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working on the food chain | stephen jones

Kicking the Commodity Habit

On Being Grown Out of Place

IT'S A RARE APRIL DAY. No rain, no fog, some sun and a breeze. You and thirty-five thousand others from Seattle have the same idea. Tulips. A bit more than an hour's drive north and you can start the slow crawl along two-lane country roads to hundreds of acres of tulips in full bloom. The fields arc split into ten- to forty-acre parcels within eighty thousand acres of highly diverse farmland in the stunning Skagit Valley. Hit the day right and you'll also get a 360-degree view of the San Juan Islands, Mount Baker, the west slopes of the Cascade Range, a view south and west to the Olympic Mountains, and far to the south, Mount Rainer. This is the only remaining western Washington agricultural valley. Like Santa Clara Valley in California, which became Silicon Valley; the Kent, Puyallup, and other agricultural valleys to the south were swallowed whole or chewed in random bits until gone, victims of development-homes or warehouses near Interstate 5 and all the trappings of the big three: Boeing, Microsoft, and Amazon. These once verdant valleys were comprised of farms raising cows, berries, hops, cabbage, lettuce, poultry, and everything else one would expect to see in a storybook farm. Skagit Valley is not a firewall to development; it is simply the last one left.

Even on a sour April day, one without the sun and the deep views, the agritourists still come. And they take pictures, a digital archive of reds, whites, yellows, purples, and salmons. They may notice the nearby fields of raspberry canes, the seed cabbages, the goat farms. What most of them miss-and that's half a million of them in a good year-lurks in the backgrounds of those photographs. It is easily missed because it seems so out of place in this valley stuffed with such a diverse blend of crops.

It is wheat. Wheat?! Isn't fifty million acres east of the Cascades and west of the Appalachians enough? Red heirloom iceberg lettuce in a valley like this? Yes, please, if you must. But wheat? Here? Why bother?

In early April, the wheat fields are great green lawns just waking from a wet winter. As the plants get the energy to grow they are frequently mowed down by the larger of the Pacific Flyway travelers, trumpeter swans, lots of them. It is not easy being wheat in a valley that not so long ago was covered with old-growth cedars and ferns. But again, why bother? What value could there possibly be in growing something as simultaneously mundane and exotic as wheat?

In fact, until very recently the value of growing wheat or other small grains in diverse farming areas like this has had more to do with the health of the soil than with the farm's bottom line. John Roozen of Washington Bulb (where all the tulips come from) often says, "When I grow wheat I just want to lose less money." Dave Hedlin, a third-generation farmer in the southwest corner of the valley who grows over forty different organic crops on two hundred acres and has a research project with The Nature Conservancy called Farming For Wildlife, loves to tell people, "I grow wheat for fun and sometimes profit." They and other farmers of very high-value crops grow wheat because it breaks disease cycles in their complex rotations and builds organic matter in their soils. But they and other farmers who grow wheat out of place want out of the commodity market. The commodity grain market is designed very efficiently as a "buy low, sell high, repeat" model. For small-scale, vertically integrated farmers this loss of control, including over price, is foreign.

"Out of place" is a definition often left to those "in place." The right place then morphs into the rightful place. Kansas is "The Wheat State." The wheat belt of this country, with all of its amber images, needs no additional description here. We all know that the center of the country is where wheat is grown, and that wheat is grown there because it is the best place in the world to grow it. Right? Where does one grow wheat? There. Why? Because that is where it is grown. But let's take away the circular reasoning and ask where else wheat can, or in some cases should, be grown. Today commodity wheat is a default crop. It is grown in the center of the country not because that is the best place to grow wheat. Rather it is grown there because you cannot grow other higher-value crops. Eight million acres of kale in Oklahoma, even if you could grow it, doesn't make much sense. But over one hundred years ago, California grew great swaths of wheat until farmers determined that they could grow more than 250 other higher-value crops. Today Whitman County in Eastern Washington grows more wheat than the entire state of California. Why? Because you can't grow much else there other than a wheat/pea rotation. Eastern Washington grows about two-and-a-half million acres of wheat. It is essentially all for the commodity market in a system designed to send it out of the country. The price of this wheat is predetermined by speculators. The grain is shipped to the Snake and Columbia Rivers, loaded onto barges, and then transferred onto massive ocean-going ships at Portland, Oregon. This is wheat in place and anonymous. It is defined as red or white, hard or soft, winter or spring. It does not have a variety name or a location. It is a big commodity, and it has as much to do with small-scale wheat as canned fruit cocktail has to do with a basket of fresh fruit.

