

# Farmer Finds His Niche with Spelt

—Kristi Bahrenburg Janzen

Farmer Joel Steigman has found a product in such high demand that buyers are tracking *him* down. Some new-fangled miracle crop? Tobacco? Bootleg? No. Certified organic spelt. Having grown the crop for almost 10 years, this Pennsylvania farmer now not only raises the specialty grain, but also dehulls it.

All kinds of customers—some of them gourmet foodies, others the simply health conscious or folks with wheat sensitivities—have come seeking his spelt. They pick it up by the trunk-full, order it to be shipped through the mail, or have it delivered by the trailer-load. Selling both wholesale and directly to customers under the name “Small Valley Milling,” Steigman’s spelt business is not just a boon for him, but also exemplifies the kind of regionally-specific grain operations that are making a come-back nationwide.

## Dehulling at Small Valley Milling

Steigman’s shiny dehuller towers over his farm. Manufactured by Maple Grove, Minnesota-based Codema, a grain equipment manufacturer and consulting firm, the dehuller is no typical piece of equipment. “I probably have the only dehulling facility in Pennsylvania,” Steigman says. Rick Gilles, co-owner of Codema, confirms that estimation. “There are maybe 10 people dehulling in North American,” excluding any possible small lesser-known operators, says Gilles. Codema supplied the dehullers for about five, he adds.

Dehulling spelt is critical because, unlike wheat, spelt doesn’t “thresh free.” In other words, the outer shell, or “hull,” which covers the kernel like a papery envelope, needs to be removed between harvest and milling.

While Steigman started out using an oat dehuller, he soon realized he wanted to upgrade. “It didn’t do that much, and it took hours and hours,” he says. “It’s very loud too.” Now having spent more than \$100,000 on his dehulling system, Steigman can process others’ spelt as well, helping avoid fuel and transportation costs hauling the spelt around. “I know farmers who send their spelt to Michigan for dehulling,” he says. “So it gets to go across the country twice!,” he laughs.

## Reviving an Ancient Grain

Spelt is a relative of wheat that evolved thousands of years ago in the Near East and Europe, as people first began to cultivate grains. Eventually, European settlers brought the grain to the U.S. in the late 1800s, and it remained popular for decades. By the 1920s, however, spelt had fallen out of favor as a food for human consumption for several reasons, including its inconsistent yields and need to be dehulled.

During the late 1980s, spelt reemerged as a viable product in the health food market, both in the U.S and in Europe. Fans say it’s much easier to digest than wheat and its nutrients are more “bioavailable,” that is, more readily accessed during digestion. While it does contain gluten and is not suitable for people with Celiac’s disease, lore regarding spelt’s advantages dates back at least a thousand years. The famous German nun and healer Hildegard von Bingen, for example, noted in her writings in the 12<sup>th</sup> century that spelt is restorative and “easily digested.”

Spelt flour can be used instead of wheat in most recipes, although spelt dough involving yeast must be handled more delicately due to its fragile structure. Crackers, pasta, cereal and snackfoods, as well as bread and buns, made partly or entirely of spelt, are now widely available in retail and online locations. Spelt kernels, or “berries,” are also delicious when boiled, and are even popping up in place of rice or wheat berries in gourmet restaurants.

Experts disagree on whether to classify spelt as its own species of wheat, scientifically known as *Triticum spelta*, or to define it as a subspecies of common wheat, *Triticum aestivum* subspecies *spelta*. Either way, spelt is clearly different from wheat, notes Gil Stallknecht, an agronomist retired from Montana State University. “Research shows the starch (in spelt) is more easily digested,” says Stallknecht, who worked with specialty crops including spelt. “There are distinct differences between common bread wheat and spelt,” in terms of DNA and protein, he adds. “Not very large, but distinct.” Also, it’s generally accepted that spelt is higher in zinc.

