

YQ and the rise of an alternative grain network

Using indicators such as protein content to assess quality in grain has become embedded in wheat production, and yet these indices are limited in what they can tell us about a wide variety of baking or organoleptic qualities. The baking process common to large scale facilities relies on consistency and speed and that is being questioned as part of the rise in artisanal baking and the real food movement. We have gained first-hand experience of the current issues and opportunities surrounding how quality is determined in UK grain markets as sales of ORC Wakelyns Population (OWP) seed have increased and producers have questioned “what can I do with it?”

*The diversity within OWP challenges us to explore alternative approaches to marketing of both the seed and grain (see Box 1). When it comes to the grain, Kimberley Bell of the Small Food Bakery has been pioneering the use of OWP, which has been nicknamed ‘YQ’ (Yield/Quality), in wholegrain bread and other baked goods and showing what is possible with wheats that may not comply with standard ‘quality’ measures. Alliances are now developing across the country to bring together bakers, millers, farmers and more who are looking for alternatives across the grain economy. This was explored at the UK Grain Lab conference held at the Small Food Bakery in November 2017. In this article, **Kimberley Bell** discusses working with OWP, the current state of play and approaches to alternative systems with **Charlotte Bickler**.*

CB: It is clear that the appeal of OWP goes beyond certain traits and characteristics that it may possess. What drew you to OWP ‘YQ’?

KB: At first it was the flavour, delicate and nutty/malty... and it might sound silly, but the silky texture of the dough we made with this flour was so enjoyable. Upon further investigation it was my interest in the story of Martin’s work and ideas that compelled me to want to make a bread with it. I think to some extent many of us (bakers) are trying to find a way to work and exist in the world that contributes in a positive way to our community and environment. It just made total sense to me that we should be trying to bake with grain from Wakelyns and to play a part in getting this new grain into the food chain somehow, and the ideas behind it into the wider discussion on the future of food.

Part of my interest in the YQ Wakelyns population was that (although a modern crop), Martin’s intentions in developing the crop seemed to be aligned with a (pre-chemical agriculture) set of values more reminiscent of the past. Looking to bring back biodiversity and farm in a low input system are certainly value sets that I believe those working with heritage varieties have in common with Martin’s work and the story of the population wheat.

CB: We hope to test the baking quality of grain produced in our Organic Winter Wheat variety trial network (see p9 – and look out for tasters at NOCC!), what would you be looking for when working with flour samples from these grains?

KB: Flavour. As a baker working with naturally fermented dough, I’m interested in how that flavour manifests itself after fermentation. After that, it’s the baker’s responsibility to find an appropriate product to utilise good flour. Some benchmark measures would be helpful though for bakers, as not having them can be a barrier to investing in new flours.

I have worked with two harvests of OWP YQ, milled by different millers and there have been big differences in the character (flavour and behaviour) of the resulting flour. This has as much to do with infrastructure as farming (storage and milling) but has been an interesting journey for me, learning how to cope with it, and testing my sense of responsibility as a baker to continue being an ambassador for this crop.



Kimberley Bell demonstrates baking with the YQ - ORC Wakelyns Population at the UK Grain Lab conference.

BOX 1: ORC Wakelyns Population seed and grain

After extensive study of its potential to show resilience and yield stability in organic systems, and lobbying for changes to seed regulations which currently do not allow for genetically diverse ‘heterogenous material’, the EU granted a temporary experiment on the marketing of heterogenous material. OWP was launched for sale at National Organic Combinable Crops (NOCC) in 2015. The vision for OWP was for farmers to develop their own local populations from the ‘pool’ of genes provided within OWP via farm-saving seed, but the regulatory framework, and the benefits of economies of scale when it comes to haulage and processing, has led to some centralisation in seed marketing in these early stages. We are now working with Walnes Seed to market the OWP seed. As for the grain, Kimberley began baking with OWP in 2016. She has now recruited a local farmer and windmill to grow and mill the grain for the Small Food Bakery and other bakeries in Nottingham. Whilst we have followed a more traditional approach to certifying the seed, for example working with seed companies to process and market it, it has been interesting to see how the grain has been taken up by end-users interested in more alternative local economies and shortening the food supply chain.



CB: What does local mean to you?