The Champlain, Hudson River, and lower Willamette valleys were all once "breadbaskets" in their regions. The northern counties of California and the western hills of



Above: A harvested wheat field near a former Skagit Valley dairy, in the early fall.

North Carolina, and most places in between, produced wheat and other grains. In a pre-nod to modern locavore movements, the earliest settlements of the Hudson's Bay Company and others like them in the Pacific Northwest grew wheat for their trappers and employees so that they would not have to source expensive and unpredictable staples. Despite conventional thinking wheat is not out of place in these areas. It has merely been gone for a while. A century ago wheat from the San Juan Islands was carried by ship down the Puget Sound to Seattle. During that same time the Skagit Valley was wall-to-wall oats and other grains planted to feed both horses in Seattle and loggers at camps up in the woods. Today people often ask me if it is possible to grow wheat and oats on the San Juan Islands, in Skagit Valley, or basically in any place out of place. The farm memory is gone. It has vanished along with the infrastructure that once supported it. In the Northeast, the millstones have tumbled into the streams as their neglected wooden structures decayed. In the Northwest, our grain elevators have been remodeled into Italian restaurants, or weird shopping malls, or been dismantled and recycled as rustic floors and kitchen cabinets. Little remains to remind us that thousands of communities once had vibrant local grain systems in place for food, feed, and malt.

Now wheat is returning to these areas. People seem to want to apologize for it, yet there is no need to. Start with yield. The average yield of wheat today in Kansas is about 45 bushels per acre (2,700 pounds). A hundred years ago a farm on Eby's prairie on Whidbey Island (about thirty miles from the Skagit Valley) reported a yield of 117 bushels per acre, then a world record. Today the very same farm (without irrigation) produces organic wheat at a rate at least three times that of the average modern high-input conventional Midwest farm.

But these measures of productivity are only of value to the farmer and the buyer. Contrary to the nonstop cheap food arguments, cheap to the farmer means that increased production is a requirement, not an option. Rarely does productivity translate to lower consumer prices, and rarely is it associated with flavor and nutrition. And flavor is where local wheat shines.

Millers and bakers of small-scale wheat are picking up flavors that were never noticed in commodity-wheat flours, doughs, and baked products. George de Pasquale of Essential Baking in Seattle has been making and selling hand-crafted bread for thirty-five years. He says that the bread made from organic wheat grown just up the Interstate on Dave Hedlin's farm is the best he has ever tasted. He and baker Scott Mangold from the Breadfarm (a small craft bakery in Skagit Valley) pick up chocolaty overtones and a hint of spice in the bread. While flavor has been appreciated in heirloom wheat varieties like Red Fife and Turkey Red for years, it is also a component of more modern varieties. In this case the variety of wheat, Bauermeister, has been around only about fifteen years. Thus it does not qualify as an heirloom. But it does demonstrate two things: that modern wheats can compete with heirlooms on flavor (very good news for farmers who are looking for the increased yields and disease resistance of the newer wheats) and that there is something to the idea of terroir in wheat. Bauermeister, which was developed by Washington State University for Eastern Washington, does not exhibit the same flavor notes when grown there that it does in areas west of the Cascades, an out of place location.

These flavors are not limited to the Skagit Valley. Lane County in the lower Willamette Valley of Oregon is a region once famous for being the grass seed capital of the world. The billboards are still up, in fact. But in a down economy people aren't building houses and as a consequence are not planting new lawns. Suddenly, the boastful "grass seed capital of the world" rings hollow. Combine this with the idea that the county government likes to draw attention to the alarming (but actually very common) fact that Lane County, one of the most fertile farming areas of the world, grows only 2 percent of the food it consumes, and you have a reason to switch from grass seed to food crops.

