

# Hayden Flour Mills Goes in Search of 'The True Flavor of Grain'

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Harvest time at Sossaman Farms. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)

The family-run business is dedicated to growing and stone milling heritage and ancient grains—for better flavor, better health, and a better future

Most of the flour on our grocery store shelves is essentially the same thing, says Emma Zimmerman, co-founder of Hayden Flour Mills in Queen Creek, Arizona. It's made from a couple strains of modern wheat, grown in the United States and sent to one mill in Italy to be milled. "They just put it in different bags," she said.

The flours that Hayden Mills produces, on the other hand, have character. They're freshly milled from ancient wheat varietals, cultivated by their partner and neighbor Sossaman Farms, then carefully blended for specific uses—pizza, pastry, bread, and more.

These ancient wheats are special. From mild, sweet White Sonora to robust, nutty Emmer Farro, each has a distinct flavor profile—and its own story.



A sampling of Hayden Flour Mills' different heritage wheat varieties. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)

White Sonora was America's first wheat, brought over and planted in the Sonoran desert by Spanish missionaries, thanks to the papal decree—still in effect—that communion could only be taken by way of a wheat product. In some ways, noted general manager Debbie La Bell, the wheat being grown in Arizona again is a homecoming.

Red Fife wheat was named after David Fife, the farmer who discovered it in the 19th century. Blue Beard durum takes its name from the blue whiskers that grow on the stalk. Emmer farro is thought to have been served to the Pharaoh, and was named such by the Italians who Italianized the word "Pharaoh" into "farro." (Others say it is simply derived from the Latin "farrum," meaning "a kind of wheat.") The emmer mentioned in the Bible's book of Exodus, La Bell said, is the same stuff.

Since Emma and her father Jeff started the company in 2011, Hayden Mills has been committed to nurturing and sharing these old varieties.

## The Makings of a Movement

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When Jeff Zimmerman was young, his family owned a wheat farm in North Dakota. It was the 1960s and the "grain revolution" was taking hold in America. Wheat, a grass that has fed humanity for 10,000 years, was being crossed with other grasses in order to increase its yield.

“Wheat farmers were riding high,” said La Bell. “Their first few years, they couldn’t believe the prices they were getting.” Growing modern wheat tripled their yields. The Zimmermans bought a new combine to store their bounty.

But as the wheat supply drastically rose, prices fell. A few years after transitioning to modern wheat, the Zimmermans sold the farm and moved to Arizona, leaving wheat farming behind.

A few decades later, Jeff, now with a family of his own, had become an enthusiastic home bread baker. But even as his skills grew better and better, he found that he could only get his bread to a certain level. He considered the organic, farm-fresh fruits and vegetables he was buying and their range of flavors. He wondered if there were interesting grains he was missing, too.

He learned about heritage grains, sometimes called ancient grains, an alternative to the modern varieties that had been bred for higher yield. Heritage grains were never hybridized, and thus retained their unique flavors and textures. After eating them and using them in his baking, Jeff—whom Emma calls a “serial entrepreneur”—wanted to try growing them himself in Arizona.



Jeff Zimmerman. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)

Emma had just left her doctoral program in neuroethics in Montreal, feeling unsatisfied with academia, and became her dad's business partner almost immediately. Together, they began looking for farmers to grow heritage grains for them.

"We asked basically everyone we knew," said Emma, but the 10-acre experiment they wanted to start out with was much too small for most commodity growers. Eventually, Steve Sossaman of Sossaman Farms in Queen Creek, an old friend of Jeff's, agreed to try it out.

Then, there was the problem of seed. The Zimmermans reached out to Native Seeds/SEARCH in Tuscon, a conservation organization specializing in seeds suitable for the southwest region. They are "all about getting people to eat these rare foods and preserve the foodways," Emma said, and they were eager to help.

"How many packets do you want?" they asked.

But packets wouldn't do it; the project needed a few tons of seeds to begin. The organization connected them with Anson Mills in South Carolina, who specializes in organic heirloom grains, and founder Glenn Roberts donated two tons of White Sonora wheat seeds. Sossaman and a few other local farmers grew the grain. Chris Bianco, iconic Phoenix restaurateur, gave them space in the back of one of his restaurants to mill.

"We had the makings of a little grain movement," Emma reminisced. "It was very exciting."



