

Oxford Bread Group (OBG)

There is a growing demand in the Oxford region for high quality bread that is baked locally using flour that is also grown locally in an ecologically sustainable manner. Most of the bread consumed in Oxford is baked outside the region, or is delivered to shops and supermarkets pre-mixed for in-store baking. Few local bakers use locally grown flour, and most of the flour (both conventional and organic) produced in the region is milled from imported grain. Yet, high quality bread flour can be grown here.

Modern wheat varieties are genetically uniform, and produce bumper crops of high-protein grain only if they are grown in ideal conditions with chemical fertilisers, herbicides and fungicides. An unusual blend of older wheat varieties is now being grown locally, which produces a reliable yield of tasty, high quality, bread grain in organic conditions. The genetic diversity within this crop also ensures that it is better able to survive difficult growing conditions and adapt to climate change.

Bread has been 'the staff of life' of cultures throughout the world for thousands of years, and is an essential part of a balanced diet. Traditionally, dough was left to ferment for several hours in order to develop its flavour and improve its texture, digestibility and nutritional qualities. Modern supermarket bread is no longer fermented, and instead contains a host of chemical additives, flour improvers and processing aids that allow mixtures of flour, water and air to be processed into fluffy bread rapidly on an industrial scale. Supermarket bread also contains a host of chemical enzymes (not listed on food labels) that are added in order to soften the bread and extend its shelf life. Many believe that these enzymes are linked to the epidemic of coeliac disease and gluten intolerance which is making life difficult for many bread lovers.

Local farmers will not grow wheat for local bakers unless they know their crop can be sold and generate a fair profit. Locally produced baking flour (both organic and conventional) is more expensive than imported flour, and bakers will logically use less expensive flour unless there is a clear demand, and willingness to pay for, a more expensive local loaf. At the present time there is insufficient demand from bakers in the region to grow 'heritage blend' wheat for the open market, but by creating a 'buying group' of bread lovers who obtain their loaf directly from the baker, the costs and financial risks of growing wheat are reduced.

Members of the OBG will be consulted before determining the style of bread to be baked for the group. Members will pay for their bread in advance, and collect their loaves from convenient pick-up points throughout Oxford and the region (eg. shops, farmer's markets and veg box schemes). A website is being created (www.oxfordlocalbread.org) to facilitate communication and coordination between members, and bread evenings will be held twice a year to bring members together.

Goals

- create a buying group for bread baked locally using 100% locally-grown flour
- encourage the use of ecologically sustainable cereal production methods
- support the on-farm conservation of cereal biodiversity

OBG bread will be:

- baked from flour from cereals grown on farms in the Oxford region
- made from stoneground flour that is locally milled if possible
- baked by a professional baker in the Oxford area using traditional methods

OBG bread will:

- contain at least 75% flour of older, locally adapted, mixtures of cereal varieties
- not contain additives, flour improvers, processing aids or preservatives

Partners (Years 1 & 2)

- grain will be grown primarily at Sandy Lane Farm, Tiddington, Oxon
- OBG bread will contain at least 75% 'Heritage Blend' flour developed by John Letts
- flour will be milled locally if feasible, or by Stoneground Flour Co. (I. of Wight)
- bread will be baked by Geoff Coleman of The Cornfield Bakery, Wheatley

Management

- the OBG will be co-ordinated in Year 1 by John Letts and Ruth West
- a steering committee will be chosen by the membership at the first AGM
- the steering committee will establish the OBG's constitution and legal status

For more information contact info@oxfordlocalbread.org or go to http://www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/content/articles/2008/11/04/oxford_bread_group.shtml