Making comparisons between wheat and spelt, and among spelt varieties, is tricky, in part because there are so many different kinds of spelt. Much of the existing research points to the need for closer examination, as studies show that different varieties of spelt, and various soils and environmental conditions impact the quality and nutritional profile significantly. A number of researchers around the world, including in Australia, Canada and Europe, are currently examining some of these questions, including spelt’s nutrient content, how cultivars differ, how spelt can yield better, and how to select the best varieties for certain locations.

Amid this ongoing research, more growers are starting to give it a second look too. Instead of seeing the tough outer hull as a processing problem, they view it as an advantage helping the plant resist disease and maintain freshness. Spelt carries other pros as well. The German Baking Institute points out in an October 2006 paper that the long stalk counteracts the spread of mycotoxin-forming fungi. Spelt is also widely understood to require less nitrogen than wheat and tolerate a wider range of soil conditions. Others point out the grain is especially well-suited to organic operations, which by definition involve rotations and polycultures.

Steigman says he hasn’t found spelt to present any special issues, particularly compared to wheat. “The biggest challenge I’ve got is the weather!” quips Steigman, who more seriously adds that he keeps experimenting with green manure, rotations, and tilling practices to fortify the soil and reduce weed pressure.

### **From Chianina Cows to Organic Spelt**

Steigman and his wife Elaine, a practicing nurse as well as his right-hand “man” on the farm, work three hundred and fifty acres, all certified organic. They own two hundred and rent the rest, with a total of about seventy acres in spelt. Steigman also grows corn, sells hay and silage, and is currently raising 60 non-organic beef steers. A tinkerer and old tractor buff who still has the first one he ever bought, Steigman prides himself on recycling old equipment. The dehuller aside, he also owns three stone mills, which he bought used.

Having farmed since he graduated from Penn State in 1970, Steigman and his wife have been involved with all kinds of niche products over the years, riding trends in the sometimes brutal agricultural economy. “I’ve always been into new things,” he says, flashing an easy smile. “Uncertainty doesn’t bother me.”

In the 1970s, he bred and calved Chianina beef cows, which were popular for their lean meat. “Then the meat market got terrible, and we got rid of ‘em,” he notes. “It was in the

'80s. It was gettin' ugly," he says. So he moved on to edible soybeans for tofu, as well as food-grade waxy corn, the starch of which is used for thickeners and stabilizers in processed foods.

Steigman's land has been certified organic for about 9 years. "I hate the paperwork, but I've got a good system now," he says. "I've got all kinds of clients" who want certified organic products, he says. It was the soy that got him on the organic path, but his mother grew up on a farm, and her organic ideas were "always in the background," he adds. The soy led to organic wheat, which led to organic spelt, when a miller he knew suggested trying it in the late 1990s, he says. At the time, the miller was working with Okemos, MI-based Purity Foods, which was already a significant market maker and is now perhaps the leading producer of spelt consumer goods.

Currently, Steigman grows mainly the Maverick variety, seeds for which he purchases from French's Hybrids in Wakeman, Ohio. He is also experimenting with spring spelt in cooperation with Lakeview Organic Grain in Penn Yan, NY.

### Watching Spelt Demand

Data on spelt production in the U.S. show farmers are growing both certified organic and conventional spelt. In 1997, the last year for which overarching data on organic and non-organic spelt were available, farmers planted a total of 4,600 acres of spelt, according to the Census on Agriculture, says Catherine Greene at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Of that, roughly a third was certified organic, she notes. Separate statistics focusing on certified organic products show organic spelt acreage planted has fluctuated significantly over the last couple of decades. Farmers planted 12,350 acres of certified organic spelt in 1995, with that number dropping to 8,169 acres by 2005, and bouncing up and down in between, according to the USDA. More exhaustive or up-to-date comparisons are unavailable.

Few statistics on spelt exist, in part because it is often categorized as a kind of wheat or lumped into a category entitled "other grains." Also, data collection has not focused on spelt since it is clear the grain represents a niche market, especially as compared to wheat. For comparison, the U.S. planted 70.4 million acres of wheat in 1997, or more than 15,000 times as much as spelt!

