

MILL OWNER HAS GOT THE GRIST OF IT

Local wheat now processed at a local flour milling facility

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The Register-Guard

Appeared in print: Sunday, April 17, 2011, page D4

Sometime in the coming week a Lane County resident will bite into a slice of bread or a pizza crust made from the first flour to be grown and then ground in a commercial grist mill here since before the Great Depression.

Farmer and entrepreneur Tom Hunton launched his Camas Country Mill in far north Eugene in the past week and, out of the gate, he's supplying The Bread Stop, the Hideaway Bakery, the Market of Choice bakers and Cosmic Pizza.

He installed a Denmark-made Engsko mill with a 40-inch grinding stone that's suitable for pulverizing wheat kernels into speciality flour for the next 150 years.

Hunton paid for the \$300,000 project from his savings, a \$97,000 economic development grant from Lane County, and a \$50,000 loan from Hummingbird Wholesale in Eugene.

The mill has widespread support because it is key in the effort to re-localize the food system by growing and processing foods close to where they're consumed.

"Every state used to grow their wheat locally, mill it locally and consume it locally," Hunton said.

But today, much of the flour that consumers purchase in grocery stores nationwide comes from wheat grown in Kansas that's milled to smithereens by the Archer Daniels Midland Company, he said.

The effort to relocalize food involves unwinding nearly a century of efforts to industrializing, homogenizing and centralizing the production of food.

At the time, "we thought it was progress," said Hunton, a second generation farmer.

It was "efficiency," his partner and son Jason Hunton said.

What the Huntons are doing is "a huge step forward" when it comes to increasing the amount of locally grown food, said Oregon State University extension agent Ross Penhallegon. "We can

grow anything we want to in the Willamette Valley, and we have all the people to feed it to. But we don't have the middle (link): How do we get what we grow to the consumer? We can grow it, now what do we do with it?"

In the case of wheat, with no grist mill nearby, local farmers had no way to affordably mill wheat once they grew it, Penhallegon said. The only option was to truck it out of the area for processing, which is hugely expensive.

But, if producing food locally can be made to pencil out, the demand is there, he and others agricultural experts say.

"There's a growing number of people in the country who are concerned about the food system in general, and that includes the flour that goes into the bread, whether or not pesticides are used on crops and things of this nature," said John Ikerd, professor emeritus at the University of Missouri.

This drive to relocalize has made for some strange bedfellows. Hunton has primarily been a grass seed farmer who also owns and operates a farm chemical/fertilizer dealership.

But he's establishing his mill, which is just off of Awbrey Lane, with the help of Hummingbird Wholesale owners Charlie and Julie Tilt, who are as organic and alternative as Hunton is as straight-laced and conservative. Ten years ago, Hunton would have said it's "not likely" he would ever be working cheek by jowl with the Tilts the way he is today.

The Huntons, who farm 2,700 acres in the Willamette Valley, are well-known and well-respected in the agriculture industry, Penhallegon said.

Patriarch Everett Hunton started farming with his wife, Ellen, in the years after World War II along Milliron Road in Junction City. He joined the burgeoning group of grass seed growers that were rapidly replacing vegetable farming in the Willamette Valley and became a leader in the field, honored by the Oregon Seed Growers League and the Oregon Orchardgrass Commission. But he wasn't satisfied with just grass.

He planted parsley and cabbage seed and California poppy seed and peppermint for oil, and he ran 100 head of cattle, his wife, Ellen, said. He also built a wholesale seed cleaning operation.

Tom Hunton joined his father when he finished college and the two of them started the Surecrop Farm Service. Tom took charge when his dad died in 2005. Besides grass seed, he planted clover seed, brassica seeds, meadowfoam, teff grain, soft white winter and spring wheat for export.

But in 2008, the economy brought crisis to the grass seed growers in the valley. Severe drops in home construction nationally meant fewer lawns were planted and the demand for turf seed plummeted. Hunton said the demand will never again be as great as it once was: Because of taste and water regulation, home lawns will be smaller.

"The dire economics force you to start looking at options," Hunton said.

He was looking for options when he met up with the Southern Willamette Valley Bean & Grain Project, a group that's trying to bring food crops back to the valley.

The conventional wisdom, supported by some professors at Oregon State University, is that the Willamette Valley is not suited for growing the kind of wheat — hard red or hard white — needed for making breads.

Valley wheat farmers were growing soft white wheats and almost all — 98 percent, Hunton said — was shipped through the Port of Portland to countries in Asia that used it for noodles or pastries.

So Hunton was being a contrarian when he tried growing a half dozen hard red wheat varieties as well as hard white spring wheats, which are favored by artisan bakers.

“We’re disproving the fallacy that you can’t raise bread wheat here,” Hunton said.

He produced his first bread wheat crops in 2009 and 2010. He trucked the crops 176 miles south to the Butte Creek Mill at Eagle Point for grinding into flour.

The Tilts began marketing the flour wholesale to bakeries and in four-pound sacks at Kiva Grocery Store in downtown Eugene, but the operation ran into a major problem.

