat for Asian markets, Fleming grows a variety of hard red spring wheat recently developed by WSU wheat breeder Kim Kidwell specifically for the local climate. The wheat produces a high-gluten flour that Fleming and partner Karl Kupers call Shepherd's Grain. Since spring, HearthBread BakeHouse of Spokane has produced a new line of breads based on the Shepherd's Grain flour, marking the first time that Spokane and Coeur d'Alene area consumers can easily buy bread made from locally grown wheat.

"Karl and I fell into this," says Fleming. "We didn't come in with this grandiose idea. We had been commodity farmers, where you produce wheat as cheaply as you can. But the problem is, it's not sustainable. You rely on subsidies and farm the ground in a way that's not the most environmentally friendly manner. So we wanted to separate ourselves from commodity farming."

Two years ago, Fleming and Kupers founded Columbia Plateau Producers to market Shepherd's Grain products. The organization now includes several family farms in the Inland Northwest all dedicated to sustainable agriculture. The growers use direct seeding and no-till farming methods that minimize disturbance of the soil, holding in moisture, nutrients and carbon. They reduce their use of chemicals, disallow the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and foster wildlife habitat while providing safe and fair working conditions for farm laborers. By following these practices, the Shepherd's Grain products have been certified by the Food Alliance (www.foodalliance.org), a Portland-based non-profit that sets standards for environmentally friendly and socially responsible food production.

"There is a weight and validity to the Food Alliance," says Fleming. "They also have allowed us to be introduced into the marketplace. Before, we were trying to push our way in and the marketplace said, no, we really don't want to talk to farmers, we have our system all set up, go away."

Purchasing a Food Alliance-certified product gives consumers the satisfaction of being food activists through their choices at the grocery store, says Fleming.

"Activism can be a quiet, uneventful affair," he says. "The single mom in the grocery store who picks out the Shepherd's Grain product is being a food activist. Consumers can be proactive in helping farmers take care of the environment and preserve the family farm. We firmly believe that by having a healthier soil, we will have a healthier product for the consumer."

Rather than selling their wheat as a commodity at the grain silo of the local cooperative, Fleming and the other Columbia Plateau Producers keep their wheat in home storage and do much of their own marketing. Using what Fleming calls "relationship marketing," the growers reach out to restaurants, food service organizations, commercial bakers and retailers.

"They come out to the farm and they ride the combine," he says. "They learn about the environmental impact of what we're doing, and they learn about how to support local farms in a manner that is truly user-friendly to everybody."

In addition to HearthBread BakeHouse products, which are available in most grocery stores, local consumers can get a taste of baked goods made with Shepherd's Grain flour at selected local restaurants, like Luna and Anthony's. Only a couple of retail outlets — the Farmer's Daughter Country Store in Airway Heights and the URM Cash and Carry on Sprague Avenue in the Spokane Valley — sell the flour directly to consumers so far, but Fleming is optimistic that Shepherd's Grain will find new outlets.

"People enjoy local foods," he says. "They like to know the farmer."

And farmers like Fleming and Kupers like seeing products connected to their farms on local supermarket shelves.

"As a wheat farmer who typically sees his crop go into an anonymous bin, it's exciting to see a food product with origins on my farm," notes Kupers. "It proves our vision of a viable market for environmental stewardship is being realized."

The land that Fleming calls home has been farmed by his family since 1888, when his great-grandfather, Fred Wagner, homesteaded just north of Reardan because he knew the railroad was coming. In those early years, that single homestead could support all of the family's needs; now, farmers need far more acreage just to break even. In his own lifetime, Fleming has seen the number of farmers in the area dwindle as the average size of each farm has ballooned. He hopes to put the brakes on that trend through his transition to direct seeding and relationship marketing.

"We have to become sustainable," he says, glancing across the desk to the photo of his granddaughter, who's a sixth-generation Fleming in Eastern Washington. Right next to the photo sits a Global Positioning System (GPS) device. "It comes down to embracing our heritage, knowing who we are and what we are, knowing how to take care of the place, and taking technology and putting it to good use."

— Ann M. Colford