

# The Whole-Grain Grail: A Sandwich Bread With Mass Appeal

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ELMORE, Vt. — When Blair Marvin started making and selling bread 15 years ago, she promised herself three things: She would never preslice it. She would never bake it in a pan. And she would certainly never sell it in plastic.

But three years ago, as she was helping out in the one-room schoolhouse where her son, Phineas, attended first grade, she realized she had a problem. At lunch, his friends weren't eating sandwiches made from the stone-ground, organic loaves she and her husband baked at [Elmore Mountain Bread](#), and sold in local supermarkets. Sure, the students had Vermont-churned cheese from Vermont-raised cows. But their bread often came from a national bread company, made from white flour or laced with preservatives.

"All of these preconceived notions and standards I set for myself," said Ms. Marvin, 39. "None of it mattered. If Phineas's peers weren't eating our bread, then we were doing something wrong."

So she broke her vow. Using mostly whole-wheat flour, stone-ground in a mill made by [New American Stone Mills](#), a company owned by her husband, Andrew Heyn, she developed a new loaf — soft, sliced and sealed in plastic.

“Everybody should have access to healthy food,” she said. “We’re trying to make something that is recognizable to the general population. It’s a way of getting real bread into people’s diets.”

Ms. Marvin and Mr. Heyn are part of a collective of about 40 bakers, millers, teachers and wheat-breeders who work with [the Bread Lab](#), a famed research center affiliated with Washington State University that has long focused on [developing wheat varieties](#) specific to regions of the country. Since last April, using guidelines established by the lab, the collective has pursued a common goal: making a whole-grain loaf that’s familiar-looking and affordable enough to appeal to a mass audience.

The Bread Lab calls it “[the approachable loaf](#),” but each bakery in the [Bread Lab Collective](#) makes a slightly different version, informed by local tastes and local grains. Elmore Mountain Bread calls its bread the Vermont Redeemer, after a type of local wheat. Zingerman’s Bakehouse, in Ann Arbor, Mich., calls its loaf [State St. Wheat](#). King Arthur Flour, an [employee-owned company](#) in Norwich, Vt., christened its version Just Bread and [published a recipe](#) for home bakers on its website. It sells 350 of the loaves a week and donates others to a food pantry, said Karen Colberg, a chief executive at King Arthur Flour.

Whatever the name, the approachable loaf is made in 20 states, from Kalispell, Mont., to New Haven, Conn., as well as in England, Canada and Australia. For each loaf sold, 10 cents goes back to the Bread Lab to help fund grain research.

The loaf is something of a Trojan horse, a way to sneak healthy ingredients onto the taste buds of a younger generation. Its disguise as a standard-issue sandwich bread might be just the guerrilla tactic needed to get regional whole grains integrated into the developed world’s diet.

“If it’s crusty, you’re not going to get soccer moms saying, ‘Hey, we need to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches out of this,’” said Anthony Ambeliotis, a member of the collective who sells a version of the approachable loaf for \$4.50 at [Mediterra Bakehouse](#), his family bakery outside Pittsburgh.

Despite a growing interest in baking bread and [declining consumption of white bread](#), most loaves sold in America are still less than ideal in nutrients and fiber. Even the whole-grain breads that have reached a national market sometimes contain chemical preservatives or additives, like flavor enhancers or sugars.

“Why is it that ‘affordable’ has to be this hyper-centralized, hyper-processed product?” said Stephen Jones, the director of the Bread Lab, standing in its flour-covered research kitchen in Burlington, Wash., about 70 miles north of Seattle.

Since he founded the lab in 2011, Dr. Jones has tried to reinvent bread by promoting regional grain, breeding wheat varieties that taste good, like heirloom strains, but have a

strong yield, like most modern hybrids. At the Grain Gathering conference, an annual meeting he hosts at the lab, enthusiasts and members of the collective come together to discuss how to incorporate the lab's research into craft baking.