An innovative project to grow local beans and bread wheat headed by Harry MacCormack has been in place in the valley for twenty years. Still, there was resistance to the idea of growing bread wheat in an area that has not seen it in generations. That didn't deter Tom and Sue Hunton, who liked the idea of growing more food and less grass seed. They recently built a local flourmill, Camas Country Mill, the first in the area since the Depression, and started growing local grains and contracting with neighboring farmers to do the same. They also started connecting with local chefs and bakers. Tom found at first that people came to his products for the story, the localness of it all. What he did not anticipate was something else, the flavor. Recently he said, "It became not just a storyline but recognizable flavor and quality points that no one anticipated." Tom works closely with local chef Heidi Tunnell who admits, "I never took into account the actual flavor of the wheat or flour I was using." She does now.

The "new" flavors of wheat are not limited to the West. Dawn Woodward of Evelyn's crackers in Toronto sources her wheat and other grains (mostly heirlooms) from organic farmer Patricia Hastings, who grows them in a region of Ontario better known for dairy and vegetable production. Dawn admits to at first "chcf-ing up" her crackers with all sorts of flavor add-ins. Now she lets the grain flavor shine as the dominant note. Without the distractions of ferments and crust-crumbs ratios that come through strongly in bread, she can more easily use the grain as the driver of flavor in crackers.

The notion of flavor in grains is spreading up and down both coasts and inland to towns like Asheville, North Carolina, and Ashland, Oregon. The regions are similar to parts of Maine, Vermont, coastal California, and Alaska, where the craft bakers far outnumber the wheat farmers. That scene is changing. In the Sand Hills region of North Carolina, farmer Billy Carter grows organic wheat for local miller Jennifer Lapidus in rotation with crops of organic tobacco, strawberries, and cut flowers. Near Ashland, Oregon, Maud Powell with the Small Farms Program at Oregon State University holds sold-out workshops on growing wheat for local use. With seed provided by my research program, Heather Darby at the University of Vermont is breeding wheat for the first time in that state in over a hundred years. And now Bob Klein, restaurateur and founder of Community Grains in California's Bay Area, is adding pasta made with local wheats to what has mostly been a discussion about bread. My own research program in Skagit Valley is focused on breeding wheat specifically for organic farmers. All of these individuals and hundreds more are kicking a commodity habit that evolved over generations.

The terms "food justice," "food security," and "food sovereignty" are being used to describe this movement. They fit very well. This year Tom Hunton has contracted with the local food bank system in Lane County to grow two hundred acres of beans (in rotation with his grains) to add much-needed protein to local diets. Native American tribes in the Northwest are investigating growing grain crops for local use on land that had been formally leased out for commodity crop production. In a direct shot at food security for his state, farmer Bryce Wrigley started The Alaska Flour Company in December 2011. The mill is set to grind one hundred tons of Alaska grain this year.

The systems for farming, storing, milling, and selling these grains still have to mature to make a lasting economical model. We are seeing infrastructure improvements and investments like flour mills, storage, drying facilities, and bakeries. And some of these regions have also seen a return to the scene of malt houses, bringing barley along as a local food source. The market of grains as feed for local animal production is also a critical piece that is coming back into place. Many mid-sized northwestern and northeastern dairy and poultry production systems adopted a model of importing cheap feed from the Midwest. This model is collapsing on itself as transportation and biofuel-driven price spikes are putting serious strains on these farmers. The answer here, too, is local grains. Food, feed, and malt are returning to our local communities in ways that make sense and that benefit not only those who enjoy regional flavors but, more important, local economies. Wheat that does not meet the requirements of local millers or bakers can find a ready market in the regional animal feed systems. Add organic as a prefix, and everything in these models becomes even more possible and necessary.

Farmers in Skagit Valley want the wheat that they grow to have a value and place in the same way that their fruit, vegetable, nursery, and other crops have. Uniqueness and desirability are key in any non-commodity farm product. To find these two traits in wheat is revolutionary.

There is a beauty to wheat having an identity. It is not steel or coal or lumber. It has sustained humans for over ten thousand years. Wheat deserves a higher status, not just in our meals but in how we view it in a local field. It deserves to be considered in place in progressive, small-scale, diverse farming systems. And it has a place in preserving farmland and saving a valley like the Skagit.