

# BAKING WITH WHOLE GRAINS: (and Saving the World)

I CAME TO THE WORK OF BREADMAKING WITH A MARKED PREDISPOSITION TO FAVOR WHOLE GRAINS AND WHOLE GRAIN FLOURS. WE HAD JUST COME THROUGH THE 1960S. I WON'T RE-HASH THE STORY OF THOSE TIMES SINCE THE PHRASES ABOUT "A TIME OF CHANGE" SEEM OVERDONE. MAYBE YOU HAD TO BE THERE. LET'S JUST SAY THAT BY THE EARLY '70S, ALTHOUGH SOME DUST HAD BEGUN TO SETTLE ON THAT PERIOD OF CULTURAL TURNOVER, MANY OF THE ISSUES WERE VERY MUCH ALIVE AND DEVELOPING.

By **CHUCK CONWAY** Guild Member and Owner, O Bread Bakery, Shelburne, VT

Among those, and relevant to this particular story, was the growth and mutual influence of certain threads: ① the back-to-the-land phenomenon, ② a revival of interest in craft (and yes, artisan) pursuits, and ③ what was called the natural foods movement. These were accompanied by (whether causing or resulting from is hard to say) a sense or intuition we had that ran counter to the seemingly blind cultural shift of the preceding decades, towards mass production and the reliance on industrial technology. Many of us felt that, despite the advances, much had been lost and that some of it was of great importance – important both from the producing end and the consuming end.

One development was that a number of food items began to appear on American grocery shelves that had not been seen before: tofu, miso, organic produce. And the bread aisle was evolving beyond the scarcely edible, brick-like loaves that had been the only alternative to Wonder bread. European-style country breads. *Desem*. Levain. Hearth-baked loaves. Breads that your parents and grandparents would eat and enjoy.

As I said, my take-off point in baking was tied to a wish to introduce breads made with whole grains

and whole grain flours to a much wider audience. At our first Vermont bakery, my wife and I began experimenting with milling our own flour on a small 8-inch stone mill. We milled mostly wheat from Ted Whitmer & Sons in Montana, supplemented with some spring wheat grown by a friend in Craftsbury, Vermont.

When we moved our baking operation to Shelburne Farms in 1977, we devoted our efforts to producing exclusively whole grain products and to honing our skills in fermentation. We experimented with a number of "starters" we made for leavening bread: miso breads, beer breads, breads that rose for three days. No store-bought yeast for us.

Not satisfied with our results, we traveled to Europe. Extensive visits and studies with bakers in Belgium, the Netherlands, and France supplied the framework we had previously lacked to manage the leaven cultures. Actually, we still had no comprehensive or scientific overview, but had found a way in. We began producing *desem* breads. *Desem* is the Flemish word for the leaven culture we had learned to propagate.

Shelburne Farms engaged us by having a go at raising wheat. We had heard from a number of people that our new home, the Champlain Valley, had been, during Colonial times, a breadbasket for New England. Among various plantings, I recall one – a variety called Pennal, which we procured from Johnny's Seeds. The catalogue described it as "a soft red winter, European-bread type wheat." It grew over 5 feet tall. The flavor was excellent, but the flour needed substantial help from some higher protein varieties.

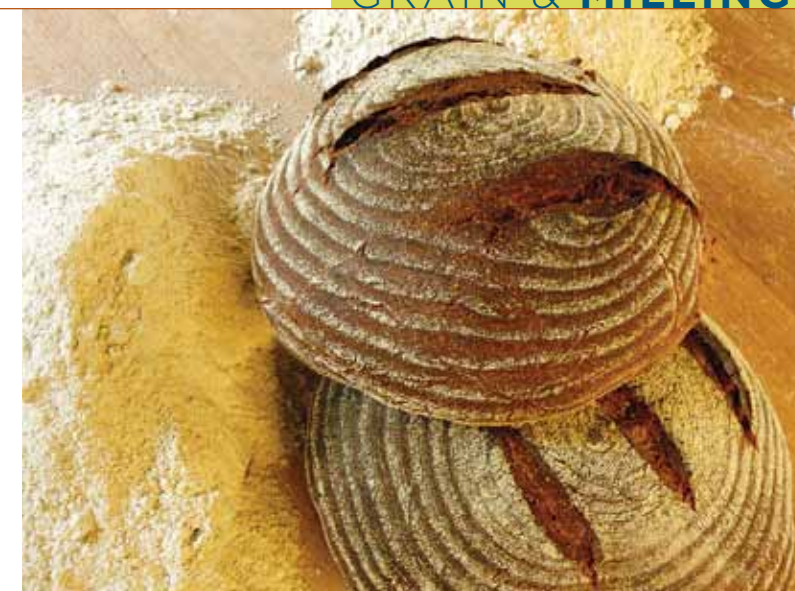
We acquired a larger mill, and began milling in earnest: wheat, rye, spelt, some corn, as well as some soft white, for pastry flour, that was grown here on Shelburne Farms. I learned to dress our millstones, and we all managed to put up with the noise and dust.

