

Food

Hayden Flour Mill name, heritage grain for locally milled flour

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Using locally grown and milled wheat and reviving the Hayden Flour Mill name, Jeff Zimmerman sees his dream of producing stone-milled flour realized.

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Chapter 1: Harvesting a dream



At the eastern edge of metropolitan Phoenix, where rows of stucco houses finally give way to plots of crops, cars and pickups pulled into a dirt lot near a wheat field. There were no defined parking spaces. Agricultural activities rarely draw spectators.

A bread baker talked protein content. A pastry chef snapped close-up photos of the stalks using his cellphone. The farmer joked about the fast talking that had roped him into planting three kinds of grains in the field.

"I promised me a muffin," the farmer said.

The fast talker was Jeff Zimmerman, a former tech worker living in Tempe, who had indeed made muffins, using corn grown on the Gila River reservation. He brought out a basket, pulled back the dishcloth that covered them, and the farmer, bread maker and pastry chef all reached for the muffins.

Zimmerman walked the few steps into the wheat field. He pulled off the top of a stalk and rubbed the raspy chaff together in his hands. Hulls floated away in the breeze, leaving amber kernels tinier than a grain of rice.

The grains would soon be plucked on a mass scale by the bright-green-and-yellow combine that stood at the edge of the field, two stories tall, with

Remaining Views

a 35-foot-wide cutting cylinder protruding from its lower jaw. To an urban dweller, it resembled a child's toy.

Zimmerman shook hands with the man who would drive the combine and introduced him to the crowd, sharing some news: They could take turns riding in the giant harvesting machine, if they liked. He promised everyone it would be a great view.

"It'll be fun," he said.

Zimmerman was the reason they were there. He was the one who envisioned this field of grain, although, two years ago, it was barely a vision.

Zimmerman, 59, had wanted to re-create a piece of the farm life he grew up with, the part where farmers took grains down to the local mill to produce soft, delicate flour.

He registered the trademark for Hayden Flour Mills, which had been abandoned by its operators along with the iconic building that sat at the end of Tempe's downtown. Zimmerman had no plans to reoccupy the Hayden Flour building itself. It was too large for what he had in mind, and its operators long ago installed mechanical rollers in place of the original stone-mill method Zimmerman envisioned.

He had the name - one that held history and nostalgia for longtime Arizonans. And he had an idea to find the same grains that flourished in earlier times and mill them on a hard stone the way earlier generations had done.

But he had no wheat. He had no land to farm it. No seeds to plant. No crop to harvest. No grain to mill. And no mill.

One by one, he met the people who would bring his idea to life. A food academic. A pizza maker. A man from South Carolina with a soft spot for grits. Together, they would nurture these amber stalks from the ground and resurrect a food, a community entity and a flavor from the past.

And they would bring a crowd at sunrise on this early-summer day.

Zimmerman made one more pitch for someone to join the driver in the combine. Seeing no takers, he gave the driver the go-ahead.

The engine rumbled, and the combine made its way into the field for the first harvest.

Chapter 2: The seed of an idea



Zimmerman grew up on a farm in Arthur, N.D., about 35 miles northwest of Fargo. His father raised sheep and chickens and grew vegetables. Baskets of eggs were small presents to neighbors. Milk was collected at the cooperative creamery that made dairy products. Grain was taken to the

l. was very inefficient, small scale," he said. "You have enough to provide for your family and just enough to sell."

ring Zimmerman's lifetime, the family farm would yield to the industrial farm. Grain subsidies were put in place to ensure that Americans were and to keep costs low. Government money encouraged farming to get big. Grain was a commodity.

The transition proved lucrative for farmers like Zimmerman's father, who made enough money to let the family escape the cold North Dakota winters with trips to Arizona. Zimmerman said the sunshine lured him to Arizona State University.

He earned a theology degree and trekked through various careers before landing at Intel, a computer-chip-manufacturing plant in Chandler. After

he was laid off, he worked as a technical consultant, but also looked to start his own business, something he could pass on to his two children.

Zimmerman's wife studied [nutrition](#), and Zimmerman realized the food chain that included his family farm was not only better for the community but also for overall health.

The kinds of food his family had grown - natural dairy, cage-free eggs, organic heirloom vegetables and humanely raised meats - were popular again among food aficionados. Food from nearby sources was prized. But Zimmerman saw one area missing.

