

Local Flour

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NOFA-NY Newsletter Summer 2014

The first time I had local grains was in a cookie. The wheat and oats in that that chocolate oatmeal bar announced their presence loud and clear, even though flavor competition from the chocolate was pretty rough. The locally grown and recently stone ground flours were just stunning. That single cookie made me fall in love with regional grains, and I've been trying to figure out everything about them ever since.

I dived into grains wholeheartedly, but I know that the topic gets the hairy eyeball. Incorporating any new ingredient into your kitchen can be a challenge. Trying to find time to understand something as anonymous as flour and starch may seem silly. Starch is starch, right?

Wrong. I cannot give you the cookie that opened the door of my mind, but I hope I can give you some inspiration to play with grains. Our staple crops should not stand in the background. They can have as much flavor, freshness, and variety as any other plant food.

There is a small culinary explosion happening around local and heritage grains, so there is no shortage of sources for exploration. Look for grains at co-ops, farmers markets, and farm stands. Ask around. Who knows? Maybe you have a neighbor with a bicycle-powered mill in his basement, ready to grind your flour. (I do.)

A lot of organizations are collaborating to revive regional grain production. NOFA-NY has been involved for more than a decade, partnering on grants and projects to get farmers growing grains in the state. One of NOFA-NY's partners, the Greenmarket Regional Grains Project has made a map of the Northeast Grainshed that should help navigate your search. Look for it online.

Here's a map of the grains themselves. Grains are the edible seeds of certain grasses, like wheat, spelt, emmer, rye, barley, triticale, oats, rice and corn. All but rice are all grown commercially in our region.

Ancient and heritage varieties of wheat, like emmer and spelt, are available from New York state farms and mills. These grains have unique flavors, and are also desired because they have a different gluten-forming capacity than other wheats. Some people who can't tolerate common varieties of wheat find they can eat emmer and spelt.

However, don't try to push these foods on people with celiac disease. Gluten is gluten.

Pseudo-cereals are foods that cook up like grains but aren't members of the grass family; none of them have any gluten. Buckwheat, a relative of rhubarb, is a commercial crop in New York. is another option for gardeners looking to grow local and gluten free.

Some people are experimenting with growing rice in the Northeast, and find it yields quite nicely. Quinoa is also on the radar as a potential staple crop. For now, rice, quinoa and amaranth are, as far as I know, not for sale as food, just seed for gardeners.

All of these crops are excellent rotations for organic farms and gardens. The true grasses are not related to vegetable crops, so they offer a break from soil borne diseases and pests. They also build organic matter in soil. More and more people are planting a little bit of grains in their yards and gardens. I love the way these plants grow and look. Buckwheat flowers are good enough to go in a bouquet. Rice looks like jewelry. Wheat and rye grow well when planted in September or October. Though it's almost too late to start for this year, winter is the perfect time to familiarize yourself with these grains, and figure out what you might want to grow.

Flour is a good place to start. These days, my favorite is spelt, which makes velvet textured pancakes, and has a super nutty taste.

Farmer Ground Flour stone mills organically grown NYS grains. Other mills in the state that grind organic, regional grains include Wild Hive and Champlain Valley Milling. Not all flour labeled local is locally grown, though; some of it is only locally ground. When shopping, ask questions.

Wheats are classified as hard and soft, according to the texture of the starch in the endosperm. Soft (pastry) wheats have a lower protein content than hard (bread) wheats. Lower protein = less gluten, the part of wheat that helps give bread doughs and loaves structure.

Wheats are red or white. White wheats have less tannins, and are sweeter tasting. Pastry flour is made from soft wheat. Bread flour is made from hard wheat. All Purpose flour is made from both hard and soft wheat.

Stone mills grind all parts of the grain – the bran, germ and

endosperm, together. Hammer mills do, too. Roller mills work by separating the parts of grain kernels, and, in the case of whole grain flours, putting the components together again.

Locally grown grains tend to have lower protein overall, which can be challenging for bread baking. Plenty of people figure out how to do it – Stefan Senders of Wide Awake Bakery offers great classes in the skill. You can jump this hurdle by sticking to quick breads, noodles and crackers. Crepes with fresh flour are kind of extraordinary.

Another way to enjoy local grains is whole. I think of whole wheat, rye or barley berries as rice, and cook them the same way. Some people soak their grains with a little yogurt, whey or vinegar before cooking; the idea is that this helps to mitigate the phytic acids in grains that can interfere with nutrient absorption. I keep a pot of cooked grains in the fridge, and have them ready for anything – soups, stirfries, and even to grind in the blender with pancake batter!

Wheat or Rye Berry Chowder

2 slices bacon, chopped (optional)
2 ounces butter (if not using bacon)
¼ cup flour
1 cup chopped onion
1 teaspoon thyme
3 cups chopped turnip greens or kale
3-4 cups milk, depending on how thick you want your chowder
2 cups cooked whole grains

Cook the bacon pieces until crisp. There should be about 3-4 tablespoons of fat in the pan. If the bacon is swimming, remove some fat. Add the onion, and cook over low heat for a few minutes, until soft. Add the flour, stirring with a fork or flat whisk, and cook on low heat until the flour/fat mixture is light brown. Add the greens and half the milk. Simmer until greens are cooked to your desired tenderness.

Add remaining milk and grains, and cook through. Taste and see if you need to add salt. Season to taste with fresh ground pepper.