Perhaps not surprisingly, much about spelt supply and demand is not revealed in these data. Reports from numerous farmers, millers, consumers and market observers indicate spelt has become increasingly popular over the last 20 years, and a wide variety of products containing spelt—from snack foods like pretzels to pasta and bread—are now readily available in many grocery stores. A 2004 publication of the Washington State University Extension notes, "Today there is new interest in spelt among people who are looking for alternative foods, heirloom varieties, or certified organic grain products."

Don Stinchcomb, president of Purity Foods agrees. "There're more players in the marketplace now," says Stinchcomb. "Twenty years ago, we were basically the only game in town," he says.

In general, the trend toward a wider variety of specialty grain products seems on the rise. Besides Purity, companies distributing their spelt products nationally include Berlin Natural Bakery, based in Berlin, Ohio, and Lentz Spelt Farms, based in Marlin, Washington. Other firms such as Nature's Path, Rudi's Organic Bakery, and Doctor Kracker sell products using various "alternative" or "heritage" grains, including spelt. At the same time, new cooperatives

and companies are also marketing locally-grown grains around the country, including varieties of wheat and spelt especially suited to certain climates, at artisanal bakeries and markets, from New Mexico to Vermont.

Some companies are even importing spelt. The owners of Berlin Natural Bakery, for example, buy their spelt from Germany, as they believe it's the highest-quality they can get. Purity's Stinchcomb also says he imports it from Canada and Europe at times, albeit for different reasons. Due to short supply resulting from a bad harvest in 2005, "I had to bring in a couple of million pounds from Europe," he notes.

### Choosing His Buyers

Customers mostly find Steigman by word of mouth. He doesn't have a website (yet), you can't "Google" much about him, and he doesn't advertise. No matter. His smiling eyes and strong handshake are well-suited to networking, and he is long-established in Pennsylvania organic farming circles. His wife Elaine's spelt-baking advice and offerings of fresh garden vegetables to visitors surely help too.

"The guy that comes with the bucks is the guy you take care of," he notes of the numerous people making inquiries of late. He counts among his customers conservative Mennonite families as well as Jewish rabbis. After undergoing an inspection and receiving a blessing, Steigman sells kosher spelt to rabbis buying for customers in New York, New Jersey and even Israel. Some of it is for Manischewitz spelt matzo, he notes. "One rabbi told me he takes this stuff to Brazil," he adds. He has also worked with Purity, which does its own dehulling, as well as Essential Eating Sprouted Foods, a Waverly, Pennsylvania-based company that makes sprouted grain products, and McGeary Organics, which operates an historic mill in Annville, Pennsylvania.

Spelt prices are "are all over the place," Steigman observes. About the start of 2007, he got around 38 cents a pound for his dehulled certified organic spelt kernels wholesale, he says. But that price fluctuates, a fact borne out at the retail level. Both online and in stores, spelt flour prices span a wide range, even within the certified organic whole grain category. In just a quick study comparing prices of Arrowhead Mills, Purity Foods, King Arthur and Bob's Red Mill—and judging by the per pound prices of one- and two-pound bags—one finds certified organic whole spelt flour ranging from \$1.75 to \$3.95 a pound, plus shipping if it's an internet order.

For the future, Steigman is aiming at more wholesale business. He likes it, he says, because the deals are "without the bags, without the labels, without the marketing." With wholesale, you "just load it in a dump trailer and go," he says. "Liability insurance is next to nil. You're passing everything on." To do this, he has to grow the varieties that service wholesalers' needs. "When I market this stuff to wholesalers, they want an all-purpose flour and a bread flour from the same supplier," he notes, so his decisions on seed take these demands into consideration.

Having tried various angles of the healthfood market, Steigman now seems to have found his own niche in specialty grains. Taking everything into account, including seed prices and the dehuller, Steigman is happy he took the chance on spelt. With the typical reserve of an experienced farmer-businessman, Steigman sums it up this way, "It's a good niche market."

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The Mennonite Weekly Review, *and many other publications. She lives in Hyattsville, Maryland.*