



Food for the Soul

by Lynne Fessenden

Tom Hunton likes to talk about the three kinds of food he grows on his family's farm in Junction City: food for humans, food for animals, and food for the soil. Recently, Hunton has begun to realize that the act of providing nourishment to his community has nourished his spirit, and so he now adds a fourth food to his list ... *food for the soul*.

The primary crops on Hunton's third generation family farm still include forage and turf grasses, clover seed, meadowfoam, and a variety of vegetable seeds. In the last four years, Hunton and his son Jason have transitioned 400 of their 2,700 acres from seed crops into food for humans, namely grains and legumes. 130 of those acres are now certified organic, and an additional 75 will be certified in 2013.

Hunton and his family opened Camas Country Mill in April 2011 with support from Charlie and Julie Tilt, owners of Hummingbird Wholesale. There has not been an operational grist mill in Lane County since 1930. The Hunttons have been selling their freshly ground flours, whole grains, and dry beans at several area farmers markets, as well as through wholesale distributors like Hummingbird and Glory Bee Foods.

Deb McGeorge, Food Resource Manager for FOOD for Lane County (FFLC), heard Tom Hunton speak about growing beans and grains for local consumption at the annual Local Food Connection event. McGeorge, started pondering the idea of how the food bank might use these crops in pantry food boxes. Finding non-perishable protein sources is a continual challenge, as canned fish is expensive, and the peanut butter recalls in recent years have added another level of food safety issues to worry about.

McGeorge contacted Hunton last December. Of the various bean and grain combinations the Hunttons had been marketing for soup, he suggested the lentil-barley pair because both grow well in the valley, and cook relatively quickly (30-40 minutes). FFLC staff started experimenting with the soup right away. Glory Bee Foods agreed to donate spices.

McGeorge and the FFLC board were thrilled with the outcome. She says, "Not only is it great tasting and easy to cook, but barley is good for diabetics, and this option makes vegetarians and vegans happy." In February 2012, Food for Lane County purchased all of Hunttons' lentils and hullless barley, approximately 7,500 pounds.

The conversation then shifted to "intentional growing" for the food bank. Would the Hunttons consider planting crops specifically for this effort? The FFLC project was a catalyst for the Oregon Food Bank, which got on board quickly and placed an order for 240,000 pounds. Hunton convinced four other area farms to plant lentils last spring (Farver Brothers, Parker Seed, Nixon Farms, Egge Seed Farm). At harvest time this fall, they did not meet the yields they had hoped for, but came close and will be able to provide enough for statewide distribution of the soup mix.

Hunton emphasizes that all of this happened with a series of verbal agreements, no written contracts, and that there was a high level of trust between everyone to do the right thing. He says, "The rewards come from both ends in this relationship." The agreed upon price met the farmers' needs, and was one the food bank could manage. And the new demand means these are viable rotational crops for grass seed growers. The crops purchased by the food banks were not certified organic, and Hunton still sees challenges ahead in "growing affordable food for all."

McGeorge says "It's made a huge difference in the kind of food we distribute." She and her colleagues recently attended the Feeding America Food Resourcing Conference in Chicago where they presented the soup project partnership to other food banks from around the country. Their presentation drew a standing ovation. Talk about food for the soul. ♦

Lynne Fessenden is Executive Director of the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, a community nonprofit connecting farmers and consumers in Lane County, lanefood.org.

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Founded by Tom and Sue Hunton, of Hunttons' 3rd generation family farm in Junction City

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