

Field to Griddle

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“A workshop on pancakes? Everyone knows how to make pancakes,” a woman said, shaking her head. “What’s there to learn?”

I was at the From Scratch Club booth at the Homegrown Skills Tent at Farm Aid Saturday, and the question was a little daunting because I had to defend my territory. I was already a little daunted. Twenty-nine thousand people were at SPAC to hear Willie Nelson and Neil Young. From Scratch Club, which I write and teach for, was selected to showcase the DIY way to be, and host two of six workshops—bacon and pancakes.



So I thought a moment, and told the woman: This is going to be more of a “because” workshop, rather than a “how-to.” Titled “Pancakes 101: Field to Griddle,” the class was taught by organic grain farmer Thor Oechsner, who would cover the field, and me, who would hover as usual at the griddle.

“If you could read my mind, you would see that all I think about is pancakes,” I said as I got used to the Madonna microphone a little while later. A lot of people were in front of me—60 or 75, sitting on hay bales and folding chairs. I’ve got a one-track mind, and my topic is pancakes. I think of them when I am riding my bike. I come up with new recipes when people are talking about entirely unrelated things, like carpool schedules. Once, I had to force myself to *not* get out of bed and e-mail a miller about a stunning tidbit I’d learned in a book about Aunt Jemima. The e-mail would wait until morning.

I’ve always liked pancakes, but the like has turned obsessive the last few years as I’ve learned about grain production and flour. Whole grain, freshly milled flour made from wheat grown outside of the dominant grain

production areas has flavor to spare. My pancakes revel in those flavors and stand up tasty and proud at the griddle, announcing themselves as the perfect breakfast.

I'm too much of a knee-jerk proletariat to easily talk about the concept of terroir, but at Farm Aid, Oechsner talked about how grains, like any other food, taste like where they're grown. Just as grapes can have a good year, seed varieties and seasons play out in wheat fields. Wheat types that have been bred for higher yields and large-scale production have lost qualities such as flavor and nutrition. One study of nutrition conducted in Washington state found that you'd have to eat 10 slices of bread made from a certain modern variety to get the nutrients found in a variety from the late 1800s.

He also talked about figuring out how to handle grains in New York, where humid summers create a few challenges to harvest quality. He told the story of opening his mill, Farmer Ground Flour, and the bakery that began as a test kitchen for their flour, Wide Awake Bakery.

All the while, I made pancakes using malted barley from Valley Malt—the Hadley, Mass., micro-maltster whose products are found in Albany Distilling's goods—and whole-wheat pastry flour milled on Aug. 13 at Farmer Ground. (The date was on the bag.)

When it was my turn to talk, I pushed whole-grain flours, stone-milled and unsifted. The flours contain all the sweetness of the germ, and the tastiness of the bran. White flour, I explained, has always been favored because Western culture loves whiteness. This love, plus advances in agricultural and food technology like roller milling, which can sift out all of the bran, landed us in a glut of flour in the 1880s, when Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix was born.

Suddenly, there was a glut on the grain and flour market. Newspaperman Charles Rutt bought a defunct flour mill and decided to make a pancake mix to push flour. He and his business partner chose Aunt Jemima as a brand when they saw a minstrel show. Aunt Jemima Pancake Flour did not take off until a few years later, at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Former slave Nancy Green played Aunt Jemima, cooking pancakes and telling stories inside a flour-barrel-shaped booth. Her stories and food were so popular that the fair had to hire extra security for crowd control.

The gist of the myth she spread was that during the Civil War, Yankees came to her plantation, and she saved her colonel's scalp with plates of fabulous pancakes. Her recipe was so revered that eventually the company was founded.

This was the first packaged mix. I love telling this story because it is a starting point for talking about how food production began to get out of our hands. The late 1800s were a heyday for breakfast cereals and other ready-made foods. Breakfast is where convenience foods began, and going back to the griddle is a great way to take charge of food again.

Pancakes are the original fast food. Ye Olde Griddle was probably a stone heated over a fire, where our ancestors cooked grain gruels into flatcakes. You can make savory cakes for dinner in less time than it takes to make pasta. There are nice pancake mixes on the market, but you have more control of the ingredients if you make it yourself. I use the flours I love and Rumford baking powder for perfect loft. I never have to add any sugar because whole grains are sweet enough on their own. A pinch of baking soda helps the little bit of yogurt I add to make a tangy batter. Some people separate egg whites, which can lighten the cakes, but if you are devoted to cakes on a daily basis, you'll be happy without the extra work.