

This Built America

Hayden Flour Mills: Sowing Ancient Grains to Rebuild an American Tradition

by [Georgann Yara](#)  Mar 24th 2014 2:11PM



Courtesy of Hayden Flour Mills

Hayden Flour Mills founder Jeff Zimmerman

An almost-century old family farm sits on the outskirts of Phoenix where asphalt and suburbs yield to dirt roads and fields.

Forty miles northwest, in the center of America's sixth largest city, a tiny flour mill operates among espresso bars and high-end restaurants.

Disparate places. But there are two elements that bring these rural and urban spots together: wheat and Jeff Zimmerman.

The 300-square-foot [Hayden Flour](#) mill, founded by Zimmerman in 2010, is bringing back some of Arizona's agricultural roots and a part of America's food history he worried had disappeared.

"We're not trying to go back in time, but capturing an authentic time," Zimmerman says of his tiny mill that turns grains that haven't been grown in the state for decades into flours that are sought after by the city's top chefs.

That includes Chris Bianco -- the only pizza chef to win the "Oscar" of the culinary world, a James Beard award -- who owns the sandwich shop Pane Bianco that shares a space with Zimmerman's 1,000-pound millstone.

They make for good roommates. The shop is frequented by Phoenix foodies who in turn are drawn to the authenticity of Hayden's flours. The company's 20-item product line ranges from pastry and pizza flours to polenta and pancake mix. But getting to this point hasn't been an easy road for Zimmerman.

Chapter One: Planting a Seed

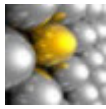
Zimmerman's journey started long before he figured out where to buy a millstone in Europe and persuaded farmers to plant White Sonoran wheat -- all in preparation for rebuilding the small batch flour mill process that once commonplace in the American landscape before being lost to mass production.

Zimmerman, 60, is a jack-of-all-trades with a gift for storytelling and passion for history. He has degrees in journalism and divinity. He grew up on a North Dakota farm, but isn't a farmer. Working in the tech industry, he considers running Hayden his "night job."

His interest in wheat started during conversations with his wife, a dietician who lamented the lack of nutrients in modern foods. While there has been a

push for more variety in fruits and vegetables, it was grain that captured Zimmerman's attention. He

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wondered if there was a link between declining health in people and how few varieties of grains are being grown today and processed into much of the food we eat every day.

"If we can keep these older varieties going, it keeps the gene pool fresh and viable," Zimmerman explains. "There's also the flavor. If something tastes good, maybe you don't need to eat as much of it to be satiated."

Research led him to explore the White Sonoran wheat varietal, the oldest strain of wheat in North America. European missionaries brought it to the high desert of the American Southwest in the 1700s and farmers grew it there for centuries. In the early 20th century, it became the basis for a popular flour brand, Arizona Rose -- produced by the original Hayden Flour Mills.

That Hayden Flour was founded in 1874. The mill was rebuilt twice after fires destroyed the structures with the most recent building constructed in 1918. It remains a nonfunctional yet historic and iconic structure in Tempe, Ariz.

The family of longtime U.S. senator Charles Hayden owned the original mill off and on from 1874 to 1968. It was sold to a large corporation then and 30 years later, that company sold it, abandoning every trademark and even the name -- which left it ripe for the taking. Zimmerman did just that in 2010 and gave his business an official start.



But soon after buying the name, Zimmerman began to realize that his idea of starting up Hayden Flour again was going to take rethinking an entire grain food chain.

White Sonoran wheat's high yields had made it desirable over the centuries to the Gila River Indians who farmed along the Arizona riverbed. But those yields weren't big enough for the mass production wave that spread across America in the middle to late 20th century. The heritage wheat gave to modern hybrid versions, such as F1 Hybrid, that are grown in enormous quantities.

To bring back the wheat, Zimmerman would need to enlist the help of farmers willing to take a chance on heritage grains. Convincing them wouldn't be easy. Sowing the long-forgotten grain likely wouldn't yield the kind of profit many of them were used to from mass production.

He also needed customers -- and a place to put a grindstone that would take up close to 200 square feet.

