

Kamut brings ancient wheat to Montana

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History may be repeating itself in the wheat fields of Montana.

On thousands of acres in Montana's Golden Triangle, the epicenter of wheat production in Montana near Great Falls, an ancient form of wheat that is said to have been King Tut's wheat is taking the world by storm. The Kamut brand of ancient wheat (commonly known as khorasan wheat) is finally hitting its stride — some 30 years after the Big Sandy, Montana, father and son farming team first registered the wheat's trademark now have gotten the world's attention. In February a study in Italy — Kamut's largest market — reinforced the health benefits that Kamut wheat (said in recently discovered legends from Turkey to have been carried on Noah's ark) offers.



Big Sandy's Kamut International announced in February that the European Journal of Nutrition published a study showing that Kamut khorasan wheat raised in Montana may have a positive impact on blood insulin and glucose for patients with diabetes.

The report, "A Khorasan Wheat-Based Replacement Diet Improves Risk Profile of Patients with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus: A Randomized Crossover Trial," showed that consumption of products made from Kamut wheat significantly improved several key markers in the blood such as total cholesterol, LDL-cholesterol, glucose and insulin.

For Bob Quinn, PhD., that's the kind of news he's been telling markets for three decades.

Thirty years ago Quinn's father, Mack, took a jar of Kamut grain to a natural products tradeshow in Anaheim, Calif., where Bob had a booth under the name of his Montana Flour & Grain company to showcase Montana stone ground flour and organically grown grain. Hundreds of people came by their booth, and finally one person showed interest.

But this one inquiry in 1986 kept Quinn going. He knew that this form of ancient wheat would one day gain traction. To his surprise, he's found that traction in Europe, where about 75 percent of his market now is.

Quinn had first encountered the Kamut wheat at county fair in 1964 when a "guy passing it around was calling it King Tut's wheat," Quinn said. The wheat was three times the size of normal wheat. "It was a novelty," Quinn said. "But nobody had any commercial ideas for it and the novelty wore off."

That was until about 1977, when Quinn had an idea to send the Corn Nuts company a small sample to see if they might be interested in it. “They loved it and asked if we could sell them 10,000 pounds of the wheat. We only had half a pound,” Quinn said, “from half a jar of it my father had received from a friend. We increased the seed up to about 50 pounds by 1980 but by then the Corn Nuts Co. had lost interest in it.”

After the Expo in 1986, the family started growing the wheat again, slowly but surely, increasing the acreage year by year. The first year they planted half an acre, then 20 acres, then 80. They are up to 85,000 organic acres now mostly in Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The Italians were quick to become enamored with the Kamut wheat. There are about 2,000 products made from the wheat, from pasta, bread, crackers hot and cold cereal and couscous, to ice cream, beer, cheese and grain syrup. “About anything you can imagine being done with wheat, they are doing it,” Quinn said.

With only about 8 percent of his wheat being sold in America, Quinn is out to convince the American public — and farmers — that Kamut is simply better than modern wheat.

When the first person told him they couldn’t eat modern wheat but they could eat Kamut, “that’s when we got serious about how we grew it, marketed it and protected it,” he said.

“The appeal is great taste and versatility,” Quinn said. “Most people who can’t eat modern wheat can eat this.”

The recent study released on Kamut wheat is the third in a series of human studies on non-infectious chronic diseases comparing the effects of diets based on ancient Kamut wheat compared to modern wheat. In a previous study about cardiovascular disease, it was shown that a Kamut wheat based-diet was able to reduce cholesterol, blood glucose, markers of inflammation and increase antioxidant activity. Given that diabetics have increased cardiovascular risk, the aim of the most recent Kamut study, Quinn said, was to investigate whether a replacement diet with products made from ancient Kamut wheat could help fight diabetes and reduce the onset of secondary complications due to diabetes.

In the Kamut wheat study, two kinds of food products were supplied to volunteers with type 2 diabetes – products made from ancient Kamut wheat and products made from modern wheat. Both the ancient wheat and modern wheat were grown organically.

Each participant was required to eat the ancient wheat and the modern wheat, in two different time periods of eight weeks. Neither the participants nor the doctors knew what kind of wheat was eaten during each time period, and participants were not permitted to eat other wheat products during this time. They were instructed not to alter their dietary or lifestyle habits, or change any use of medications they were taking. The nutritional analysis found major differences between flour made with ancient Kamut khorasan wheat and modern wheat, according to the study. A significantly higher antioxidant content (polyphenols and selenium), and a higher antioxidant power were found in the ancient wheat

flour with respect to the modern wheat flour, as well as higher levels of minerals like magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, and zinc.

According to the study, consumption of products made from Kamut wheat produced improvement in several key markers in the blood, such as total cholesterol (-3.7%), LDL-cholesterol (-3.4%), glucose (-9.1%) and insulin (-16.3%), independent from age, sex, traditional risk factors, medication and eating habits. No significant effect was noted after the consumption of the modern wheat diet, the study said.

Other results in the study indicated a better antioxidant status after the consumption of the Kamut wheat products compared to a significant decrease after the consumption of modern wheat products. (The full study can be found online at <http://bit.ly/1SG03yw>.)

Montana farmers, who were initially slow to respond to the advantages of organic farming, are excited about transitioning to organic farming with Kamut wheat, Quinn said. "I've gotten more calls in the last six months than I've gotten in 30 years," he said.

He's now spending more time helping Montana farmers "who can't make money any more using chemicals learn about organic farming and how to do it without having a wreck," he said.

Canada is way ahead of Montana in organic wheat farming. While Saskatchewan has about 1,000 organic farms, Montana has 200, according to Quinn.

In order for Montana to catch up to the market demand which is outpacing supply of organic grains, the Legislature needs to address the issue with increased support for research and extension which support organic research and information distribution, Quinn said. "That's where we need the help," he said, "but we're not waiting on them to make up their minds."

Kamut's market has been growing over 20% annually for many years," Quinn said. "I never could have imagined it could have exploded like this."

In Montana you can find Kamut products at most health food stores, and Great Harvest Bread bakes with it weekly, Quinn said. Kracklin' Kamut snacks are also now being sold in Big Sandy and online. Look for their products online at montanaliving.com.