

Local Harvest

Foodlink Waterloo Region • Issue 19 • March 2006

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Local Farm Profile: Denis Baer Organic Farm and Oak Manor Farms

(Denis Baer Organic Farm – Buy Local! Buy Fresh! Map Listing #4)

How many “millers” do you know? Although Miller is still a common surname, the local grist mills that were once a feature of most Ontario settlements have either disappeared or been transformed into heritage sites. For the most part, the flour that forms our daily bread is difficult to trace back to the farm—a consequence of large corporate milling outfits, a global supply of grain, and the “miracles” of modern transportation. It’s therefore reassuring to know that the milling tradition is not lost to our community. Just outside New Hamburg, the milling operation of Oak Manor Farms, owned and operated by the Reibling family, is transforming our local grain harvest into top quality flour and grain products. Not only does Oak Manor Farms purchase grain grown by local farmers it was also the first organic mill in Ontario and just the second organic mill in Canada when it was founded by Dave Reibling in 1975. Back then, the organic industry was very much in its infancy and markets for organic products were few and far between.

As a buyer and processor of organic grain, the Reiblings’ mill is a very valuable extension of local agriculture. When Dennis Baer switched his St. Agatha area farm to organic field crops in 1987, there was no “10 year plan”, he just knew that he could not farm with chemicals anymore. His transition to organics was very much aided by the existence of the Oak Manor mill “down the road”, which buys most of his organic grain crop. Many people told him that he’d lose the family farm and that he’d drown in weeds, but, “It wasn’t that hard,” he says. Now, with the



Denis and Perry outside Oak Manor Mill

hundred acre farm in a rotation of different grain crops—including spelt—and pasture for his beef cattle, he is doing just fine. Last year Dennis harvested 20 acres of spelt and sold it to Oak Manor.

At the mill, Perry Reibling (the son of Dave and Ann Reibling), processed that spelt into a variety of products including flour, berries (as the whole un-ground kernel are called), and cereal flakes. In addition to spelt, they also mill other regional grains such as rye, oats, wheat, and flax. These products are sold to area natural food stores, remaining independent retailers, and even some to the Loblaws chain.

Marketing local products on a larger scale can pose problems for farm-based processors. With the consolidation of major food retail and their

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Local Farm Profile continued

centralized purchasing, it has become harder for individual farms and processors to feature their products on the shelves of local grocery stores. Oak Manor products were carried by the independent grocer Fortinos until it was purchased by the larger Loblaws chain. The takeover resulted in the cancellation of the contract with Oak Manor, and their flour disappeared from the major grocer's retail shelves. For most farms and processors this would have been the end of the story, however, the uniqueness and quality of the Reibling's product along with strong customer loyalty brought a reversal to the situation. According to Perry Reibling, an irate customer from Toronto began a lobbying campaign to "re-instate" the Oak Manor Brand. The persistence paid off as the chain made some concessions and 15 Oak Manor products can now be found at Ontario Loblaws stores.

While this can be viewed as a success story for both Oak Manor and the power that rests in the "food consumer", Perry Reibling remains focused on diversified markets. The cultivation of a strong local market including the Ontario Natural Food Co-op who in turn supply local health food stores, as well as selling to artisan bakers who prefer their coarser grind of flour are options to keep the mill prospering. You can also purchase their full product range from their farm-owned retail outlet near Tavistock. You can find details and complete product information on their website at www.oakmanorfarms.ca.

So what really makes Oak Manor products special? Why buy Oak Manor whole wheat flour when generic grocery store brands are less than half the price? There is a world of difference and Perry was able to shed some light on the matter. First of all, Oak Manor whole wheat flour is just that—flour made from grinding the whole grain. The original bran remains in the flour. In contrast, a lot of flour which is sold commercially as "whole wheat" is actually "ultra refined" white flour with some bran added back to it.

