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With the Grain: The growing interest in growing local grains

May 11th, 2011 | Category: [Features](#)

A look at locally grown grains with long-time researcher Dr. Stephen Jones, the Fairhaven Flour Mill, and Backyard Beans and Grains Project.

Separating wheat from chaff with Dr. Stephen Jones

by John Kinmonth

In college, Dr. Stephen Jones didn't really sow his wild oats. He grew wheat—acres of the stuff.



Dr. Stephen Jones with greenhouse wheat. Jones is the director of WSU's

Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center in Mount Vernon. PHOTO BY JESSAMYN TUTTLE

And he never really stopped.

After pursuing a master's and PhD at University of California-Davis in agronomy and genetics, Jones began the business of wheat whispering at the USDA's Agricultural Research Service at Washington State University in Pullman. Since then, his work with perennial and organic wheat has been covered in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and *Gourmet Magazine*. He was asked to write the "wheat" entry for World Book Encyclopedia.

He enjoys a nice Hefeweizen.

But he didn't get into wheat game for the publicity—or the beer.

"I really fell in love with the notion of wheat as a crop and a food," he said. "I love the idea of growing it in a relevant way on smaller farms."

Three years ago, Jones left the amber waves of grain of Pullman for the fertile Skagit Valley.

"I met with several growers and didn't want to go back after that," he said.

Now serving as director of WSU's Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center just outside Mount Vernon, Jones spends part of his time growing and testing different types of wheat breeds and the other part working with farmers, mills and bakeries to improve the environmental and economic health of farms in the region.

While Western Washington isn't exactly known for its rolling wheat fields, Jones dispels the myth that wheat doesn't grow west of the Cascades.

"The largest wheat farmer is Washington Bulb. They grow tulips—and about a thousand acres of wheat," he said.

"Most growers rotate their crop with wheat or barley to protect the soil and break disease cycles."

And he's not just talking about the low-protein soft whites commonly grown in temperate, moist areas.

"One of the misconceptions is that we can't grow a high-protein bread wheat over here," Jones said. "We're seeing hard reds doing well in the Skagit Valley."

This leads to another common perception about wheat.

"What people don't get is there is as much variation in wheat as you would see in apples or tomatoes. Wheat is not just wheat," he said. "You have specific wheat varieties that can make a very good loaf of bread. There's tremendous variation that people don't appreciate if they just buy an all-purpose flour at the grocery store, which actually is a blend of many different types of wheat."

Each year, Jones and his research team tests hundreds of these varieties, attempting to breed tougher, well-adapted plants. Taste is also a factor.

"Can we capture local differences in flavor? We've heard from bakers that wheat west of the Cascades has a grassy farm flavor. We've also heard chocolaty overtones with a hint of spice," he said.

Although wheat is grown in rural communities all over the United States, it's rarely processed or consumed within the community where it's grown.

“We’ve outsourced our wheat in a way. A lot of wheat we grow here is commodity wheat,” Jones said.

However, that is something Jones wants to see change.

“A lot of craft bakeries now want local wheat,” Jones said. “The Northeast is a wonderful model. You’re not just seeing wheat. You’re seeing mills starting up and there’s a whole infrastructure that’s quite robust. Many parts of the country want wheat back in their rotations, and it’s important to the community to bring it back.”

While wheat is mostly grown on larger plots—nearly the entire state of Kansas, for example—Jones believes it’s viable on a much smaller scale.

“On one acre in the Skagit Valley, you could easily get three tons of wheat per acre, which equals about 6,000 loafs of bread,” he said.

For those interested in learning more about growing wheat, Jones suggests visiting one of the summer field days listed at mtvernon.wsu.edu/events. If that’s not enough, the Mount Vernon Northwest Research and Extension Center is hosting a three-day collection of workshops and presentations called Kneading Conference West in mid-September.

“We’ll have 200 bakers, millers and wheat farmers talking about everything from home baking to big commercial operations,” Jones said.