The homegrown wheat project was gratifying but daunting. We had problems with weeds in some fields, problems with harvest, problems with storage of crops that came in too high in moisture. The people managing Shelburne Farms had many other challenges to meet in order to bring the old agricultural estate into its present-day incarnation of non-profit education organization. They told us they'd have to take a break from grain production. We then made the acquaintance of two brothers, Ben and Joe Gleason, who were starting to raise wheat in Bridport, Vermont, a short distance south of Shelburne.

There was a period of time when the 3 a.m. bakers would begin the day by taking a supply of empty grain bags, some scoops, and the bakery pickup to the main section of the barn. There, one or two would climb into the old tin-lined grain storage bins. They would fill the bags with wheat and hand them out to those waiting on the outside. Then we'd carry them over to ancient cleaner and run through to separate chaff, sticks, etc., put the cleaned wheat into the truck, drive back across the courtyard to the bakery, unload, mill and only then ... start mixing.

It was a lot of work. But we were pretty idealistic about the whole project - my interest in, and passion for, whole grain breads was not just gustatory – not that of an epicure or gourmet. It wasn't even just nutritional, in the good-health sense. It was grounded in the conviction that whole cereal grains had been responsible for the advent of farming, of civilization itself, and that they represented the best foundation for continued human development. In short, I was out to save the world.

O Bread's  
Whole Rye Bread



This meant that we felt we knew what people should have (should eat, should want), and we felt we had something that was so self-evidently good that people would agree – if they would just give it a fair try.

But despite the lip-service – what people will tell you conversationally, what magazines tout as "the trend," what people report as their purchasing habits – the fact is that what people really usually want, as revealed by what they actually buy, is white bread.

We began to experiment with doughs utilizing some unbleached white flour. With one bread in particular, we used 100% unbleached AP, really what you would probably call pain au levain (we were still using no commercial yeast in the bakery at the time), but which we simply called "French bread." It was quite successful; in fact, it soon became our best seller. (We always consoled ourselves by noting that whole grain breads of all types still accounted for more sales than this single variety.) This was the bread that our kids had for their lunches all through school.

In the early '90s The Guild was formed and initiated an explosion of information on all things relating to breadmaking. Although we had been cautioned by some of our mentors about the extreme urgency of quarantine in the bakery – the

need to strictly exclude the possible contamination of starter cultures by "yeast" – I now learned about the resilience, the stubborn tenacity of our "sourdough" cultures, and we began to see what the utilization of bakers' yeast could mean to a new line of products: ciabatta, baguettes, and so on...

Those were exciting times. We did have a few customers who didn't appreciate the new directions; one in particular wrote to say he'd never buy from us again since we'd "sold out." But there were many more who were enthusiastic. I was pleased when one of the bakers related a comment she'd heard from a friend of hers, who said, "O Bread just keeps getting better and better." A wider variety of products didn't just increase our sales; it also had the effect of solidifying our connection with our local community.

At present, about 30-40% of the bread we make is predominantly whole grain (meaning 50% or more, by bakers' percentage). As to my own eating preferences – what I find to be key and what makes for the best eating is getting the fermentation and the baking right. When these are going well, a good white bread can be as satisfying and nourishing as anything. So, with respect to bread, I'm omnivorous. This allows me to practice my craft to continue to learn and work across a wide spectrum – to paint with a broad palette, so to speak. ☀



Loaves of O Bread's Filone (top)  
and White Spelt.