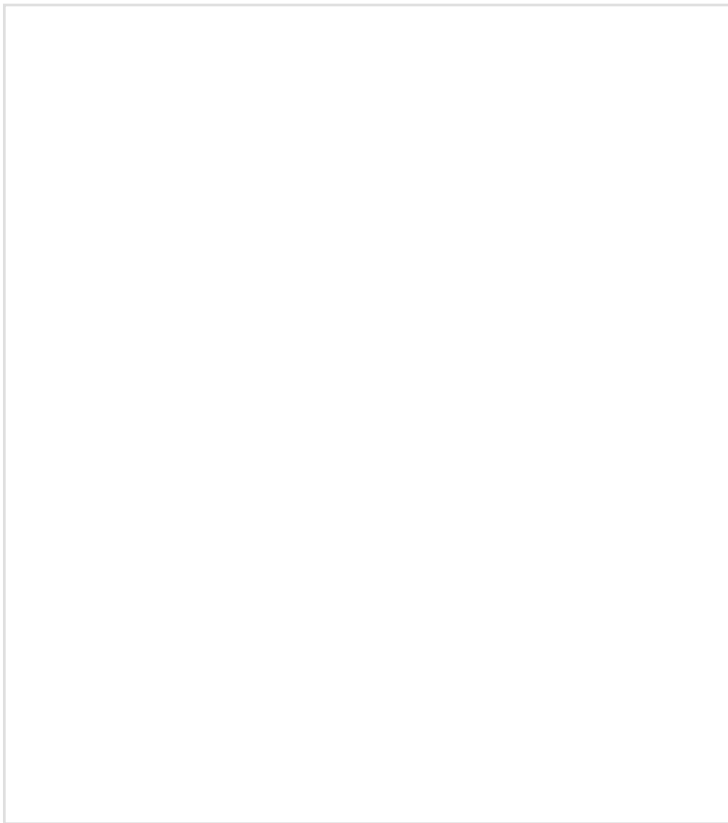
For those, he turned to the Bianco brothers, one a chef and one a bread maker. The Biancos grew up in New York City, but are dedicated to using the freshest local ingredients from their adopted home state. Marco, the bread maker at Pane, had heard about a man wanting to grow, mill and sell Arizona homegrown flour at a food conference, all under the iconic Hayden Flour Mills name. The name resonated with his brother.

Marco called Zimmerman on the phone, eventually connecting him with his brother. Zimmerman knew of Bianco's reputation in the Phoenix food scene and was excited that a chef of his stature would be interested in teaming up. Bianco had already been seeking a local flour source, and was very open to learning more about Zimmerman's vision. After quickly realizing

their shared objective, a deal between chef and businessman was made.

Bianco agreed to let Zimmerman use the back of his sandwich shop as his headquarters and a place to put his mill. Zimmerman ordered his 1,000-pound stone from Austria and part of the plan was in motion.

But it was missing a key ingredient. Zimmerman would find that an hour away from Phoenix.



A Farmer Joins the Quest

Since the early 1900s, the Sossaman family has farmed near the town of Queen Creek, with a population just shy of 28,000.

Steve Sossaman, 58, still lives on his family's original homestead, where he grows commodity crops like corn and alfalfa, selling them mostly to local dairies.

By the time the farmer and businessman met in 2011,

Zimmerman was discouraged. He had spent nearly two years trying to persuade farmers to grow White Sonoran wheat. Many were unwilling to risk cropland on a grain they weren't familiar with, while others simply lacked interest or dismissed Zimmerman's plan as folly.

But not Sossaman. His father and grandfather embraced experimenting with new crops or processes. Steve shared their attitude.

So when Zimmerman approached Sossaman for help finding a farmer willing to donate 30 acres to plant White Sonoran, Sossaman volunteered himself.

Zimmerman's jaw dropped. "I think there may have been tears," remembers Sossaman.

"I figured 30 acres out of 800 is not going to make or break me. I can take that chance," Sossaman says. "Sometimes, things like that can invigorate you."