Focused on reviving regional grain cultivation, the event is the Northwest version of the popular Kneading Conference held each year in Maine. Jones is the chair of the Kneading Northwest steering committee, and will be one of two key note speakers at the conference. (See sidebar on previous page.)

With so much uncertainty regarding the future of world agriculture, Jones ascertains the permanence of wheat as a basic food.

“It’s not going to go away. It was one of the very first foods domesticated and it will be one of the last foods we have as well.”

Kneading Conference Northwest: Sept. 15-17 in Mount Vernon

Kneading Conference West is based on the design of the original (and very popular) Kneading Conference held annually in Skowhegan, Maine, now in its fifth year. The goal is to support and strengthen local food systems that include grains.

The event begins on Thursday evening, September 15, 2011 and ends Saturday afternoon, September 17. The registration fee prior to August 1 is \$250.



Kneading Northwest will offer a number of workshops and discussions for anyone interested in using local grains. Home bakers, commercial bakers, millers and others. A highlight of the weekend is a tour of Breadfarm and the Fairhaven Flour Mill. PHOTO ON FILE

Home bakers, commercial bakers, and farmers, millers and food-lovers “will find a wide range of events and opportunities at the conference including workshops on managing sourdough starters, making crackers and flat breads, and improving flour mixes.” Clinics include starting a bakery and oven management. Attendees can tour Breadfarm, a local artisan bakery in Bow, and the Fairhaven Flour Mill, the state’s only organic flour mill, now located in Arlington. In addition, participants can have the hands-on experience of building a wood-fired oven and learn how to incorporate grains in small farms and large gardens.

The keynote presentations on Thursday and Friday evenings will be free and open to the public. Dr. Stephen Jones will address “The Re-Decentralization of Wheat Systems: Kicking the Commodity Habit,” and Jeffrey Hamelman will share “From a Baker’s Point of View: Accomplishments & Challenges.” Hamelman is an employee-owner of the King Arthur Flour Company in Vermont and Director of the King Arthur bakery. He has baked and taught all over the world, and became the 76th Certified Master Baker in the U.S. in 1998. Hamelman is the author of “Bread: A Baker’s Book of Techniques and Recipes.”

The steering committee includes:

- Dr. Stephen Jones, Chair, Kneading Conference West; Director, Washington State University Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center
- Tod Bramble, Owner/Employee, King Arthur Flour (Vermont)
- Karen Hills, Doctoral Candidate, WSU Mount Vernon NWREC
- David Bauermeister, Executive Director, Northwest Agriculture Business Center
- Kevin Christenson, Owner, Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill
- George De Pasquale, Owner, The Essential Baking Company
- Scott Mangold, Owner, Breadfarm

- Nash Huber, Farmer, Nash's Organic Produce
- Wendy Hebb, Program Director, Kneading Conference West & Kneading Conference

Some of the discussions and workshops include:

- A Realistic Approach to Making Grains Work: An Oregon Example that Benefits Farmers, Millers, and Bakers, with Dave Mostue. Dave is a farmer, inventor, tinkerer, entrepreneur, and teacher. He has successfully approached the task of reinventing his family's farm using practical innovations and diversity.
- Discussion: Growing the Grain Is Just the Start, Now What? Connecting Farmers, Millers and Bakers. The moderator will be Dr. Stephen Jones. Panelists include: Amber Lambke, one of the founders of the Maine Kneading Conference, who with her partner purchased an empty 1850s jail in her rural Maine town to convert into a grist mill; Dave Hedlin, owner of Hedlin Family Farm, a mixed vegetable organic and conventional farm in Skagit County, whose with the Nature Conservancy (Farming with Nature) has been covered in national media; and Tom Hunton, of Camas Country Mill in Eugene, Oregon., where three generations of his family own and operate the mill.
- The Basics of Artisan Bread: Scott Mangold, owner of Breadfarm, will introduce novices to basic techniques for making a straightforward, flavor-rich loaf of bread.
- Panel Discussion: The Business of Baking. Jeffrey Hamelman will moderate the discussion on what it takes to open and manage an artisan bakery. Bakery owners will discuss their experiences, challenges, and solutions.
- Harvesting Wheat, Large and Small Scale: The latest research from the Mount Vernon Agriculture Research and Extension Center graduate program.
- Issues of Scale: Values, Sustainability & Prosperity. Moderated by Piper Davis, co-owner, Grand Central Bakery. The questions, challenges, setback and successes that are created by striving for prosperity while maintaining important values and vice versa. Panel includes various bakers.
- A Guided Tour of the Heirloom Fruit Trees on the grounds of the Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center. Note the qualities of various fruits, do a little picking, then head to the kitchen to make pies.
- Building a Bakery from Scratch: a mill, an oven, and a local grain network, with Cliff Leir. By encouraging farmers in British Columbia to restore grain cultivation, Cliff has provided his bakery with a source of local wheat.
- Field Trip: Connecting the Farmer, Miller & Baker. The field trip begins at Hedlin's Farm, a third generation diversified farm that includes winter wheat in its crop rotation, then to Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill. The field trip concludes at Breadfarm.

View the entire schedule and other details online at kneadingconferencewest.com/.

Fairhaven Flour Mill: Majority of grains come from Washington State growers; regional bakeries interested

by Dana E. Neuts

With a dream of owning a local, sustainable business, Kevin and Matsuko Christenson bought the Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill from Bill and Lisa Distler in October 2007. Following the purchase, the mill – which started as a cooperative in 1974 – remained in its downtown Bellingham location until last fall when it was moved to a 7,500 square foot facility in Burlington, just off I-5.

“There was no room to grow,” Kevin Christenson said of the location.

Since moving, the Christensons have installed a much larger, second mill, allowing Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill to expand its capacity and provide more storage space. Currently, the mill produces a variety of 100 percent organically certified, kosher flours including whole wheat, cornmeal, rye, oat, buckwheat, soy, barley, gluten-free flour and more. Consumers can buy 25 and 50 pound bags of flour directly from the mill, but the remaining products are distributed to wholesalers and retailers from British Columbia to California and Idaho. Customers include Essential Baking Company, Breadfarm and Avenue Bread.



USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan and Fairhaven Flour Mill owner Kevin Christenson discuss local grains at Country Market near Seattle. COURTESY PHOTO

Only producing flour when orders come in, Christenson classifies his product as premium grade flour with an emphasis on freshness.

“More and more people are concerned about the quality of their food,” he said. “They are willing to buy a premium product if it is better for their health.”

Part of what makes the mill’s products of superior quality is the fact that 60 percent of the grains used are grown in Washington by farms that Christenson has personally selected. He visits each farm to ensure that he believes in the way the farmer does business and that the farm operation is clean, open and free of pests. He does not do business with farmers that don’t meet his exacting standards. As a result, he is willing to pay more for quality grain, and that cost is reflected in the retail price passed onto buyers.

“We don’t look for deals, and we don’t buy junk,” Christenson said of his raw materials.

When he originally purchased the mill, about 10 percent of the grain was locally grown, so Christenson is particularly proud that he is able to buy the majority of his grain from Washington farmers. The remainder comes from other sources, because some grains like rice don’t grow well here, he said.

Since buying the mill, Christenson and his wife have enjoyed being involved in the community, donating flour where appropriate and giving tours to local schools.

“I want to be part of the community here, and this is a really community-centered business,” he said. “I like dealing with the local farmers and bakeries and the community interaction we have around good food.”

As part of this work, Christenson supports the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, a nonprofit organization that focuses on helping farmers. He also spoke to USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan when she visited the area to meet with local growers and producers, and hear their concerns and challenges.

In spite of a declining economy, Christenson reports that his business is doing well. While a bakery or grocery store may reduce its orders, consumers seem to pick up the slack by baking more at home. He attributes this to an increased focus on better health and an interest in locally grown grain.

