

# Grains of change: Farmers are reviving ancient and heritage grains in the Rogue Valley

BY ANN NGUYEN

The weekend before the spring equinox, local farmers, millers, and bakers gathered to break bread and celebrate the results of four years of hard work to revive, scale up, and grow rare and almost extinct heritage and ancient grains from all over the world.

The gathering took place at Fry Family Farm in Medford, where farmers showcased bread made from the heritage grains they grew. Plates heaped with samples of fresh-milled sourdough-cultured breads were displayed next to individual bags of grains with names of each variety: Termoki wheat, Ladhaki wheat, Georgian Winter wheat, Rouge de Bordeaux wheat, Uli Hache rye, and so on. There were also cookies made with rye, sorghum, Tibetan purple barley, and amaranth, and cornbread from two maize varieties.

As we sampled the breads, a team of bakers led by Jeremiah Thorndike Church (Boreal Heat), pulled out more freshly baked loaves from a wood-fired oven. It's not often that I get to sample ancient grains, some more than 10,000 years old, grown right here in the Rogue Valley.

The Rogue Valley Grains Project (RVGP) began four years ago when Chris Hardy, of Hardy Seeds, received more than 100 varieties of rare seeds in a partnership with the Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance and began to grow them in Ashland, along with seeds from his own collection. Some varieties had thousands of years' ancestry. Emmer was domesticated as far back as 6300 BCE, with widespread cultivation in ancient Egypt around 5500 BCE. Hourani wheat was stored by King Herod 2,000 years ago.

While preserving cultural heritage is itself a meaningful endeavor, the larger

goal of RVGP is to grow its own climate-adapted grains. Heritage grains are known for their ability to increase soil carbon and other organic matter, which increase on-farm resilience and the soil's capacity for holding water and nutrients. Heritage grains are also known for having greater nutrient density than modern varieties of conventional and organic grains.

Chris enlisted a dozen growers from around the Rogue Valley, including Fry Family Farm, Shanti Acres, Eagle Mill Farm, Dunn Ranch, Feral Farm, and Wandering Fields, to grow the seeds and record the results. The trials for the first year were conducted at Hardy Seeds. Performance factors included climate adaptability, dry farming, disease and pest resistance, shattering, storage, and yield. Grower participants returned 15-20 percent of their yield back to the RVGP seed library.

Ben Yohai, of Wandering Fields, in the Applegate, shared his trial results: "We trialed three barley varieties (Tibetan black, Himalayan, and Rinpoche), three wheat varieties (Alaska, Banatka, and Red Fife), and Spokane oats. They all performed well with minimal lodging. No irrigation was supplied with the exception of a couple of rounds of overhead in the late spring. Unfortunately, the ground squirrels harvested more than I did, so we primarily had the Tibetan Black barley and the Spokane oats yield an appreciable amount. I would trial them again with the intention of seeding at higher density and trapping for squirrels."

Scott McGuire, a grower in Wimer, spoke enthusiastically about Rouge de Bordeaux wheat. Although he did



Baked goods ready for sampling by seeds of the type of grains used in their preparation. Photo: Ann Nguyen.

own locally grown organic heritage wheat.

The project has been an intensive collaborative effort that takes many hands. The Organic Seed Alliance in Washington, along with Redwood Seeds in California, provided threshing equipment; Niedermeyer Farms supplied a grain combine; and Fry Family Farm purchased a grain cleaner. The project still lacks facilities for drying large quantities of

grains and storing the seeds. not irrigate the crops last year, they performed well.

When asked to share his top five favorite varieties, Chris replied, "Toulouse emmer, which I love because it's nutrient dense and is a hull-less variety, which is extremely rare. Black and tan einkorn, ditto. Termoki wheat, for its regenerative potential for the soil and delicious versatility in the kitchen (especially pancakes!). Guatemalan amaranth for its nutrition and drought tolerance, and the Rogue red quinoa we have been growing and selecting for more than 15 years, which is extremely tolerant of heat and can be dry farmed."

The trial results have been promising enough that Fry Family Farm is scaling up from the two acres they planted in fall 2021 to 100 acres of Rouge de Bordeaux wheat, Ukrainka wheat, and Tibetan purple barley this fall. Fry hopes to soon provide the valley with our

grains and storing the seeds.

As the group gathered to hear Chris's update on the project, the hope and excitement were palpable. What if we grew our own locally adapted grains? What if we milled it here and produced our own distinct Rogue Valley bread? Looking around at the folks in attendance—farmers and gardeners, commercial bakers, millers, food co-op owners, and local families from all over the valley—all the ingredients seem to be in place. RVGP has also been in contact with growers and millers in nearby Scott Valley in California and the Umpqua Valley.

Interested in taking part in this grassroots movement to grow nutritious, drought-tolerant, soil-building heritage grains in the Rogue Valley? You can reach Chris Hardy directly at cmhardy@gmail.com.

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