Emma Zimmerman in the fields. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)

## A New World of Flavor

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Today, after plenty of trial and error, Hayden Mills is still going strong. The business is partnered with Sossaman Farms, who grows the wheat for milling, and has since expanded to around 10 new types of wheat. White Sonora remains their most popular.

They mill in their own space, next to the wheat fields, on a stone mill purchased from Italy. Next to the mill is a building where they host bread and pasta classes and sell specialty foods made by other Arizona artisans.

Jeff went back to his day job for the Arizona state government, but he still does a lot for the business, including assembling the newest mill, which was shipped over from Italy still in parts. Emma cut her teeth on the business and still runs it today.

They've done well in recent years: their products are carried by select Whole Foods stores across the country, and their White Sonora Wheat Berries just won a Good Food Award. But there's still plenty of work to be done.

Because heritage grains have lower yields per acre, Hayden Mills must pay their farmers three times as much in order to ensure the farmers can make a living. That translates to higher price tags on their products, so they must educate consumers on the differences in their wheat and in their process. Why is this flour worth paying more for?

For most people, flavor is the primary draw. In a world of homogenous, mass-produced flour, wheat with nuances in flavor and texture is a revelation.

I first became acquainted with Hayden Mills while working at a cheese shop in New York City. I taught classes on cheese and pairing and noticed that the same reverence and attention paid to cheese and wine was not paid to the bread or crackers. Why do we revere the stories of grapes and not of wheat? So, I started serving Hayden Mills crackers, made with different heritage grains, when I taught.



Hayden Flour Mills' line of heritage grain crackers. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)



The hearty Red Fife Wheat crackers, with their graham cracker-esque flavors, went beautifully with hard mountain cheeses like Gruyere. The sweeter, more delicate White Sonora ones enhanced the ethereal creaminess of a triple cream cheese like Brillat Savarin. People's minds were opened to wheat being as varied and nuanced as their favorite wine.

"Our inspiration started as a search for food with really good flavor," Emma said. "I'd say that discovering the true flavor of grain continues to be a daily inspiration for us."

## **For a Better Future**

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But their motivation also goes beyond that—to a vision of a healthier, more sustainable food future.

It starts in the fields. Take White Sonora wheat—it can get up to 6 feet high, not uncommon for ancient varieties. "What you see above is mirrored underneath," said La Bell: the roots go 6 feet below as well, burrowing far down into the earth to find water tables. In Arizona, it can be watered as little as twice a season.

"Wheat is actually a drought-tolerant crop," La Bell explained. "[It] originated in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, which Arizona shares a climate with."

Modern wheat, on the other hand, grows to about six inches tall. The roots go down around six inches, too. It needs an immense amount of water and can erode topsoil.

Before wheat can be milled, it must be dried out. For wheat farmers up north, this means either putting the already-harvested wheat on a drying rack, or spraying it with chemicals to dry it out before harvest. In Arizona's arid Sonoran desert, though, this step is easy: Farmers harvest in the summer, so it's "just baking out there," said Emma. No extra drying required.



A close-up of heritage wheat growing in the fields. (Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills)

Then comes the milling. Most industrial mills order wheat by the train car, to be processed in a giant roller mill that leaves only the endosperm (which La Bell compares to the white of an egg).

Hayden Flour Mills orders grains 2,000 pounds at a time, to be processed in a stone mill that keeps the whole wheat intact: the bran (like the shell of an egg), endosperm, and germ (like the yolk). The bran, the protective husk, is then sifted away, leaving the germ and endosperm. This, said La Bell, is both tastier and better for our bodies.

“People aren’t giving up wheat because they don’t like it, they are giving up wheat because it’s making them sick,” she said, speaking to the large number of consumers who don’t have celiac disease, but find that their stomachs hurt when they eat wheat. Maybe it’s the chemicals used in industrial agriculture, maybe it’s the homogeneity—it’s hard to say what exactly the problem is. But whatever the reason, “these people find that they can still eat our wheat,” La Bell said.

“How did we get to this point in our food system?” Emma wondered aloud. It’s largely wasteful and inefficient, and she worries about the loss of biodiversity, and of our connection with the people who bring the food to our tables.

But in reviving these heritage grains, and the tradition of locally, sustainably grown and milled flours, Hayden Mills sees a solution for the future—looking to the past.

*Hayden Flour Mills products are available for purchase at [HaydenFlourMills.com](http://HaydenFlourMills.com)*

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