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KAMUT – An Ancient Grain Flourishes in the Upper Great Plains

July 19th, 2010

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By Gail Nickel-Kailing, Managing Editor, Food CEO



Decked out in his cowboy hat complete with a bunch of wheat heads tucked in the band, Bob Quinn looks every bit the part of a Montana grain farmer.

Behind that image, the soft-spoken Quinn is extremely well educated – a Masters in plant pathology and a Doctorate in plant biochemistry – and a successful entrepreneur marketing KAMUT® khorasan wheat.

Quinn filled Food CEO in on the wheat's history, where it's grown, where it sells best, and what it's used for.

Food CEO: What makes KAMUT khorasan wheat so special? Why did you decide to brand it?

Bob Quinn: KAMUT is a brand name for a particular type of wheat, khorasan wheat. It's an ancient "heritage" type of grain that has never been hybridized or crossed with other grains to change it from its original form.

If you compare it with commercial bread wheat the kernels are almost three times as big; they are about twice the size of a kernel of Durham wheat. The heads and awns are larger too.

The main focus on modern wheat has been to increase yields. At the same time, breeders have made the grain shorter, more disease resistant, increased the protein for manufacturing, changed the starch characteristics, and made the bran harder so it can be more easily removed. KAMUT is the way it was in the beginning.

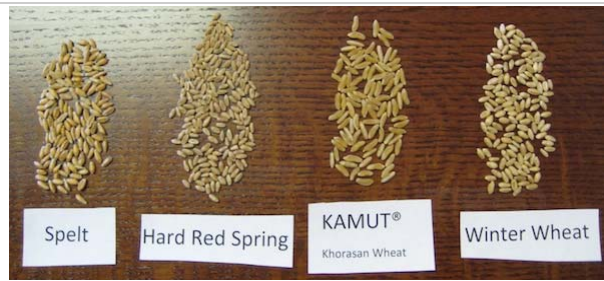
By branding the wheat we are able to establish growing and nutritional standards so that we can sell a consistent product. That's important for companies who manufacture other products using our wheat.

Food CEO: How is the flour different from the common flour that we find on the grocery shelves?

Bob Quinn: KAMUT is more like Durham wheat than bread wheat. The gluten is very fragile without a lot of "endurance" and it absorbs water faster. It is better for pasta, cakes or quick or flat breads.

For bread baking it must be mixed slowly and for a short time to avoid breaking the gluten. An artisan bread baker will know what the dough needs. By working small batches by hand, you can get a very satisfactory product. Commercial baking operations can't just set the machine dials and expect it to turn out. It will be more like a doorstop.





KAMUT makes wonderful sour dough pancakes and cooked porridge like Cream of Wheat. I try to eat something made out of it every day. I grow what I eat and eat what I grow.

Food CEO: Your KAMUT brand really started out with just a handful of kernels of wheat brought back from Egypt by a World War II serviceman. That's a pretty small amount that has grown into tens of thousands of acres of wheat.

Bob Quinn: When it was first introduced in the late 50s there wasn't much commercial interest in it, and we started growing it in the 70s. I thought we could probably grow 2-3 acres and sell it by the pound as a high value crop.

Someone saw it and wanted to sell it in San Diego as whole grain for macrobiotic diets. Since we thought of San Diego as a big market, we expected to sell a few truckloads.

Then a friend took it to a pasta manufacturer. The pasta made with the wheat one first place in a taste test and that opened a new vista for us.

When another friend who had severe food allergies tried it and actually felt better after eating it, we realized we had something special. It just took off from there. In my wildest dreams I never imagined it would be like this.

Food CEO: Where do you grow KAMUT wheat? Does it have special geographic requirements?

Bob Quinn: We've found that khorasan wheat grows best where Durham wheat grows best. We grow our wheat in the upper Great Plains, in the western third of the Canadian Durham growing belt. It's actually northeastern Montana, northwestern North Dakota, southeastern Alberta and most of southern Saskatchewan. The best area is about 150 miles north and south of the US/Canadian border, from the Rockies east for 400 miles.



We've tried growing it all over the world, but this area has the most consistent production because khorasan grain is very sensitive to humidity. As of 2008, there were over 45,000 acres of KAMUT wheat seeded.

Food CEO: Obviously you don't grow all that wheat yourself. Who grows the wheat for you?

Bob Quinn: We work with a network of about 150 organic farmers who grow KAMUT, mostly in Saskatchewan. While we're not officially a co-op, we have adopted the best aspects of a co-op. We work together to solve problems and when things go well, we enjoy the benefits together.

For our farmers, because they're limited to growing only 25% of their land in KAMUT, it's not their only crop or even their biggest acreage. It's still a significant crop for them. We limit the coverage to 25% to allow for good crop rotation, which is one of the founding principles of organic agriculture.

Food CEO: While KAMUT is grown in a relatively small geographic area, you're selling it all over the world. It turns out most of it is going into Italy... why?

Bob Quinn: Almost 60% of everything we plant is shipped to Italy. They love it! We were very surprised; we didn't expect it. We expected the acceptance to be the same as the rest of Europe or even less since we had been told Italy was a tough market.

The Italians, of course, have used a Durham type of wheat for pasta for generations, and KAMUT is very close to Durham wheat. The "old school" pasta makers think the smell and taste is very similar to the traditional grains they used to use.

We've also had a lot of interest from those who can't tolerate modern wheat. Culturally the Italians eat pasta every day, and if you can't tolerate wheat, your choices are limited.

The Italians also have a very strong food culture. They take great care and have a deep appreciation for their food. They also have a lot of imagination! Our wheat has been made into about 2000 different types of products worldwide; 1800 of those were developed in Italy.

Food CEO: What are some of the kinds of products they have made?

Bob Quinn: The list is a long one! Pasta, bread, cereals, snacks, pastries, cookies, and crackers are ones that most people would think of. But the Italians are also making beer out of it and a wheat drink that is like rice or soymilk. From that they are making ice cream and other dairy substitutes including cheese.

Almost all the products made from KAMUT are organic, the grain is only grown organically and most of the products are certified organic.



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