

At the mill, sacks printed in English and Ethiopian await filling. The Huntons grow teff, an annual bunch grass that is the key ingredient in the Ethiopian flatbread staple, *injera*.

“There’s been a farm connection in place in this area for a longtime, with farmers markets and CSAs [Community Supported Agriculture],” Hunton says.

Generations have enjoyed ripe-picked berries or delectable chanterelles, or any of the copious bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables that local farms have on offer. But the idea of locally sourced grains and legumes is a fairly new one.

“Go back 10 years, and the grains — which provide 60 to 70 percent of our calories — were the last that had that local focus,” Hunton says. “Nobody cared where their flour came from. But now, grains can have traceability.”

With its sizeable land base and its grain cleaning and storing facility, Camas Mill is able to focus on cultivating grains and legumes that the market craves.

“The emphasis on local food is evolving,” Hunton says. “And we’ve asked ourselves what we could do to adapt.”

## FOOD SMART

Camas Country Mill is in good company.

Oregon State University Extension Service’s Small Farms Program hosts an annual Small Farms Conference, which drew more than 1,000 people last year.

And at a recent fill-your-pantry event, the Willamette Food and Farm Coalition invited farmers from throughout the area to offer their goods, including grains and legumes — as well as storage crops like onions, squash and garlic — direct to the consumer.

Willamette Food and Farm Coalition’s Lynne Fessenden explains.

“The Fill-Your-Pantry event started out as a way to support farms that were growing beans and grains, by helping customers to be aware that farmers are growing these crops,” Fessenden says. “At first, there were just two farms: Greenwillow Grains in Brownsville and Camas Country Mill.”

Participants in 2016 ranged from Adaptive Seeds and Deck Family Farm to Organic Redneck and Wintergreen Farm.

Even the full list is far from a complete picture of the many small farms making a go of growing in the fertile Willamette Valley.

“This is the first year that Camas Mill didn’t sell at the event,” Fessenden says. “It’s a sign of their success. They don’t need the event anymore because they’re not selling by the pound, they’re selling by the pallet.”

The Willamette Farm & Food Coalition facilitates and supports the development of a secure and sustainable food system in Lane County and Camas Mill plays a vital role in that vision.

“Ten years ago, no one was growing hard red wheat in the valley, but in a five year stretch, we went from no locally grown wheat in the area, to two farms, both growing, and milling wheat for baking,” Fessenden says. “That gives me great hope.”

But Tom Hunton remains humble.

“We think we understand the agronomy, the cultural practices of raising a crop,” he says. (Agronomy is the science of soil management and crop production.) “But the outreach and marketing, we felt we needed help with.”

Camas Country Mill employs just 12 people, not all at full-time, but judging from the scale of their operation, one would think they had a lot more help.

“This venture, this effort, brings to us employees with a lot of passion, for what we’re doing,” Hunton says.

The farm hosts weekly school tours. “The kids get to see the grain in the field, they get to grind some flour, and then they get a homemade muffin.”

Hunton says he’d like to see more opportunities for communities to connect to food and where it comes from.

## LABOR OF LOVE

Growing is one aspect of farming. Though the relocalization movement encourages consumers to mindfully choose food options from nearby, Camas Mill depends on a growing web of channels to sell their products. “The cold, hard truth is that distribution is complicated,” Hunton says.

Camas Mill partners with Hummingbird Wholesale to help facilitate that distribution.

“Tom is one of the smartest men I know,” says Hummingbird co-owner Charlie Tilt. “He’s the ultimate example of what a farmer can be.”

Tilt and Hunton have worked together since 2012 to grow the local food economy.

“Tom approached us as a conventional farmer interested in trying to raise grains and beans,” Tilt says. “We were initially not interested, since we sell only organic. But we were interested in seeing and supporting the transition to organic acreage, and Tom just won us over.”

“If you don’t support transitional products, then you can’t get to organic,” Tilt notes.

The collaboration with Hummingbird was instrumental in getting the Camas Mill up and running.

“People don’t buy wheat berries, they buy flour,” Tilt says. “And we penciled out that the mill would need to do 500,000 pounds of production per year to pay for itself.”

Early adapters included the Bread Stop Bakery in Eugene and New Seasons Market in Portland.

But Camas Mill also does plenty of self-distribution to restaurants and bakeries, shipping across the country. Their regular clients include Grand Central Baking, with outposts in Portland and Seattle; San Francisco’s famous Tartine Bakery; Prager Brothers Artisan Breads in Carlsbad, Calif.; Selam Foods in Minneapolis, Minn.; and celebrity chef Dan Barber, at the inimitable Blue Hill restaurant, in upstate New York.

And these wholegrain flours are not just destined for upscale eateries.

Camas Country Mill, notes Hunton, also distributes to “eight Oregon school districts and two universities, who provide whole grain baked goods with our flour.”

The mill has partnered with FOOD for Lane County to offer its high-protein soup mix, a combination of low-glycemic grains, beans and lentils, to food pantry sites across the region.

“By working with a food rescue facility, we’re able to give back to the community,” Hunton says.

Deb McGeorge, FOOD for Lane County resource manager, couldn’t be more grateful.

“Camas Country Mill helps us in our choices on what to produce locally on our leased land in Junction City (lentils, barley, pintos, garbanzos, etc.). They farm and mill product for us,” McGeorge says. “They teach us sustainable ways to feed the multitudes”

Camas Country Mill is a multi-generational effort. From Hunton’s mother running errands and keeping the books, to his wife Sue Hunton minding the store and his son Jason Hunton co-managing the farm.

So, as populations grow and resources become scarcer, what would Hunton’s hope be for the next generation or for his young grandson Owen?

“I hope he’d see that what grandma and grandpa, great-grandma and his mom and dad are giving him are the opportunities to remain on the land and to be connected to his community, by producing food that’s wholesome and somewhat unique,” Hunton says.

“That’s a solid ground to build a future on.”

*Camas Country Mill and Bakery is open 8 am-3 pm, Tuesday-Saturday, at 91948 Purkerson Rd., in Junction City. You can also find their products at Hummingbird Wholesale, 150 Shelton McMurfey Blvd, in Eugene.*

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