Grains weren't part of the resurgence. Old varieties once had flourished on the state's Native American lands. But at the time, in 2010, there was little to be found in the way of local grain. Menus touted Arizona fruit and Valley vegetables. But nobody promoted the source of their bread flour or polenta.

There used to be varieties of grains as diverse as the nation's regions and climates. But as wheat production became concentrated on large farms in the Midwest, grains were bred for utility and ease of farming rather than taste.

Not even people who grew grains felt connected to their products anymore, Zimmerman discovered. He visited his hometown last year and reconnected with some high-school friends who are still farmers.

The sense of community was still there. They had breakfast inside a gas station whose owner gave the farmers a key, letting them open it up and make their own coffee.

Those North Dakota farmers grew corn and soybeans. Zimmerman asked his friends what happens to the soybeans they grow. The farmers didn't know. One said he thought it became tofu, but he had never tried tofu. The corn, they knew, was made into animal feed.

"There was no connection to people," Zimmerman said.

In 2010, Zimmerman had a plan to rebuild that connection. The farmer would know the miller, who would know the baker. And customers would appreciate the taste and story behind the product.

His plan had some gaps. Zimmerman needed the varieties of wheat that had been grown locally but knew of no one growing it.

He also needed a wheat field.

And a stone mill.

And a place to house it.

Small details.

That year, in October, Zimmerman attended a conference in Phoenix designed to pair local farmers with local chefs.

Zimmerman was neither. He had no product to offer, just an idea. But he got this idea to the right person: A pizza maker named Bianco.

Chapter 3: Enter the pizzamaker



Chris Bianco runs the renowned Pizzeria Bianco in downtown Phoenix and a sandwich shop and bakery called Pane Bianco. He is a James Beard award winner. He is one of the better-known pizza makers in the world.

Bianco did not re-invent pizza. He just determined to make his with the freshest and best ingredients possible. He bought vegetables from local farmers because he remembered the windowsill gardens in his Bronx neighborhood growing up. The Italian immigrants in metropolitan New York wanted to grow tomatoes and herbs because they knew they tasted better.

Such simple ideas were common and routine. They're only special now, he said, because they've disappeared.

"Now it's celebrated," he said. "All of a sudden, that becomes part of poetry. It used to be commonplace."

Bianco heard about Zimmerman from his brother, Marco, who made the bread at the sandwich shop. Marco had attended a conference and met a man who had the idea of growing and milling local wheat, under the old Hayden Flour Mills name.

Bianco remembered that name from when he moved to Arizona in 1985 and saw sacks with the Hayden Flour Mills logo at Smitty's Big Town grocery store in Scottsdale. He remembered thinking the sackcloth would make a good poncho.

Bianco met Zimmerman, and the two reached an agreement: If Zimmerman could acquire a stone mill, Bianco would house it at the back of his bakery.

For the pizza maker, it was good karma. He had started making pizzas in borrowed space at the back of a grocery store; this was his way to return the favor.

It also was good business. He believes heritage grain flour, freshly milled, will be used more as people realize it is better than bleached industrial flour.

"It starts with (making) food that's good," Bianco said. "You don't want to start with an excuse."

With a home for a mill, Zimmerman set out to find one.

He had already been scouting for one, having traveled to Canada to visit a bread shop that milled its own grains. He wrote down the type of stone mill they used. And, a few days after meeting with Chris Bianco, Zimmerman sent an e-mail that ordered a 1,600-pound stone mill from an Austrian company that started making them in the 1940s.

In August 2011, the stone mill imported from East Tyroll, Austria, was moved into Pane Bianco. Given that its width was equal to the frame of the door, it took creativity to squeeze it into the back of the shop. But after it was assembled, Zimmerman put grains he had purchased from Washington through the mill to test it.

Marco Bianco, the bread maker at Pane Bianco, baked a batch of bread. Success.

More than a home for the mill, Zimmerman had a champion in Bianco, who had a calm air that made Zimmerman more confident his plan would come together.

Still, the mill would need grain. And to get grain, he would need to grow wheat. And to grow wheat, he would need a farm.

Arizona farms have long grown wheat for export. But Zimmerman wanted to plant the varieties that used to flourish in Arizona - strains like White Sonora wheat, which makes a puffy dough and exceptionally soft tortillas.