"Once, if you said, 'I want to put my bread in a plastic bag and I want it sliced,' people would be like: 'I think you're at the wrong conference,'" said Louie Prager, an owner of [Prager Brothers Artisan Breads](#) in San Diego, which sold 4,800 approachable loaves last year, at \$5 apiece. "But now, it's fine to make a bread that works better for more people."

In summer 2018, Dr. Jones laid out his new vision. Like Ms. Marvin, he recognized that the collective needed to pivot and work with, rather than against, an American palate shaped by generations of white-bread sandwiches. To build the base formula for the new bread, he turned to Jeff Yankellow, a baker and the western region sales manager for King Arthur Flour.

"It's not the bricks of whole wheat bread that you think of from the hippie days," Mr. Yankellow said. "We're making really good stuff."

The Bread Lab has set three strict parameters for the approachable loaf: More than 60 percent of the flour must be whole wheat; it can't have more than seven ingredients, all of which have to be real food, not chemical additives; and it can't cost more than \$6.

"It's local, and I know the people who make it," said Elaina Lefevre, 27, who regularly buys Ms. Marvin's loaf for her young daughter at the Hannaford supermarket in Morrisville, Vt. "Five ingredients or less on a label is what I aim for."

Bread is among the simplest and most mundane things humans eat. It's in our prayers: Give us this day our daily bread. It's in our wallets: our bread and butter.

But bread has also been a catalyst for change. In 1789, the [high price of bread](#) brought angry protesters to the streets of Paris. In 2011, it did again, [in Cairo's Tahrir Square](#).

"There's nothing more revolutionary than bread," Dr. Jones said. "But there's also nothing more mundane or pedestrian than bread. It's who we are."

Dr. Jones often works in an apron branded with a skull and the words "White Sliced Death," armor in his crusade for whole grains. Still, his no-hostages approach to white flour and regional grains has earned him the respect of many in the local-food movement.

"I think what we're doing is radical," Mr. Prager said. "It's radical to make good, organic, clean food affordable to more people."

The collective has a point. It is a curious quirk of contemporary America that a 6-year-old from Burlington, Vt., and a 6-year-old from Burlington, Wash., can eat entirely identical sandwiches for lunch. Once, that would have been impossible. Vermont bread was made with Vermont wheat, and Washington bread was made with Washington wheat, made from local grains ground in local mills.

But in the late 19th century, a new technology arrived from Europe, changing American flour: roller mills, which separate the bran — the “whole” part of whole wheat — from the kernel.

Without the bran’s oils and proteins, the chalky “all-purpose flour” that most Americans would recognize today is inert and easier to preserve.

Although it keeps longer, white flour is less nutritious, as the bran holds most of the kernel’s fiber. Dr. Jones also thinks it is wasteful in an agricultural system struggling to adapt to climate change.

“If you’re a farmer and you grow 100 pounds of wheat, only 70 of it is going to be made into food,” Dr. Jones said “If you wanted to raise the yield of wheat tomorrow, just eat the whole kernel.”

Without added chemicals to keep the bread soft and mold-free, the approachable loaf has a shelf life of about a week before it goes stale. This requirement also helps ensure that the bread stays local; any time spent traveling to a store would waste precious freshness.

“There’s no reason that bread should keep for this long,” said Dr. Jones, shaking a mass-produced loaf with a sell-by date of June 2018 that is still soft. He keeps it in the lab to help make his case.

Today, after millennia as a daily staple, good bread has almost become a luxury item. Whole-wheat flour can be expensive, especially if it’s organic. Loaves baked by hand cost more, as bakers need to be paid for their time and labor.

Even \$6 for the approachable loaf can be a steep price for many families. But though it’s not as cheap as Wonder Bread, the loaf is close in price to most other whole-wheat options sold in supermarkets. Members of the collective hope that, together, they get Americans to take bread more seriously.

“People care about their hops and their cheese and their coffee and their dairy and their meat, but they don’t even think twice about their grains,” Ms. Marvin said. “But bread is the most broken.”