

■ FOOD FEATURE

A whole life in whole grain

LOCAL WOMAN BRINGS TIME-TESTED WHEAT VARIETIES BACK TO CALIFORNIA

By Daniel DeBolt

Mountain View resident Monica Spiller has made it her life's mission to promote whole grains, a passion that has led her to sell once-forgotten varieties of wheat seed, and the pasta and flour made with it.

Spiller, a former high school chemistry teacher from England, became fascinated with the idea of making whole grain bread and growing organic wheat in the 1980s. The Ardenwood Historic Farm in Fremont offered the use of its space to grow wheat if she could find some varieties of wheat grown around 1900.

Her pre-Internet search eventually lead to the United States

Department of Agriculture, to Spiller's surprise. The USDA had been keeping seed stocks of wheat that modern farmers had mostly forgotten, occasionally replanting them to keep the stock fresh — for decades.

Spiller took various wheat seeds and planted them, for 10 years. "My lesson resulted in recognizing these old-fashioned varieties are the ones appropriate for organic farmers," Spiller said.

So she became a self-appointed marketing person for these grains — connecting farmers who could sell each other seeds, or buying and selling them herself.

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MICHELLE LE

Monica Spiller, the founder of Whole Grain Connections in Mountain View, pauses in front of a mural outside of Country Sun, a grocery store that carries her heirloom wheat pasta.

DINNER BY THE MOVIES AT SHORELINE'S Pizzeria Venti



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Cotolette alla Bolognese

- 4 veal cutlets, 6 oz. each
- 4 thin slices of fresh pecorino or provolone
- 4 slices prosciutto
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1/2 cup finely ground breadcrumbs
- 1 jar good quality tomato sauce, heated
- Salt
- Freshly ground pepper
- A little butter for the baking dish

Preparation:

Preheat your oven to 350 F

Pound the cutlets flat, trim away any fat, and remove any membrane. Salt and pepper the meat to taste, dip it in the beaten egg, and dredge it in the bread crumbs, pressing down to make sure the crumbs adhere.

Melt butter in a large skillet, and when it begins to bubble. Fry the cutlets until golden, turning them once. Transfer them to a buttered baking dish, lay a slice of prosciutto and one of cheese slices on each piece, and bake for 10 minutes or until the cheese melts. Spoon a warm tomato sauce over each and serve with crusty bread.

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Organic whole-grain pasta and wheat, from left: Sonora wheat ribbons; Ethiopian Blue Tinge ribbons; grains of Sonora wheat; Sonora and Ethiopian Blue Tinge pasta spirals.

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She believes the most popular type, Sonora wheat, was grown by Native Americans in the Southwest for years before the Juan Batista de Anza expedition in 1775, and it was grown in California until modern, engineered wheat varieties took over in the 1950s. Sonora wheat can be grown without pesticides, fertilizers and irrigation, and it grows tall above the weeds that organic farmers often battle. When turned into flour, it makes a stretchy dough that lends itself well to making tortillas, as well

as pasta, pastries, flatbreads and pancakes.

Spiller's non-profit, Whole Grain Connection, now sells Sonora and other heirloom wheat seeds for \$1.25 a pound. While she's not looking to make a living on it, she's sold her seeds to 90 organic farms, many of which had been using modern wheat seeds in their crop rotations to build the soil. Unlike "terminator seeds" that are genetically modified to be sterile, the farmers only need to buy her seeds once.

Spiller said she hopes to work herself out of her seed marketing business eventually. She's moved

into the flour and pasta business and soon will offer bread made from the wheat she's marketed.

Spiller's Whole Grain Connection label can be found on pasta and whole grain flour sold at Country Sun Market in Palo Alto. The pasta and flour are available in two varieties: Sonora and Ethiopian Blue Tinge. Whole Grain Connection's flour is ground by Giusto's Specialty Foods in South San Francisco, while the pasta is made by Pasta Sonoma in Rohnert Park. The wheat for both comes from farmer Fritz Durst in Capay, Calif.

Spiller has also lined up a bakery to produce bread for the Whole Grain Connection brand. She is currently looking for someone to help her market the pasta and flour to other grocers.

Despite its rougher texture and darker color, an increasing number of restaurants and grocers espousing sustainable local products are reportedly looking for pasta made from locally grown wheat.

"The trend that I'm trying to ride is the local food movement," Spiller said. "It gives us the opportunity to produce whole grain products rather than refined grain products."

The difference between refined and whole grains is an important one to Spiller. Her late husband, Dr. Gene Spiller, authored books

on the dietary benefits of whole wheat that are still widely read. She coauthored one of his books, "What's with Fiber?" in 2005, the year before he passed away.

"It was through that work that he did that I understood that the biggest need we have in our diet is whole grain foods," Spiller said.

Like his wife, Gene Spiller was an advocate for returning to old-fashioned ways of eating. His book "The Power of Ancient Foods" says, "In order to choose a more healthful way to eat we expect formal statements by major research or government organizations — all this while the peasant of Crete and the Incas of Peru knew ages ago all we need to know about healthful foods."

Spiller says many modern diseases can be traced to the increased use of refined grains, including digestive problems, obesity and diabetes. Whole wheat is ground in such a way that it leaves intact the vitamins and minerals necessary for the human body to properly digest the protein and starch in the grain, Spiller notes. It also provides anti-oxidants to prevent diabetes, and short-chain fatty acids, which can lower cholesterol. She claims that her Ethiopian Blue Tinge wheat, is "one of the best anti-diabetic foods you

can eat." The number of anti-oxidants in it turn it purple, she said.

Only 5 percent of the grain sold in the U.S. is whole grain, but the USDA recommends that 50 percent of the grains people eat be whole grains, she said.

"If the supply isn't there, how can we possibly do that?" Spiller said.

Because of conventional agriculture's dependence on artificial fertilizers and herbicides, "the ground is depleted, really," Spiller said. "I'm trying to encourage these organic farmers to use wheat in rotation with legumes to rebuild the soil and produce a good soil. It will take a number of years. Until the rebuilding has happened the wheat is not so productive."

"The same field of Sonora doesn't yield as much as a conventional field," she said. But because it does not require herbicides, irrigation, fertilizers, "eventually I think this old-fashioned organically grown wheat will be less expensive than conventional wheat."

Information about Whole Grain Connection is at sustainablegrains.org. Products are available at Country Sun, 440 S. California Ave., Palo Alto and seed wheat is sold at Common Ground, 559 College Ave., Palo Alto. ▀

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