

In Defense of Home-Milled Flour

WRITER **DANIEL DUANE**, A HYPER-AMBITIOUS COOK, THOUGHT THAT MILLING HIS OWN FLOUR MIGHT BE ONE STEP TOO FAR. BUT THAT WAS BEFORE HE PUT THE HOME-GROUND STUFF TO THE TEST.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **BEN WISEMAN**



MY FIRST PORTABLE GRAIN MILL, a white plastic contraption the size of a 12-quart stockpot, arrived early on a Saturday morning. I was too sleepy to contemplate unboxing an esoteric new appliance and teaching myself to grind wheat berries into flour, but my 11-year-old daughter, Audrey, was game to try. She's the baker's equivalent of an Australian shepherd—cute, brilliant and happiest when she has a job to do. So I told her to experiment with our new toy while I made coffee and sat down to read the only guide to home milling I'd been able to get my hands on, a 2004 book called *Flour Power* by Marleeta F. Basey.

I think of my kid as a precocious cook, but I was astonished by how quickly and easily she assembled our NutriMill, plugged it in, flipped the switch and dumped whole winter wheat berries into the hopper. I helped her sift the results to remove all the wheat bran and germ, but then I went back to my coffee. I looked up an hour later to find two batches of Audrey's go-to shortbread, one made with home-milled flour, the other with all-purpose out of a bag. The taste test was the real shocker: Home-milled flour produced a shortbread that was dramatically more delicious. Lighter and somehow richer, it had a toasted-nut-like flavor that, I swear, evoked a deeply buried taste memory from my past life as a Nebraska farm boy.

Hippies and pioneer-housewife types have been all over home-milled grains for years. A friend of mine, George Durkee, milled bread flour with a hand-cranked grinder 40 years ago when he was a backcountry ranger in Yosemite National Park. Then there's Kendra Lynne of rural North Carolina, author of the blog *New Life on a Homestead*, who uses hard white wheat to make blueberry muffins and challah. Likewise, Melissa K. Norris—"follower of Jesus, lover of Mason jars, canning addict, homesteader"—lives off-grid in Washington state, records the *Pioneering Today* podcast and mills flour to make pancakes, cupcakes, cookies and pizza for her kids and husband.

Nowadays, however, serious chefs grind grain. A partial list of grain-grinding restaurants in New York includes Marco Canora's *Hearth* in Manhattan and *Faro* in Brooklyn. In Boston, Kevin O'Donnell and Michael Lombardi of *SRV* buy organic whole durum wheat berries to make 00 pasta flour; Marc Vetri of Philadelphia's *Vetri* restaurant employs a full-time miller just to grind local wheat varieties like *Redeemer* and *Warthog*. Within a few miles of my San Francisco house, in fact, Thomas McNaughton is grinding wheat at *Flour + Water*, the city's finest pasta joint, and our two world-class bread bakeries, *Tartine Bakery & Cafe* and *Josey Baker Bread*, run their entire operations around in-house mills.

I've heard that upscale home-kitchen designers are getting requests for grain-milling stations. There's certainly an enormous selection of consumer grain mills, which range from hand-cranked rustic versions to my sensible NutriMill to the gorgeous wood-clad KoMo stone-grinders. These all suggest that plenty of home cooks consider the time and expense worthwhile.

Before Audrey's shortbreads, however, I'd felt wary of subjecting the simple pleasure of baking cookies to the sardonic cook's maxim popularized by San Francisco chef Judy Rodgers: "Stop, think, there must be a harder way." More to the point, I'd already embraced every farm-to-table trend of the past decade, from CSAs to raising chickens in my backyard. The argument in favor of home milling made me worry I'd seen this movie too many times.

But there were health concerns to consider. Yes, the gluten-free, low-carb believers cite research on the negative effects of wheat flour on the body. But it has become almost a law of culinary culture that whenever a nutrition study declares a particularly delicious food to be suspect, a cottage industry will spring up telling us that the real problem lies with the factory methods used to process that once-wholesome ingredient. All we have to do is spend three times as much money on a small-batch, locally sourced version and we can eat whatever we want—like grass-fed steaks drowning in pastured butter with fried farm eggs on top.

The case for home milling rings these bells perfectly. Wheat berries have three main components—bran, germ and endosperm—and industrial milling removes the first two while subjecting the third to heat treatment, bleaching, chemical preservation and "enrichment" with liquid vitamins. This turns an ancient food into a shelf-stable commodity with little protein, fiber or flavor. Store-bought whole-wheat flour isn't much better given that it is really just processed white flour with a little bran and germ dumped back in.

A 2015 report published in *Cereal Foods World* found no meaningful difference between whole-wheat flour made this way and whole-wheat flour made the way you'd prepare it at home. But a cursory glance at that report's supporting

institutions—among others, the Wheat Foods Council and Engrain, manufacturers of "innovative products to improve bread volume, optimize pasta texture and enrich baked goods"—suggests that somebody might be running scared.

Marc Vetri puts it like this: "Twenty years ago, everybody suddenly wanted fresh vegetables, so that whole farmers' market thing started. Then everybody wanted sustainable fish. Then it was only animals that run wild and eat acorns. Grain is what our civilization was built on, it's what we all eat more than anything else, and yet everybody still just says, 'Gimme a bag of flour,' like it doesn't matter where it comes from."

I was speaking by phone with Vetri, who was home on his day off. He'd just ground local grain in his KoMo Classic to bake some bread. "Nobody thinks wine grapes are all the same," he told me, "but with flour everyone thinks it's all the same, and it's not. Wheat has a flavor, and different wheats have different flavors."

Based on this insight, a company called Community Grains in Oakland, California, has announced plans to create an urban "community granary" at which farmers will clean, store and distribute "local, organic, full-identity-preserved grains." Enthusiasts will soon be able to buy small lots of single-origin wheat and then compare terroir in their loaves.

Home-milled wheat flour absorbs more moisture than commodity flour, and home bakers report a learning curve in getting bread to rise properly. But it took no extra effort whatsoever for Audrey and me to produce the most delicious linguine our table-mounted pasta maker has

ever cranked out. Her Irish soda bread was a revelation: In place of the bitter and acrid taste I associate with store-bought whole-wheat flour, I detected only a rich, complex sweetness.

Still, the clincher in our grain-milling journey has been the sheer ease. Grinding grain with a modern electric mill is so quick and hassle-free that I've already followed Vetri's example by ordering a KoMo Classic of my own, plus a few bags of organic field corn. Home-ground polenta, here I come.

San Francisco-based writer Daniel Duane is an F&W contributing editor and the author of How to Cook Like a Man.



“Everybody still just says, ‘Gimme a bag of flour,’ like it doesn’t matter where it comes from.”

—CHEF MARC VETRI, VETRI, PHILADELPHIA

3 HOME MILLS TO TRY ↓

1 NutriMill Classic Fast, durable and easy to clean, the NutriMill's high-speed metal impact grinder turns grains and beans into flour with a coarseness range from superfine to medium fine—perfect for pasta, pastry and bread. \$220; pleasanthillgrain.com.

2 KitchenAid Stand Mixer Grain Mill Attachment Ideal for the occasional and clutter-averse cook who owns a KitchenAid stand mixer. \$130; surlatable.com.

3 KoMo Classic Beautifully designed and almost maintenance-free, it employs stone wheels to grind grains and legumes across a spectrum from superfine for pasta flour to coarse or cracked for whole-grain cereal and polenta. \$500; pleasanthillgrain.com.