The Pima Indians used to grow White Sonora wheat, taking it to the Hayden Flour Mill on mule. The old mill used to produce a bag specifically labeled as flour for tortillas.

Zimmerman's search led him to Native Seeds, a research group in southern Arizona that cultivates and saves seeds from lost strains of vegetables, fruits and grains.

The group's founder, Gary Nabhan, had acquired seeds of White Sonora from tribal members who wanted to help ensure the variety stayed around. He grew some to create more seeds and experiment with the flour.

Nabhan said his group could donate a few hundred pounds of seed to the effort. Zimmerman figured that after three years of growing and cultivating and saving seeds for the next year, he could have enough flour to sell.

Bianco and Zimmerman held initial meetings with farmers to ask about growing grain. They faced skepticism. The farmers didn't have experience with wheat. Some figured there was more money to be made in other crops that were easier to manage and had a ready market. Cows needed corn to eat. It was unclear whether consumers would buy boutique flour.

[Most Arizona-grown wheat is shipped to Italy >>](#)

Zimmerman resigned himself to getting grain for his mill from North Dakota, one of the nation's biggest wheat producers. At least, he figured, it would be locally milled.

"It just seemed so insurmountable," he said.

But around that time, someone on the East Coast began to believe in the project. He would provide the seed that would let the idea take root.

Chapter 4: A miller, a farmer get on board

Glenn Roberts got into grain for grits.

A connoisseur of old Southern recipes, he wanted to resurrect a variety of corn called Carolina Gourdseed White. The strain was native to the Carolinas and made exceptionally creamy grits.

So Roberts, in 1998, founded Anson Mills. The South Carolina company gathered, preserved and grew old varieties of grain. It got its start by marketing the rare grains to well-known chefs.

Soon, Roberts came to know a chef who wanted freshly milled grain for pizza crusts. The chef also wanted conversations about food. He would talk to Roberts by phone, sometimes late into the night, lamenting the lack of local grains near his restaurant, remarking that perhaps he should just buy a mill and grow his own wheat.

That chef was Chris Bianco. With no local grain for his breads and pizza crusts, Bianco had been buying from Anson Mills.

"He's always wanted his own mill," Roberts said.

In 2011, Roberts was in Arizona, invited by Nabhan to give a lecture on heritage grains. He met Zimmerman, heard about his project and learned that one of his best customers, Bianco, was involved.

Roberts had been doing what he could to re-introduce heritage grains to different parts of the country. He had donated about 50 tons of seed to projects in 20 states.

This one held exceptional promise, he thought. "It was moving so quickly on so many fronts," he said. He liked the energy of the miller, that an expert in seed and crop cultivation was on board and that there was a popular chef who would use the finished product.

Roberts can safely say there's not another (project) like this anywhere," Roberts said. "Period."

Roberts made a donation: two tons of White Sonora seed. Zimmerman would pay back the donation, worth about \$4,000, by giving double that amount of seed back to Native Seeds once the plants grew.

For Zimmerman, the donation of that seed put the project in motion. Farmers wouldn't have to put up the money for seeds. And Zimmerman could produce flour on a large enough scale to sell to chefs and retail customers.

"It took the risk away," Zimmerman said. "That was a big deal."

Nabhan delivered a major contribution, too. Through Native Seeds, he worked on landing a grant for nearly \$50,000 from the Department of Agriculture. The money funded a field in Amado and another operated by a community food bank in Tucson.

Meanwhile, Zimmerman looked for farmers in the Valley and found Steve Sossaman, whose family has farmed around Queen Creek since 1918. When Sossaman heard the Hayden Flour name, he felt a tug of nostalgia.

He has a shirt made out of an Arizona Rose flour bag hanging in his closet. "I think it still fits," Sossaman said.

Sossaman planted White Sonora, as well as Hard Red Spring wheat and Emmer, a variety Italians call faro.

Sossaman said the 30-acre wheat field is the only portion of his 800-acre farm that grows food for human consumption. The rest goes to cattle feed.

"It's an emotional connection," Sossaman said. "I get excited about this. I think the excitement level isn't there, really, with corn and alfalfa."

In early 2012, Zimmerman started pitching his products to chefs and specialty bakers. He also started selling at farmers markets. Production was small, using some small batches of Arizona grain, as well as some out-of-state grain that Zimmerman bought. The chefs started coming on board.