Another significant difference is that a lot of Oak Manor flour doesn't have to "carry a passport"! They put priority on using available, local supply first. Perry reports that many lines of whole wheat flour come from grain imported from places like China and Argentina, milled in the Prairies, packaged and shipped all across Canada. In contrast to the corporate processors, Oak Manor is also committed to paying local farmers—like Dennis Baer—a fair price for their grain. When you buy Oak Manor (and other lo-

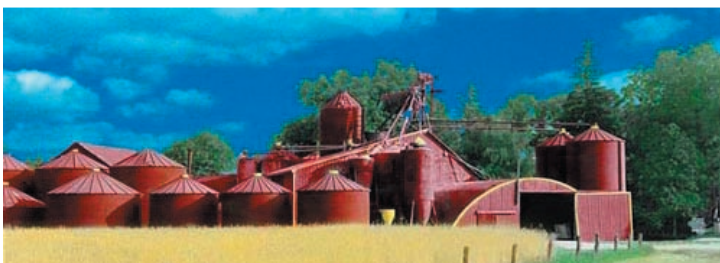


Oak Manor carries a complete line of flour and grain products

cal products), you're strengthening the local economy and helping keep farmers in business. So get out there and spend "your dough on their dough"!

Not only does Oak Manor pay a premium price to farmers, it also cultivates relationships with the farmers in order to provide a more secure market for them. According to Dennis, this really is a partnership. He explains that early in the year he talks to Perry to discuss what crops he's needs to grow based on his land's rotation plan, and Perry lays out the market projections. Together they decided what crops Dennis will plant that Oak Manor will then buy at harvest time.

Both Dennis and Perry share a passion for farming and the long-term viability of local farms and the rural enterprises that support them. For Dennis, it is also evident that his commitment to organic farming is more than just a "production method"—it is a philosophy and a lifestyle. He carries this passion further by his involvement in Foodlink. Rather than just complain and worry about the farming situation in Canada, he decided to do something to improve it by his active role on the Foodlink board. His longer-term vision of cultivating local processors and retailers that in turn support regional farmers has influenced the organization to move beyond a project to promote farm-gate sales. While appreciating the role of the Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map in helping consumers find local farm products like his "grass-fed, organic beef" and his spelt flour at Oak Manor, Dennis knows it's only the beginning. The development of a regional brand and food label is something that the organization is now pursuing. Sometimes he worries about the big picture of the global food system but mostly he's feeling optimistic about changes in consumer behaviour and how their growing preference for local food items could be the sign of good times ahead for farmers. ✓





Bread Winner: the Story of Spelt

“The spelt is the best of grains. It is rich and nourishing and milder than other grain. It produces a strong body and healthy blood to those who eat it and it makes the spirit of man light and cheerful. If someone is ill boil some spelt, mix it with egg and this will heal him like a fine ointment.” – *Hildegard von Bingen, 13th Century.*

Wheat symbolisms pervade modern life. Wheat is the staff of life. The income earner in a family is the breadwinner. Productive agricultural areas are known as the breadbaskets of a country. One separates the wheat from the chaff. We reap what we sow.

And what more and more farmers are sowing is spelt, an ancient wheat species. Wheat comes from the grass family Triticeae and originated in the Fertile Crescent now known as Iran and Iraq over 7,000 years ago. Wheat has been intensively bred over the centuries and our famous “Canadian Durum wheat” (*Triticum aestivum*) would look quite different from its ancient ancestor. However, some original wheat species, such as spelt (*Triticum spelta*), are being grown today on many organic farms across the province. All wheats are descended from the wild form, einkorn, meaning “single grain”. As its name implies, there are only 1 or 2 kernels per spike spindle, in contrast to Durum wheat that has 4 or 5 kernels. Although popular in Europe for centuries as an ingredient in a wide variety of cereals, pasta, crackers, baked goods, and beers, spelt is being rediscovered by Canadian consumers. The ancient Romans knew it as “farrum”, Italians now call it “farro”; today’s Germans know it as “dinkel.”