What's next? Fine-tuning the production of gluten-free flour. Currently, gluten-free flour is made using one of the existing mills, following a thorough cleaning to remove any trace of gluten from other grains. Christenson said that consistency in the gluten-free flour is sometimes an issue, however, so they continue to refine the process. He estimates that it will take the Fairhaven Mill another month before it can say that it is using 100 percent gluten-free dedicated equipment. Though the mill is only inspected once a year to be certified gluten-free, Christenson said he feels an obligation to provide a gluten-free environment year-round.

For more information about the Fairhaven Mill, including a full list of products, visit fairhavenflour.com or call (360) 734-9947. The mill is located at 808 North Hill Boulevard in Burlington.

Backyard Beans and Grains Project compiles grower's guides

by Becca Schwarz Cole

Krista Rome did not set out to become a farmer, she just wanted to learn about growing grains and beans on a small scale. Four years later, her efforts have resulted in various growers guides and information through her Whatcom County-based Backyard Beans and Grains Project.



Krista Rome, of the Backyard Beans and Grains Project, gazes at last year's mature flax. COURTESY PHOTO

After reading a number of food books one winter, Rome started the BBGP to answer her question, "Can we grow this food for ourselves?" Farmers of Northwest Washington, she said, produce a large variety of vegetables, fruits, and dairy products, as well as those providing meat and seafoods, but not many storable, high-quality vegetable protein sources, such as beans and grains.

Focused on growing the best grains and beans for small-space gardeners, Rome started experimenting with different varieties and recorded her findings season after season. Her research

now includes growing amaranth, millet, dent corn, flax, buckwheat, barley, wheat, oats, and quinoa, as well as dry common beans, soup peas, garbanzos, and soybeans.

Initially, Rome sent out a survey to several farmers in Whatcom County asking about their experiences growing grains. “I didn’t want to reinvent the wheel. I wanted to know what farmers had tried or were trying, what worked and what didn’t work, and why,” she said. Once her project was off the ground, they came out of the “woodwork” to share information, but many of them were not growing much. She continued growing at different locations and compiling information.

This year, through a \$500 Farm Fund grant provided by the Community Coop—the first money she has received for the project—Rome was able to create a one-page growing guide for each crop. The guides, available in PDF on the Project’s website, are the results of her research (but still in “draft” form), she said. Rome added she is interested in talking with other growers who have experience with any of these crops.



Krista Rome showing some of this season’s starts. PHOTO BY BECCA SCHWARZ COLE

In addition to producing the guides, the \$500 grant allowed her—for the first time—to pay for the field lease and tilling provided by Broadleaf Farm, owned by Dusty Williams in Everson. Previously, it was done on “good will.”

Saving and sharing seeds is a large focus of the BBGP. “Cultivating and sharing seeds is one of the most basic things we can do,” Rome said. With her seeds now for sale (this if the first year), Rome hopes to bring in some revenue, while also putting seeds into the hands of local growers who can save them for the following season. “I want to get the seed out into the community,” she said. “I am going with the hope of not having return customers... with most crops it is very easy to save seed.”

For those starting out, Rome said Flax is easy to grow and well-suited for our climate. “The weeds are the hard part,” she said. Dent corn, she added, is great for making corn tortillas, and produces well per square foot.

Long-term plans for the project include seed selling, more interaction with growers, and a focus on more selective breeding. “Some crops are doable, but some are kind of borderline,” Rome said, noting she’ll continue to pursue varieties best-suited for the climate.

For more information about the Backyard Beans and Grains Project, visit backyardbeansandgrains.com, e-mail backyardbeans@gmail.com or call (360) 224-4757. Donations, volunteers and inquiries are welcome.

Sharing is caring!



Tags: Backyard Beans and Grains Project, Fairhaven Flour Mill, grains, Sr. Stephen Jones, western WA, wheat, WSU Extension Skagit County

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