



The grain *debate*

LAST YEAR WAS AN INTENSE ONE FOR FRITZ SCHOON, OWNER OF SCHOON DE COMPANJE. NOT UNLIKE THE OTHERS BEFORE IT, BUT DEFINITELY DIFFERENT. HE TOLD HIS TALE – AS WELL AS THE STORY BEHIND HIS BREAD – AT THE RECENT SPIER SECRET FESTIVAL.



This image Fritz Schoon, owner of Schoon de Companje, explained why he believes in bread at the recent Spier Secret Festival in Stellenbosch.

I love bread. I love everything about it. There is no way I would ever give up on it – even after it became evident that people were opting not to eat it any more, because it was one of the carbs making them fat (if the Banting diet is to be believed). Jesus Christ referred to Himself as the bread of life. There is no way He would do that with the possibility of it ever becoming an evil product.

Last year was an intense one. Our business, Schoon de Companje in Stellenbosch, grew from four to 15 and then to 60 staff members in a relatively short period of time. Our offering extended from a humble bakery to a fully equipped kitchen, patisserie, coffee roaster, ice-cream shop, butchery and boutique wine shop, with fresh produce being dropped off daily for resale. We were also selling some antique Indian furniture on the side – all in one space.

One morning at 4am, while preshaping our baguettes, my right-hand man at the bakery, Brett, told me that we had been sitting with leftover bread every afternoon. Bread orders had also declined rather rapidly. People had stopped eating our bread! At least some people – and by a noticeable amount. That same morning, I discovered our delicious

creamy scrambled eggs were not being served with the usual slice of sourdough toast. Apparently it was on purpose. Tim Noakes' Banting diet had converted many of my regulars. (My weekend regulars, that is; my daily regulars are way too hardcore.) Something was wrong. It forced me to ask a few questions.

I started my research by establishing the nutritional value of the wheat grain, the product that makes up most of a loaf of bread. It turns out it's absolutely packed with nutrients, vitamins, minerals, fibre and essential oils. Most of the good stuff was contained in the germ as well as the bran. And, to my knowledge, white bread flour contains neither of those. It only consists of the starchy endosperm, which contains the gluten-forming proteins. I came to realise that, even though the wheat grain naturally offers so many nutrients, we are not using any of them.

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

In 1950, geneticist Dr Norman Borlaug (also known as the Father of the Green Revolution) successfully bred a wheat grain called the Semi Dwarf. His success would grant him a Nobel Peace Prize for feeding more people than any other before him.

This Semi Dwarf wheat was short, allowing the stalks to withstand harsh winds. It was also able to adapt to a broad spectrum of conditions, which meant that you could pretty much plant it anywhere. It was a stable varietal with high pest resistance and an amazing yield of seed. The Semi Dwarf also fared amazingly well with chemical fertilisers, allowing farmers to skip the year of rest (which the land requires to recover). Instead, the same area could be used repetitively. Or so we thought.

With time, though, the land started to weaken and lost its ability to give the plant enough strength to fight off pests naturally. The chemical companies were happy to offer a solution: pesticides and herbicides. And all the while, people were becoming more and more sickly. Our bodies were not used to the chemicals they were receiving. No recipe should ever contain the products that were added on the lands.

GONE THROUGH THE MILL

Another problem with the mass production of grain was the use of the stone mill, which would mash the germ (the super-healthy part of the wheat) into the flour. The healthy oils in the germ limited the shelf life of the flour so it would turn rancid and become unusable. More so, it could not be milled and distributed quickly. What followed was probably the saddest part in the history of food: the invention of the roller mill.

The roller mill had the ability to remove the germ and the bran of the wheat grain, the parts that fed us. And with so many sets of rollers working at high speeds, it was able to mill fine, white flour. The flour most of us know today. A dead product. And a dead product transports just fine. At this point, during the mid-1950s, half of the European kilojoule intake was through eating bread. It was only logical to foresee that removing all nutrients from half the food consumed led to an immediate rise of critical illnesses.

SCIENCE EXPERIMENT?

The evolution of the wheat grain also meant the end of the artisan (or local) baker, who had no place in the chain of mass production. The new commercial baker had the technology at his disposal to bake thousands of loaves per day, feeding thousands of people from one plant. Finesse, feeling, skill, time, experience and love had no place in an operation like this. All that was needed was flour that would respond well to commercial yeast, high-speed mixing and a quick gluten formation for volume. It was light, white, fluffy, dead bread.

The chemical companies also partnered with bakers to produce loaves that would remain soft, white and fluffy for a long period of time. Bleaching flour became common. "When bleached flour is used, chemicals such as acetone peroxide, chlorine and benzoyl peroxide (used to treat acne) can be included in the recipe and are masked under the term "bleached,"" explains Dr Stephen Jones, a wheat breeder from Washington State University Agricultural Research Center.

Optional ingredients are also permissible in products called bread: shortening, sweeteners, ground dehulled soybeans, colouring, potassium bromate, the now infamous azodicarbonamide (publicly denounced because of its use in both yoga mats and sandwich bread) and other dough strengtheners.

All these unnecessary and potentially harmful ingredients are allowed in a recipe for a food product that can still be labelled "bread". Our bodies were not created to channel these products, which cause discomfort, indigestion and obesity.

Doctors tend to dismiss this discomfort as intolerance to gluten. Could it possibly be that our bodies are telling us that they do not want the chemicals contained in preserved bread? Things happen for a reason.

ONLY THE BEST

As I was researching the benefits of wholegrain, a man popped his head into my office: Heinie Fourie, a wheat farmer from Caledon and the owner of stone milling operation Bio-Wheat Milling. While we were catching up, he explained that some bakers have been struggling to work with his product because he refuses to mill fine, white, dead flour, incorporating most of the germ and bran for taste. I knew immediately that this was a miller with integrity, who farms his land in a sustainable manner, and one who gives a damn about what he fed people, whether or not bakers can work with it.

I started searching for original varieties, grains such as spelt, rye, farrow and khorosan. Using organic grains, I started the Ancient Grain Series at the De Oude Bank Bakkerij in Stellenbosch to revive the consumer's connection between the grain and the loaf. I knew I was on the right track when my favourite bakers in the world were bringing out books on ancient grain baking. More and more chefs were also incorporating wholegrain, cooked, soaked or sprouted, in a variety of dishes. And not any grains: original grains.

MADE WITH LOVE

I recently met someone who has become my mentor and friend – James Moffet. He has been farming organically in Ficksburg in the eastern Free State way before it was trendy, growing wheat, maize, medicinal plants and more.

We started discussing the possibilities of farming grains in the Cape winelands and decided to plant a couple of test crops on local organic wine farms. Although the result made us all chuckle, it did not cause us to lose hope. James, my flour supplier, Heinie (who has set parts of his land apart to test the possibility of large-scale organic wheat farming) and I are at peace with the fact that this will be a journey. Even though most of our trials were not a great success, we will look back one day at the seeds of change to this South African staple.

Our aim is to plant older varieties according to the terroir they thrive in, mill these flavourful grains in their whole and remove no parts, mill locally and distribute to bakeries in a set perimeter. At bakeries, we will soak and sprout our grains for optimal nutrition, flavour and enzyme activity. We will naturally ferment all dough types for aroma and digestibility, and bake them in wood-fired ovens that require skill and discipline, draw no electricity and rid the farmers of unwanted tree species. We will do all this because we have understood the responsibility of feeding people. Love is not a spoken word; it is an action. 🌱