Once commonly grown in North America, spelt was replaced at the beginning of this century by modern wheat varieties that were more suited to the high volume production techniques still used on most Canadian farms. The property of spelt that brought about its decline in North America is now

thought of as one of its primary benefits. Spelt has a tough hull, or husk, that makes it more difficult to process than modern wheat varieties. However, the husk, separated just before milling, not only protects

the kernel but helps retain nutrients and maintain freshness. Modern wheat varieties, on the other hand, have been bred to lose their husks when harvested. Furthermore, these newer varieties have been specifically bred for their high gluten content, important in the production of yeast-raised breads and baked goods. Unlike wheat, spelt has retained many of its original traits, such as a low gluten content, and remains highly nutritious and full of flavor. Spelt’s flavourful, “nutty” taste has proven to be an attractive alternative to the common varieties of wheat, so much so that spelt production in North America has increased nearly 80-fold in less than a decade. Spelt products are gaining popularity among manufacturers, bakers and consumers across North America.



Spelt is a preferred grain for organic farming. Although it requires a balanced nitrogen content in the soil, it grows well without excessive application of nitrogen fertilizers. Also, unlike other grains, spelt’s husk protects it from pollutants and insects and usually allows growers to avoid using pesticides.

Today there are about 200,000 varieties of bread-type wheat in the global shopping

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basket of genetic resources and yet only a few genetic lines of wheat feed the world. It's perhaps no wonder that people have developed allergies to wheat products! Since spelt has a lower percentage of gluten than modern hard wheat, it has been touted as an alternative grain for those who suffer from wheat sensitivity. However, the Canadian Celiac Association warns that this claim does not hold true for those with celiac disease who are unable to digest the gluten protein. Further testing of different wheat varieties and growing conditions is required before the Association will support the consumption of any Triticum grain for celiac patients.

Nutritional Value

It is more than just good taste that has caught the attention of Canadian consumers. Spelt is naturally high in fiber, and contains 10 to 25% more protein than common varieties of commercial wheat. It is also higher in B complex vitamins, and both simple and complex carbohydrates. Mucopolysaccharides are a special carbohydrate found in spelt that are important in blood clotting and stimulation of the immune system.

The fibre in spelt contributes to the reduction of cholesterol levels. Fibre binds with the bile acids that are used to make cholesterol. Since fibre isn't absorbed in the intestinal tract, the bile acids are secreted from the body and not available for cholesterol production.

Spelt is an excellent source of riboflavin (vitamin B2), which is necessary for proper energy production within cells. Riboflavin has been shown to help reduce the frequency of migraines, possibly by improving the energy metabolism of brain and muscle cells. Eating just 2 ounces of bread or other baked goods made from whole grain spelt will provide more than 75% of the daily recommended intake of riboflavin.

In contrast to modern wheat whose nutrients are mainly concentrated in the outer layers, spelt offers a more even distribution of its nutrients throughout the entire kernel.

Spelt in Ontario

According to a study commissioned by Agriculture and Agri-food

Canada in 2004, the most important organic crops in Ontario are spelt and soybeans along with dairy products. In Ontario, there were 85+ farms sowing 20,782 acres of spelt, with the potential for \$10 million dollars in farm gate value. ✓

Did you know?

There is no 'native' wheat in North America.

Fancy Spelt Pancakes

Ingredients:

- 2 cups Oak Manor Spelt flour
- 2 tablespoons baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 3/4 cups water or 2 cups nutmilk (see below)
- 1 egg (optional)
- 1 teaspoon maple syrup (optional)
- 3 tablespoons oil

Preparation:

Whisk together dry ingredients in a medium bowl. In a smaller bowl whisk together the liquids. (If you are making nutmilk, work in a blender: grind 1/2 cup raw cashews or other nuts to a fine powder, add water to make 2 cups, then add egg, maple syrup and oil. Whiz briefly to blend.) Pre-heat griddle. When a drop of water 'dances' on it, pour liquids over flour mixture and stir to moisten. Oil griddle. Spoon batter onto griddle in 4" to 6" cakes. Turn when top side is thoroughly bubbled. Serve immediately.

Make sure to enjoy your pancakes with Waterloo Region's fine Maple Syrup! Check out the Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map for farms that sell this seasonal treat. You can also read more in Foodlink's April 2004 Local Harvest "A Sap Story"!



Finding Spelt and Other Grain Products in Waterloo Region

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