KB: Local means human scale and direct. It's not about a prescribed geographic area, more about a web of strong human relationships that can deliver a sense of community and sovereignty over our food systems. For our bakery, in terms of geographical proximity, it's about deciding what's appropriate on a crop by crop basis. It makes sense for me that eggs should come from a few miles down the road, but, provided a relationship can be built and maintained with a farmer, I'd be happy to consider grain to be local from anywhere in the UK.



CB: What do you think the key elements of a successful local network are? What tips would you give growers and producers hoping to engage in something like this?

KB: Fundamentally, people need to make the time and space to come together and form relationships that will provide the network. It's critical that we work together, so, for cereal farmers wanting to trade more directly and build a community around their product, they need to get out there and meet bakers and millers. It won't take long before they find people they can work with and this will give momentum to new ideas. Making time to step outside of your work and see what others in the network are doing is essential to building these relationships. At Small Food Bakery the whole team spend up to two weeks a year travelling to visit farmers and suppliers and to attend lectures and conferences. Our network wouldn't exist without this. But it works both ways, and it's also important that our farmers and millers come to visit us too. It might sound like a luxury, but it's during these visits that new ideas present themselves, problems get ironed out and business is done. They also build trust, loyalty and friendship... These are the most important elements of a successful 'local' network.

CB: What led you to organise the Grain Lab conference at Small Food last year? Will this continue?

KB: I think we urgently need to build localised grain economies across the UK and I thought an event of this nature might help. I have had the privilege to meet some brilliant people working with grain at all stages of the network and it seems that there are many of us that share a common aim to build strong local networks, but we are disconnected and therefore don't move forward. After hearing discussions amongst colleagues from the scientific and agricultural side talk about the obstacles they perceived to achieving this, and on the flip side, bakers speaking about the challenges they face... It just seems to me that the first step is to get everyone in the same room learning about each other's work, sharing a meal together, cross-pollinating our ideas, building empathy and knowledge in a convivial atmosphere.

I was inspired by the US Grain Gathering hosted annually by Steve Jones and the team at WSU Bread Lab. Each year they bring together a gathering of farmers, millers, bakers and scientists who spend 4 days eating, learning, teaching and spending time together. I guess I wanted to re-create this kind of learning and development opportunity here in the UK.

As a baker, to have the opportunity to come together and exchange skills and ideas is progressive in itself, but if you add the full network into the mix I think the learning and exchange can be much more powerful...

CB: Where do you hope that the movement will go next? What role will the UK Grain Lab (see Box 2) play in facilitating your vision?

KB: I hope that we will see more farmers, millers and bakers working together in much more long term forward looking collaborations. Ideally with academics and scientists in the mix to support with their knowledge and resources. I feel that the UK is really lagging behind other countries in this and we should run to catch up.

The UK Grain Lab (bolstered by our Grain Lab conference, which will be held again at the Small Food Bakery in November this year) will hopefully become a facilitated network that can help kickstart some of these relationships, foster a culture of transparency/sharing of knowledge and help to address some of the infrastructure problems we have to overcome. It would be great to connect seed breeders and those reviving old seed with bakers to ensure meaningful and real feedback loops – rather than relying on basic lab results and supposition to determine how to take things forward.

BOX 2: Introducing the UK Grain Lab

The Grain Lab is a collaborative initiative between farmers, millers, bakers, brewers, chefs and researchers. The vision is to work along the supply chain, and across food and farming networks, to make innovative, diverse, nutritious and flavoursome grains available to all. The Grain Lab is inspired by the pioneering work of the Bread Lab in the US, which started within Washington State University and now conducts research on thousands of lines of cereals. Working with farmers they are identifying those that work well for growers and food processors from millers to bakers and maltsters to brewers. We will be organising gatherings across the country encouraging collaboration and creating opportunities - pick up an information leaflet or talk to the team at NOCC on 3 July, follow @UKGrainLab on Twitter, or email Steven Jacobs (steven@ofgorganic.org) or Edward Dickin (edickin@harper-adams.ac.uk) to find out more and get involved.

Check online for up-to-date details on the next Grain Lab conference and go to: ORC website for more photos from the event in 2017 and to read Kim's interview in full.

This interview will feature as a factsheet for the CERERE project and there will be a case study of the ORC Wakelyns Population.



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John Turner (Grange Farm, right) is growing YQ for 2018 harvest; it will be milled by Paul Wyman (Tuxford Windmill, left). They discussed their approach to shortening the supply chain at the UK Grain Lab conference.