Charlene Badman, chef at FnB in Scottsdale. Doug Robson, chef and co-owner, along with Bianco, of Cocina 10. Nic Mediterra, owner of Mediterra Bakehouse in Coolidge.

After trying out the flour, Mediterra told Zimmerman he wanted to visit the Queen Creek wheat field where the crop was growing. The baker sat down among the stalks and meditated for a while. "It was beautiful," he said.

Zimmerman knew he had to generate that same excitement, or at least curiosity, from consumers as well. He figured that would come from the name.

Chapter 5: The value of a name



The original Hayden Flour Mill, powered by the then-flowing Salt River, helped spur the development of Tempe. Its main street, Mill Avenue, was named for it.

Over the mill's lifetime, it grew bigger, abandoning the stone mills for mechanized roller machines that could run 24 hours a day. The mill was bought by a larger milling company, started getting its wheat from the Midwest and became more disconnected from its roots. According to an Arizona Republic story from the mid-1980s, a city official mistakenly told a reporter the mill had closed, even though it was still churning out thousands of pounds of flour each day.

When the mill needed to expand yet again, the company that owned it figured that it was cheaper to close it and rebuild a mill elsewhere. The last batch of flour was trucked out in 1998. And the silos and mill building have stayed vacant since, becoming both an eyesore and piece of history on an increasingly commercialized street.

Civic preservationists have fretted about the iconic building since the mill closed. Architects produced sketches that showed the silos turned into condos and the mill building becoming a tavern. With those plans not coming to pass, the city has turned the area into a park, with the mill equipment becoming relics seen through barred windows.

Zimmerman wasn't as interested in the building, though, as with the idea of the mill and flour itself.

"People were focused on preserving the building and not preserving the process," he said.

When Zimmerman came up with his grain concept, one of the first things he did was check the status of the Hayden Flour Mills name. He discovered that the company that operated the mill left it behind with the building. That included the list of brands that were familiar to generations of Arizonans: Crown-o-Gold, Navajo Maid, Family Kitchen and Arizona Rose.

Zimmerman picked up the trademark, first registered in 1915. His new flour would carry a familiar name.

Zimmerman knows his product can't compete with bulk flour in price. The first bags of flour he's produced sell for \$5 and weigh 1.5 pounds. That's about the same price as a 5-pound bag of all-purpose flour.

But, maybe, by making flour more affordable, it has also been devalued.

"In Europe, people expect their flour to be fresh," Zimmerman said. "We expect it to be cheap."

Chapter 6: The dream ripens



Wheat plants start sprouting green, the blades looking like tall grass. When they turn brown, farmers will say the wheat is "field-ripening," but the plant is really dying, giving all it has to the seeds in the stalks. That is when it is time to harvest.

Before the grains were picked from the Queen Creek field, Martin Makatsu, the pastry chef at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale, took some close-ups of the stalks.

The combine had started its work in the westernmost field, slicing a path through the Hard Red wheat. Zimmerman walked over to that end with Sossaman, the farmer, and Makatsu, the pastry chef.

A woman from the marketing department of Whole Foods Market drove up, wanting a picture of Sossaman in the wheat field. The photo would presumably be displayed outside the plastic-silo-like dispensers that will sell bulk grain. The high-end market apparently also believes people will pay a premium for heritage-grain flour.

This first harvest, with grain pulled from this field and others in Tucson, Amado and Sacaton, was going well. Watching the combine, Zimmerman thought about two years earlier, when this was just an idea. Maybe two years in the future, there will be 10 times more acreage planted, an expanded mill and a lower price, allowing more people to enjoy the flour.

Zimmerman walked into a just-thatched portion of the field and watched the combine as it circled back from the far end. He could see the mound of grain cresting at the top of the tank.

"That's a beautiful sight," he said.

He waved for the combine driver to stop. Then he ran over excitedly and climbed up to the cab. He lifted himself up, balancing a foot on the driver's seat, and scooped up some grain with his hand. He gave some to the combine driver to sample, then hopped down and, with an ear-to-ear grin, handed some to the pastry chef.

Where to buy:

Hayden Mills Flour is available for purchase at Pane Bianco, 4404 N. Central Ave., Phoenix; Bodega Market, 7125 E. Fifth Ave. Suite 16A, Scottsdale; and at farmers markets in downtown Phoenix and Old Town Scottsdale on Saturdays. For more information, visit haydenflourmills.com.



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