

Marketing, Production Pave Way for Hard Wheat

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SPOKANE – In the novel “Gone With the Wind,” Tara is the Southern plantation razed by the Union Army and rebuilt by the heroine. In the Northwest, Tara is a hard red spring wheat variety being used to revive domestic demand for regional production.

Beginning this spring, a Tara flour blend will be used to make five bread products at a mid-size Spokane bakery and pizza crusts at Washington State University’s dining facilities.

Fred Fleming and Karl Kupers are the brains behind Columbia Plateau Producers, a company the pair started in 2002 to market not just commodities but also the way they’re grown. Shepherd’s Grain is the name given their high-gluten flour as well as other commodities raised under a sustainable agricultural and economic system.

The Portland-based Northwest Food Alliance is an integral part of the pair’s vision. A third-party verifier, the alliance’s backing assures consumers the products they buy are produced in an environmentally and socially responsible manner.

Kupers and Fleming were the first Northwest wheat farmers to receive the alliance’s seal of approval. Although farming with a direct-seed system was one of the crucial certification factors, there are other requirements as well. For instance, Fleming was originally denied certification because his company, Reardan and Ritzville Seed Co., lacked an employee handbook.

Eleven grain growers who are members of CPP now either have the food alliance certification or are working toward it. In order to assure an adequate supply of wheat and to protect against drought or pest infestations, the company has fields of Tara planted at different locations around the Northwest.

Kupers expects 25,000 bushels of wheat could be marketed through local avenues in 2004. HearthBread BakeHouse, a Spokane bread company with distribution to nine Western states, will be taking some of that production.

Frank Pigot, president of the company, said the Tara flour blend will be used in

three loaf or “artisan” breads, a hamburger bun and a hoagie roll. The product’s packaging will display the food alliance label as well as the fact the wheat for the bread was grown in the Northwest.

Although Pigot said the Food Alliance certification has value, it’s the quality of the flour he remarked about first. As a specialty baker, HearthBread BakeHouse caters to the “super premium” side of the business.

“We are not a loaf of bread for everybody, but it is what we are focusing on,” he said, adding that high-end products are also the fastest-growing segment of the bakery business. Pigot knows the segment well. Among other things, his company produces pastries for Starbucks.

For years, Northwest growers have lived with the idea that because of the environment, the region can’t grow a hard red spring wheat that competes with the highest-quality Montana and Midwest varieties. As a result, about 80 percent of the three-state region is planted to soft white wheat varieties.

Kupers and Fleming believed otherwise, and Tara is the wheat that validates their instincts. Released out of Kim Kidwell’s WSU spring wheat breeding program in 2002, Tara is at the top of the quality list of Washington’s hard red spring cultivars.

Brady Carter, wheat quality specialist at WSU, said scientists are still learning about what makes a good hard wheat. Usually it is a combination of factors, but adequate protein and strong gluten are always necessary ingredients.

When it comes to Tara, he said, it’s not just the quality that’s special, it’s the fact that Kupers and Fleming are marketing it as identity-preserved.

“I think they have a good system in terms of being able to control what they are delivering to their customers,” he said. “There is a lot of talk in the industry about the value in knowing what you have.”

As for the value of Tara marketed as Shepherd’s Grain, Kupers said, sustainability is about more than the practices a farmer applies on the ground.

So the price of Tara is based on a reasonable cost of production plus an acceptable rate of return. The wheat is going for around \$5.25 a bushel now.