Sossaman planted his first crop of White Sonoran in 2012 using seed donations from seed conservation groups. He took care to ensure this batch had the best possible environment and fertilized it with liquid nitrogen and cow manure earlier than he would modern wheat.

The stalks grew as high as 40 inches, much taller than modern varieties that typically reach just 24 to 30 inches. They also lacked the beard -- the bristly strands that protect the wheat kernel -- seen on modern wheat.

Sossaman was pleased with the initial harvest. Now, it was easier for Zimmerman to persuade other farmers to plant grains to be milled on his Austrian stone. Today, a dozen farms grow various grains for Hayden, including Hard Red Spring wheat and Farro, an ancient grain commonly used in salads and soups, in addition to White Sonoran.

Reviving a Craft

For centuries, millers were a linchpin in American communities. It may be why the last name Miller is so common in America. But the skill of milling grains into flour died out as highly automated milling took over in the 20th century.

In fact, Hayden's miller Benjamin Butler often finds himself explaining exactly what he does. "I say, 'I'm a miller,' and people say, 'What you do you mean?' That term is lost," he says.



Frank Thomas

Hayden Flour Mills miller Benjamin Butler.

Zimmerman speaks longingly of the 1800s when more than 23,000 flour mills existed in the United States. They served as central locations where farmers sold their wares, customers purchased their flour and communities connected. Now big mills generate a million pounds of flour a week.

Hayden, however, might mill that much in a year. But to stay small is important because Zimmerman sees his mill in a similar role to those 200 years ago. "To connect local farmers with consumers who like to use our products to make cookies, cakes or pizzas is huge," he says.

Every time customers buys a one and half pound bag, Butler is able to tell them about the farmers who grew the grains and describe all the steps that went into making the flour they hold in their hands.

The petite sack, undersized by traditional five or 10-pound bag standards, subtly clues consumers into its contents' distinctiveness -- an ingredient that needs to be used in weeks not months. The packaging makes it more likely to be used at its freshest, explains Emma

Zimmerman, Jeff's daughter and Hayden's business manager. Each bag is stamped with a "best or freeze by" date, typically five months from production.

"The idea is to keep it smaller so when you use it, it still has that fresh taste," she says.

Butler, who learned his skill on the job at Hayden, enthusiastically speaks about how 80 percent of a wheat berry actually becomes flour. He demonstrates -- by rubbing the powdery freshly-milled flour between his fingers and thumb -- that the batch he just milled lacks coarseness and therefore, meets his standards. There's no mathematical equation or computer software that signals success -- it's all in knowing his craft and materials and how the flour feels in his hands.

Bigger, but Not Too Big

Now, two years after that first crop of White Sonoran wheat was threshed and milled, Hayden has grown into more than a niche business. The mill has become a force in the community, thanks to professional chefs and at-home cooks. It's altered Arizona ecology by resurrecting heritage grains on land that hasn't borne them for decades.

It's also changing the landscape by keeping it the same.

Sossaman's farm is surrounded by housing developments that once were family farms, most settled around the time his grandparents homesteaded in 1919. Craving financial security and relief from the hard life of the trade, many farmers took developers' first offers 20 years ago.

However, Sossaman's father wanted to leave a legacy for his family and refused to sell. Little did he know that decision would help spark another kind of heritage, decades later.

In May 2014, Zimmerman will move his mill to Sossaman's farm not far from the first field of wheat the farmer planted for him. The larger facility will accommodate inventory, production and the influx of visitors requesting tours.

Sossaman's farm continues to thrive on corn and alfalfa, in addition to the wheat it grows for Hayden. But seeing Zimmerman's dream come true and the Hayden name resurrected gives him a unique excitement because he's been instrumental in making them happen. He's gathering data and tracking seeding and fertilization methods to determine ideal growing conditions for heritage grains, which could also help optimize flour for specific uses, like making pasta or baking bread.

"None of us are risking our livelihood, but we think it's important to do this," Sossaman says. "If not us ... then who?"

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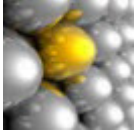
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