“Every 50-pound bag they sold lost money. It cost more to ship it and grind it” than they could make, Charlie Tilt said.

So the Hunttons put together their savings, the loan from the Tilts and the grant awarded by the Lane County Board of Commissioners to build a local mill.

Commissioner Rob Handy said it was a great economic development move for the county. Lane County grows less than 5 percent of the food it consumes. For each additional percentage point raised here, \$11.7 million dollars in the county — and that means jobs, Handy said.

“We can feed ourselves, and the economic development that would mean to our community is astounding,” he said.

In August, Hunton and Tilt were read to install the mill. They hoped to have it running by the end of the year. A couple of neighboring farmers had planted hard wheat in the spring with the intent of processing it at the new mill, Hunton said. He hired a miller to run the machinery. But then the project ground to a halt.

Hunton and Tilt said it stalled in The Eugene Planning and Development Department.

“They were really busy with the Matthew Knight stadium. They were overloaded. They had cut down staff because of the recession,” Tilt said.

The Camas Country Mill couldn't get their attention, Tilt said. "I started feeling like, 'Oh, no, I've misled Tom. All of a sudden he's stalled. He's got a full-time worker. He's got the floor done and the walls painted. He's met every obligation, but the city is not responding."

The difficulty, Hunton said, is that flour in the air in the right concentrations — with a spark — can explode. "They had difficulty believing that we could isolate any potential hazard," Hunton said.

Hunton and Tilt hired additional engineers and architects to work through the problems, Tilt said. They added \$10,000 in upgrades to the vent and duct works. Every little redesign required an engineer's stamp, which cost \$300 more each time, Tilt said.

Tom Hunton insists: "There needs to be a philosophy change somehow in permitting that it's not a game to put obstacles in the way."

Charlie Tilt says: "If you encounter this once, you don't ever want to do it again. You want to go outside the city with your business."

The permitting was finally completed in April, meaning the newly hired miller had months to wait to start grinding flour — and the farmers that had grown wheat for the mill had to sell their crops on the commodities market before the mill was completed.

Assistant City Manager Sarah Medary said, "I have a ton of respect for the Huntons. They have done some great work in the valley, and this is a great project.

"We're totally excited about having a flour mill in the area, it meets a lot of our objectives — sustainability, food production, growing local businesses and local jobs, re-using a building. It is exactly the type of project we want to have here."

But it also was a complicated project, more so than either party probably realized upfront, she said. It meant taking a mechanic's shop and converting it to food production, which triggered a lot of different types of codes, including statewide ones.

"I think if everyone had known on day one the full scope, it could have been an easier project," Medary said. "It started off on the wrong foot, at least on our side. I'm glad they finally got it done." As for the city permitting process, she said, "We hope to do better. We need to find ways to make it easier."

Through the difficulties, the two unlikely business partners, Hunton and Tilt, forged a bond of respect.

"Farmers are risk-takers. They're always doing things that aren't guaranteed to turn out. They figure out ways to make it work," Charlie Tilt said.

Hunton figured he's shocked the Tilts; and the Tilts have surprised him.

“We have some differences of opinions on some things, but it all comes down to values, and they’ve got a wonderful set of core values that we correspond with,” he said.

Now the questions are: Will their risks reap a reward? Will the mill be a success?

Penhallegon said he thinks it will. Demand for locally produced food far surpasses production, he said, with the stumbling block being how to get the raw product from the farmer to the user.

“Tom (Hunton) is being very far-sighted,” Penhallegon said. “Grass seed is in the dumps. Here’s a golden opportunity to produce clean local food — yaaaay, we did it. Five hands up on that one. The key is, he’s shown it can be done. That’s such a huge, huge thing that we need to think about. Now, we need to find some Tom Huntons to fill in the other pieces ... tree fruits, berries, and so on.”

With the help of the Willamette Farm and Food Coalition, the Huntons and Tilts have been test-marketing the home-grown flour at the Lane County Farmers’ Market. And now Hummingbird Wholesale will be looking for retailers to take the flour.

All-purpose flour in grocery stores goes for as low as 30 cents a pound, Hunton said. The Camas County Mill flour is now retailing for \$1.50 a pound.

The farmer and the wholesaler are betting that customers will be willing to pay the cost for highly nutritious flour that’s grown and produced right down the road.

The Bread Stop wholesale bakery already buys 20 50-pound sacks of the flour each week for its honey wheat loaves and burger buns.

The mill, a Willy Wonka contraption under a two-story-tall ceiling, is capable of producing 800 pounds of flour per hour.

Tilt figures if they run the mill three hours a day three days a week they’ll produce 500,000 pounds in a year, which is the break-even point on the operating costs.

Hunton said if the demand outstrips the mill, there’s room for a second mill right beside it.

Ellen Hunton, who succeeded in the farming business for 66 years with her husband, gave a blessing recently as she snipped a ceremonial ribbon on the mill: Let this pay for itself, she said.

“Over the years, every time your dad started on some new venture — and I opposed a lot of them — he would say, ‘It will pay for itself,’ so we hope that this does.”