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MOUNTAIN PEAK: OUT HERE IN THE FIELDS

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Photo by Carole Topalian

BY AMY HALLORAN

The ninth Grain Growers Conference was held March 14 at the Essex Resort, attracting 135 people from Vermont, New York, New Hampshire and elsewhere for presentations and baking workshops.

The first meeting of the Northern Grain Growers Association (NGGA) drew just 15 people. Interest has been steadily growing as more people explore the capacity to grow wheat and other grains in and around the Champlain Valley, an area formerly known as a bread and oat basket.

This year's conference featured two keynote speakers and several workshops on growing, processing and using local grains. Wheat breeder Stephen Jones came from Washington State to discuss the value of growing grains out of place. Julie Miller Jones came from Minnesota to talk about the bestselling diet book *Wheat Belly*, which is critical of modern wheat.

Growing grains in places that aren't Kansas or other Plains States is a topic that Stephen Jones explores daily. The former wheat breeder for Washington State University in the western part of the state, where 2.5 million acres of wheat are grown a year, he now works with farmers on the eastern side of the state. These are farmers who grow wheat in rotation with other crops like tulips and potatoes, not wheat farmers who only grow wheat.

Jones advises a number of projects throughout the country, including a mill in Oregon's Willamette Valley, Camas Country Mills. This was his second time speaking at the NGGA conference; he visits Vermont at least once a year to help farmers and researchers in their efforts.

At the Mount Vernon WSU research center, Jones and his colleagues test up to 40,000 varieties of wheat each year, trialing 400 of these wheats in checkerboards of test plots. They're crossing plants to try to find good growing properties, such as yield and disease resistance, and good baking and malting qualities, too.

"We can import malt, we can import flour, but that means the value is generated somewhere else and then it comes into our community," said Jones of his interest in grains. "Our vision in our foodshed is to keep the value right there, to not import organic feed for poultry folks from Nebraska."

This sentiment was of a piece with the presentations scheduled for the rest of the day. Heather Darby and Erica Cummings talked about UVM research on heirloom grains, fertility and planting dates. Other sessions covered soil health, specialty grain processing, growing rye bread from ground to loaf, and building a homegrown ration. These were led by people who have experience working with grains, and with forming partnerships to figure out the necessary equipment, knowledge and infrastructure for growing, harvesting, storing and using these staples. If this sounds like reinventing the wheel, that's because reintroducing regional grain supplies asks for new wheels, or new versions of old ones.

Jeffrey Hamelman runs King Arthur Flour's bakery in Norwich, and has been a member of NNGA since he heard of it. (The company is a sponsor of the conference.) As a baker, he considers the organization a great way to engage with farmers, and vice versa. He taught a class in baking crackers using local flour. Crackers, he explained, are more accommodating than bread to the irregular qualities of Vermont flours.

After his workshop, while the crackers cooled on racks, Allie Thompson from Sunnyfield, a brick oven bakery in New Hampshire that uses regional flour as well as flour from Canada, consulted Hamelman about crackers. He tried a sample and suggested she play with chilling the dough after a brief fermentation. Another star of Vermont baking, Red Hen Bakery's Randy George, taught a class in making sourdough pancakes.

Baker Thom Leonard traveled to the conference from Georgia to speak about Turkey Red wheat, a heritage variety that helped turn Kansas into the Wheat State. Turkey Red fell from use, and Leonard has been working with Heartland Mills, an organic flour mill in Lawrence, Kansas, to help bring this special-identity wheat to market. "The book *Wheat Belly* has been having an impact on our fledgling grain industry in Vermont and other places," said Heather Darby, introducing Julie Miller Jones. (The two keynotes are not related.) "We've heard that growers and bakers are losing business because of this topic. They need information to be able to talk to consumers." Jones is a professor of nutrition who teaches at the College of St. Catherine and specializes in whole grains.

"I was asked to review the book and give a book report to the large milling firm in my city," said Jones. When she got to the chapter on schizophrenia, which said that not eating wheat could prevent or cure schizophrenia, she thought that bordered on the unethical. "While it is true that 5% of people with schizophrenia might have improved symptoms if they avoid wheat, to hold out that kind of hope to those families that are so desperate—that caused me to write the review that I did."

The book's author, William Davis, argues that modern wheat is addictive and causes obesity, and is responsible for allergies, celiac disease, rashes and diabetes, among other conditions. Jones countered that some of these problems, like rashes, diabetes and joint pain, can be addressed by weight loss alone.

"Davis claims that the wheat isn't what your grandma had, calling the work of Norman Borlaug anathema," she said, pointing out that the Nobel Prize-winning wheat breeder used only classic breeding techniques. "He worked on short-straw wheat that would need less input from water and soil."

At the social hour at the end of the day, people seemed pleased with what they'd learned about the challenges of fitting tools and techniques to handling grains on a small scale.

Such was the case for a folks who came from Haliburton Highlands, Ontario, where they're three years into a grain CSA. The area used to be farmland, but now is mostly second homes.

"It's really exciting to see other people just getting going and facing the same problems," said Cheryl Bathe, who mills flour and is part of the CSA.



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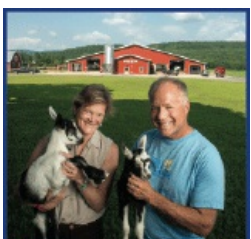
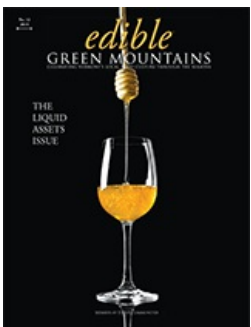
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