

Fresh Spin on Ancient Grains

This Washington family tapped into a trendy new market by going back to basics—way back.

STORY BY SAM LUCY WINTHROP, WASHINGTON PHOTOS BY BLUEBIRD GRAIN FARMS

Here in the Methow Valley, the mountain bluebirds arrive each spring about the time winter's blanket vanishes, creeks swell and soils begin to warm. There is no blue more brilliant than the males' plumage as they flit about the worn bitterbrush and sage, reminding us we'll soon be turning over cover crops and sowing our grains.

In honor of this bird's seasonal significance to both the North Cascades and our farming timetable, my wife, Brooke, and I settled on Bluebird Grain Farms as the name of our family business. Truth to tell, it was harder than naming our children! But for 10 years now the name has stuck, and our farm is recognized throughout the Northwest as the place to go

for organic emmer grain, fresh flour and dry blends.

Both of us grew up on farms. Brooke was raised in Washington, where her family owned a cherry orchard; I grew up on a seven-generation family farm in New Hampshire. While neither of us aspired to become farmers, we've always shared a deep love of the land and of food.

After six years of commercial fishing in Alaska, I ended up here in Washington when I signed on as a hired hand for a rancher who grew alfalfa, peas and some grain with few chemicals and no herbicides. He taught me about farming in a drier climate, with supplemental irrigation.

Brooke was working in education when we met; I'd just started

a land restoration business aimed at people who bought retirement properties overrun with noxious weeds. I saw a niche for restoring those farms using traditional farming practices rather than mass herbicide assault.

Generally, this meant building up soil health while outcompeting the weeds with annuals at first, then perennials. Cereal rye was one of the more aggressive grains I used to crowd out weeds. Rye sowed early in the spring would grow 6 feet tall with no irrigation! I became enamored with cereals, which we hadn't grown on our farm in New England.

Land restoration in the summer and plowing driveways in the winter paid the bills. But when our second daughter was born,

The Lucys—Brooke, Larkin, Mariah and Sam—enjoy life off the beaten path.



we realized it would be tougher for Brooke to hold a job away from home. We needed steady, year-round income. What better idea than to start a custom grain farm!

A farmer friend was looking to semiretire from his small custom organic milling business, and we thought that offering fresh-milled local flour might be a good thing to pick up. At about the same time, some landowners I'd been working with were looking to prove up old irrigation rights and needed a farmer to help.

Brooke and I also noticed very little organic grain was available locally. And I'd recently fallen in love with the ancient grain emmer after being contracted to grow some for seed. As all this was coming to a head, we coerced a friendly investor into helping us

launch Bluebird Grain Farms.

In 2005 we grew a small crop of emmer, white wheat, red wheat and flax on 80 acres of formerly fallow farmland. We built a small processing building that included four 700-bushel wooden granaries, and bought a small gristmill, fanning mill and huller. By that winter we were cleaning, grinding and selling our grains very locally. Our friend graciously handed over most of his accounts, which included a couple of local bakeries and stores.

We went to our first Seattle Farmer-Fisher-Chef Connection gathering that winter and met some of our first chefs—all of whom we still sell to today. Chefs have been just great to us. Plus, they already knew what to do with the emmer. They'd previously gotten it from Italy—where it's most

often known as farro—though much of it was semipearled, and was no longer a true whole grain. Our cleaning method, on the other hand, keeps the germ intact. The chefs tell us it's tastier, holds up better and is more nutritious.

The following summer Brooke began selling at farmers markets both locally and in Seattle. She also developed our first website. The initial investment just to test the retail and wholesale markets was considerable. After three years we seemed to have a niche market, and we decided to reinvest by putting in a better grain handling and milling line.

Quality control is a big advantage to being vertically integrated. We know these grains from plow to plate, and flour orders are typically fresh milled and delivered within

The Lucys grow 240 acres of heritage grain in Washington's Methow Valley (above). Continuing clockwise, Sam and neighbor Jolly Miller check on a newly planted field; emmer; Larkin sells Bluebird products at a farmers market.

a week, which our customers very much appreciate. We never knew how good fresh flour was ourselves until we began grinding our own and baking with it.

Organic farming isn't a huge challenge for us. I've been a certified organic grower for 16 years now, but I have always tried just to mimic nature's ways, which is sometimes easy and sometimes not. We believe healthy food comes from healthy soil, and that remains a cornerstone of our business.

Although our wheat flour is very popular, particularly locally, we knew we couldn't compete on the organic wheat scene due to our

geographic isolation. So we kept growing more and more emmer and worked to get it into broader distribution. We loved everything about this grain from beginning to end, and emmer still accounts for about 75 percent of our sales.

From the get-go, Brooke and I knew we had to ship out a high-quality finished product under our own brand and unique label. She takes charge of our marketing and public relations and is also our techie by default; I handle all the farming and oversee the granary.

Two years ago we began growing our newest ancient grain, a type of einkorn we've trademarked as Einka, under our Bluebird label. Einkorn is one of emmer's parents, though the two grains are physiologically quite different, as are their taste and baking qualities.

I think of Einka as the parent of the softer wheats and emmer as the ancestor of the hard wheats. We're now getting our Einka into the market, and we're very high on that, too! We also grow and mill heritage varieties of rye, hard red and white wheat.

Bluebird Grain Farms has grown for 10 years running. We now farm 240 acres, which keeps two full-time and four part-time employees busy, beside Brooke and me. We work with several distributors and still sell direct retail and wholesale. We're on our third website, which accounts for 25 percent of overall sales. Our daughters, Larkin and Mariah, pitch in wherever they can, and already share worries about the weather. We live a fruitful life dependent on and respectful of nature.

And the bluebirds? They gather and leave soon after we harvest our grains. Though this always carries a suggestion of melancholy, we do welcome slowing down to a 40-hour workweek again! 🐦



Fresh Herbs & Farro Salad

Brooke Lucy says this summer salad recipe from their friends at mixedgreensblog.com shows off the distinctive nutty flavor of emmer (aka farro) and pairs beautifully with pork or chicken.

SALAD

- 1 cup emmer or einkorn farro
 - 1/3 cup finely chopped red onion
 - 1 Tbsp. finely chopped spring garlic or regular garlic cloves
 - 1/3 cup finely chopped fresh oregano
 - 1/3 cup finely chopped marjoram
 - 1 Tbsp. finely chopped mint
 - 1 Tbsp. finely chopped flat leaf parsley
 - 1 Tbsp. finely chopped chives
 - 1 tsp. finely diced jalapeno pepper
 - 2 Tbsp. olive oil
 - 3 Tbsp. red vinegar
 - 1 tsp. honey
- Pinch each red pepper flakes, cumin, salt and pepper

TOPPING

- 1/4 cup chopped walnuts, almonds or pecans
- 1/4 cup dried cherries
- 1/4 cup golden raisins

In a saucepan, add emmer farro to 5 cups salted water. Bring to a rolling boil; lightly simmer for about 1 hour. Drain off excess liquid and cool to room temperature. (If using einkorn, cook for only 30 minutes and drain.)

In a small bowl or measuring cup, combine remaining salad ingredients and blend thoroughly. In a large bowl, toss with farro. And topping ingredients just before serving. Serve at room temperature.

Find more ancient grain recipes and information on ordering Bluebird products at bluebirdgrainfarms.com.