

Ancient wheat a Montana game changer

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Kamut retains qualities lost in other varieties of wheat from decades of hybridization. It is more easily digested than more conventional varieties, higher in vitamins and minerals and more tolerated by individuals with wheat sensitivities.
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Wheat has been a staple for thousands of years, but between high-protein, low-carbohydrate fad diets and wheat intolerances, its reputation is tarnished to the point that some recommend eliminating it from the menu. But Kamut Khorasan wheat changes the entire game.

Unlike modern durum, Kamut-brand wheat retains qualities lost over the decades of hybridization. It's more easily digested than conventional varieties, higher in vitamins and minerals and more tolerated by individuals with wheat sensitivities.

"We're doing genetic testing," said Trevor Blyth, CEO of Kamut International, "It's an ancient relative of durum wheat called Khorasan." In Egypt it's called Balady, which means "native" durum, and it's still found growing in backyard gardens.

The way this heritage wheat found its way to Montana is nothing short of a miracle.

In 1949, Earl Dedman, a U.S. airman, sent 32 seeds to his father in Fort Benton. The story behind the large kernels of wheat was they were discovered in an Egyptian pharaoh's tomb. Dedman's family grew it for more than a decade, but since there wasn't much commercial interest it languished until Bob Quinn — a Big Sandy native who, at the time, was a graduate student at University of California Davis — took interest in it. Ultimately what began as a handful of grain, grew into a multinational concern as Kamut International.

Since they knew they had something special, Blyth said, "They wanted to take it a step further and trademark it." This allowed them to sign licensing agreements with growers to ensure the Kamut-brand wheat maintained its high standards, including being organically grown and never genetically modified.

With its Egyptian roots, it grows well in Montana's climate.

"It's ideal for dryland farming. It needs enough moisture to get going," said Blyth. Although it typically doesn't yield as much as standard durum, when the going gets tough during drier years Kamut Khorasan will often outperform standard durum.

The beauty of Kamut Khorasan wheat is the unique flavor. Stephen Zahnow, bread mixer and baker at Sweetgrass Bakery in Helena, said "The taste is sweeter and nuttier than a typical whole grain. We make Kamut bread every Wednesday."

Zahnow said he's also used it as a substitute for whole wheat. He recommends taking out a couple of cups of the whole wheat and incorporating the Kamut brand wheat.

"It rises a little slower and makes a denser bread," said Blyth. And he noted that it doesn't require a heavy hand in kneading. "You really have to feel it. You can't just keep working it and working it."

It's also excellent for pasta, and it's a mainstream brand in Italy.

"Our belief is we've been eating wheat for thousands of years. It's changed so dramatically in the last 50 years," said Blyth. "(Modern durum) has been bred to yield more. Nutrition wasn't part of the selection in the breeding process."

The goodness of Kamut Khorasan wheat starts from the soil. It's primarily grown in Montana, Alberta and southern Saskatchewan, which are regions naturally high in selenium and other minerals.

"It takes up the minerals well in the soil," said Blyth. "And the selenium is a big one. Selenium is a powerful antioxidant."

Although it's well documented that many people with wheat sensitivities have no problem eating Kamut Khorasan wheat, Quinn was never one to depend exclusively on anecdotal evidence.

"Bob started several years ago investigating why people can eat this wheat," he said. "There's not going to be one reason why people can." Research indicates the selenium is a factor, and they continue to search for the other key elements of its health benefits.

Through a recent study researchers discovered a reduction in the inflammatory response, leading them to conduct a cardiac study to see how Kamut-brand wheat fits into the picture.

"Certainly wheat sensitivity is an inflammation in the gut," said Blyth, "Basically, the Kamut-brand wheat diet is a buffer against oxidation stress."

Kamut Khorasan wheat embodies the positive qualities of this most basic food that fed nations for eons; it gives wheat lovers a reason to return for the sake of their health.