

Harvest:

Continued from Page A1

it's harvested to make sure there's no sprouts and splits."

On Sunday, Sept. 12, two Hasidic rabbis and their driver showed up at the Melvilles' farm just outside of Enterprise. Porgesz had been working with the Melvilles all morning using air pressure hoses and vacuums to clean any grain from a previous harvest from the farm equipment.

"Samuel flew out yesterday and they had some grain stored in one of our granaries that we cut earlier this fall ... and he helped us clean everything this morning," Tim Melville said Sept. 13. "The rabbis just showed up and that's the way it always works."

The previous day, Porgesz and the Melvilles loaded wheat harvested about three weeks earlier into 2,100-pound sacks. They were to be loaded onto a truck — 22 sacks — and driven to a mill in upstate New York to be turned into flour for the matzah.

"Every bag will be sealed and then we seal the truck," Porgesz said. "We will check all the seals once it gets to our mill."

A bit of a rush

The Hasidim were in a bit of a rush this year. The harvest cycle put a bit of a crunch on them to get done in time for their high holidays. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, was Sept. 6-8, starting their lunar year 5782. Then came Yom Kippur — the Day of Atonement — just a week later, sundown Sept. 15 to sundown Sept. 16. Less than a week later is Sukkot, when Jews commemorate the ancient Israelites living in tents in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It's also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths for the tents Jews put up in their homes



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Rabbi Joseph, left, and Rabbi David examine the header of a combine at Cornerstone Farms near Enterprise to make sure it's been thoroughly cleaned before harvesting a kosher crop Monday, Sept. 13, 2021.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Samuel Porgesz, a kosher bakery manager from Brooklyn, New York, does the meticulous work of cleaning any remnants of a previous harvest from one of the combines at the Melville family's Cornerstone Farms on Monday, Sept. 13, 2021. To harvest a kosher crop for matzah, no old grain can be mixed with the new.

to commemorate how they lived in the desert.

"We bake all winter long; we start right after the holidays — right after Sukkot — and we bake for about six months all the way to the Passover holiday," which will be April 15-23, Porgesz said. "Afterwards, we start coming out to all the fields in New Jersey and the East Coast first — Virginia, Maryland and Delaware and upstate New York."

Danny Freedman, who drives for the rabbis, said it

often can be difficult to comply with the weather and, at the same time, properly mark the holidays.

"We have to go with mother nature," he said. "The holidays (and kosher laws) we can't break."

Rabbinic inspection

Porgesz may know what they're looking for, but it's the rabbis who must make the decision on whether the grain is kosher.

"We have to finish up today because we have a

holiday," Freedman said. "Yom Kippur is Wednesday but we have to be home before. Not only because of the traveling, it's because we don't eat on Yom Kippur. ... We fast from sunset to the following day at nightfall. ... We do prayers for most of the day."

The rabbi in charge of determining the kosher status of the grain, who preferred to go by Rabbi Joseph G., was the youngest of the three, just in his late 30s. However, he's the son of the grand rabbi and has been studying under his father since childhood.

"He has years of experience in this," Rabbi Joseph said, as did his grandfather. "He has experience from before World War II" in Hungary and Poland, where the large Jewish communities were virtually wiped out in the Holocaust.

"He's still learning now in some stuff," Rabbi Joseph said. "I'm still learning; there's always time to learn."

"The main thing (I like) is that it doesn't rain so often in the summer months" in the West, he said. "There's the quality, and the (lack of) shrinkage. ... Our flour qual-

ity measures the quality of the wheat. If there was rain during a stage of the wheat, the kernel inside might get core damage. Even if it's not sprouted yet, if there was some germination activity ... when some molecules and starches start to mature and it damages the quality of flour. ... For the rabbinical, we try to make sure it's not past a certain stage (of development) when it's ready so it's not a problem for us. Usually when there is rain, we see some mechanical, physical or structural damage unto the structure of the wheat and the rabbi will determine if it's acceptable or not."

Even a little rainfall can begin the process of the natural yeast — leaven — starting its activity.

"We can't determine each kernel, but the rabbis are trained to look at kernels and see if it'll be acceptable," he said. "I was here three weeks ago and compare the sample that was taken to the lab and see if there was any damage from the rain."

A rainfall of only an hour or so seemed to have doomed one wheat field the Hasidim opted out of.

"We're not farmers. We don't have any experience with tractor-trailers, but usually the Jewish people, they are very smart," Rabbi Joseph said, and added with a chuckle, "There was once when one of the combines broke down, one of the rabbis said, 'Oh, you need to fix this (part).' And in 2 minutes, it was done."

Other grains, too

Although they didn't take as much wheat as they'd have liked, the Hasidim did purchase spelt from the Melvilles for the first time. It was also the first time they'd grown the wheat-like crop.

Tim Melville said he wasn't hesitant about giving spelt a first-time try for his Jewish friends.

"We've never even seen spelt before," he said with a laugh.

According to healthline.

com, spelt declined in popularity in the 19th century, but the ancient grain is making a comeback in popularity as it's being considered more healthy than modern grains.

Porgesz said spelt is believed to be easier to digest.

"We also do a separate line of oat matzah," he said. "It's gluten-free; it's totally different. We make sure everything is clean and people will see that."

Kevin Melville said the Hasidim don't mix spelt with wheat.

"They keep (spelt) completely separate and make matzah," he said. "They do some with oats for people who are gluten intolerant. Some people consider spelt an ancient grain."

Likes Wallowa County

Porgesz said that in addition to the grain he's able to obtain, the Melvilles — and the county — make him keep wanting to come back.

"They're absolutely magnificent. Can't say anything bad about them," he said of the Melvilles. "Whatever we want, they do. ... Whatever the rabbis want, we go the extra mile to make sure it's what they want. That's why we come all the way from Brooklyn; it's very expensive. That's one of the reasons. Of course, the other reason is it usually doesn't rain out here during the harvest time."

The countryside also impresses him.

"I woke up this morning and looked out and saw those mountains," he said. "It makes me want to come back every time. The Wallowa Mountains, the lake, sometimes I take a cabin at the lower end of the lake near the tramway."

And he finds things here you can't find in Brooklyn.

"I have a house but not that kind of grass. (The yard is) only about 10-by-10 feet. That's all we've got in Brooklyn," he said. "Basically, that's why we come is for the high quality and the cooperation."



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