

BEAN & GRAIN HOMECOMING

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Filling Our Pantries with Local Foods

by Dan Armstrong

When we talk about local foods, most of us think of fresh fruits and vegetables grown by farmers we know. When we think of organic food, it often congers the same image - beautiful fresh fruits and vegetables. But when we break down our diets, we find that for most of us, a large percentage of what we eat is grain based (breads, cereals, crackers, rice, pasta, tortillas), and beans also factor in as an important protein source. Grains and legumes are not often included in the touted cornucopia of fresh local foods, but they are fundamental to our diet and provide the foundation for a self-reliant and stable food system.

That issue is more than just the expansion of our platter of local food choices. The heart of the local food movement is long term food security and the resiliency of our food system. That means increasing the diversity of local production, providing the infrastructure to support that diversity, and having a distribution system to make it available to local consumers. With the production of fruits and vegetables already established, the key additions are protein sources like legumes and whole grains. Fortunately for those of us in the Willamette Valley, the intentional reinvigoration of our food system with the production of grains, dry beans and edible seeds is well underway.

About six years ago, an awareness of the value of producing staple crops locally evolved out food security discussions at the Ten Rivers Food Web (TRFW) in Corvallis. The Willamette Valley was way out ahead in the local food movement with direct sales of organic fruits and vegetables, but the staples portion was missing. Although the south valley has a history of growing a variety of grains—wheat, barley, oats and rye – grass seed has been the predominate crop since 1980. Of the 900,000 acres of field crops grown in the valley in 2006, nearly 600,000 acres were used for the production grass seed and not quite 30,000 for soft, white wheat—once our leading crop by acreage. Two questions arose from the food security discussion in Corvallis: *Would it be possible to transition some of the valley's acreage to growing local grains and legumes as a deliberate effort to increase local resiliency? Could this be done in a way that was economically viable for the farmers as well as the consumers?*

Harry MacCormack, a Corvallis organic farmer, and in 2006 a board member of the TRFW, began an experiment to find out. He planted a variety of grains—notably hard red wheat—and dry beans on his farm. When the early returns suggested that, yes, dry beans and wheat for bread baking might just be viable crops in the valley, he connected with local grass seed producer Willow Coberly of Stafford Seed Farms. Willow immediately saw the value of this work and in 2007 trialed hard red wheat. In 2008, she expanded her trials to include several 20-acre plots of dry beans. This was the beginning of what became the Southern Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project, an ad hoc consortium of farmers and local food advocates who began to promote the idea of adding organic dry beans and grains to our menu of local foods.

Since 2006, there has been slow but steady progress in this work. Each year another few farmers add grains and legumes to their fields. Stafford Seed Farms has added milling to its business model with Greenwillow Grains in Brownsville. Tom and Sue Hunton of Huntons' Farm in Junction City have opened Camas Country Mill. Open Oak Farm outside Crawfordsville and Lonesome Whistle Farm on River Road have established bean and grain CSAs. Hard red wheat, rye, barley, oats, triticale, teff, flax, flint and dent corn, buckwheat, lentils, garbanzo beans, black beans, pinto beans, and scores of heirloom dry beans are some of the new products you can now find at Willamette Valley farmers' markets and other retail outlets. Something's happening here, and we can now "taste" the change!

It must be added that this transition, this effort to incorporate high protein staple crops into the local agricultural model, has not been easy. These farms have taken huge risks to make the transition. There have been failures and successes. Each year presents new obstacles and new insights. So it's important to stress that what these farmers are doing is beneficial to all of us in the long run, but in the short term they take the gamble. Our part as consumers, in what MacCormack refers to as the "big experiment", is to support these farms, buy their products, and spread the word. ♦

Local food advocate Dan Armstrong is a novelist, backyard bean and grain grower, and the keeper of the Southern Willamette Valley Bean & Grain Project archives. See mudcitypress.com

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