



## **With the Grain: The growing interest in growing local grains**

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### **Fairhaven Flour Mill: Majority of grains come from Washington State growers; regional bakeries interested**

*by Dana E. Neuts*

With a dream of owning a local, sustainable business, Kevin and Matsuko Christenson bought the Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill from Bill and Lisa Distler in October 2007. Following the purchase, the mill – which started as a cooperative in 1974 – remained in its downtown Bellingham location until last fall when it was moved to a 7,500 square foot facility in Burlington, just off I-5.

“There was no room to grow,” Kevin Christenson said of the location.

Since moving, the Christensons have installed a much larger, second mill, allowing Fairhaven Organic Flour Mill to expand its capacity and provide more storage space. Currently, the mill produces a variety of 100 percent organically certified, kosher flours including whole wheat, cornmeal, rye, oat, buckwheat, soy, barley, gluten-free flour and more. Consumers can buy 25 and 50 pound bags of flour directly from the mill, but the remaining products are distributed to wholesalers and retailers from British Columbia to California and Idaho. Customers include Essential Baking Company, Breadfarm and Avenue Bread.



USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan and Fairhaven Flour Mill owner Kevin Christenson discuss local grains at Country Market near Seattle. COURTESY PHOTO

Only producing flour when orders come in, Christenson classifies his product as premium grade flour with an emphasis on freshness.

“More and more people are concerned about the quality of their food,” he said. “They are willing to buy a premium product if it is better for their health.”

Part of what makes the mill’s products of superior quality is the fact that 60 percent of the grains used are grown in Washington by farms that Christenson has personally selected. He visits each farm to ensure that he believes in the way the farmer does business and that the farm operation is clean, open and free of pests. He does not do business with farmers that don’t meet his exacting standards. As a result, he is willing to pay more for quality grain, and that cost is reflected in the retail price passed onto buyers.

“We don’t look for deals, and we don’t buy junk,” Christenson said of his raw materials.

When he originally purchased the mill, about 10 percent of the grain was locally grown, so Christenson is particularly proud that he is able to buy the majority of his grain from Washington farmers. The remainder comes from other sources, because some grains like rice don’t grow well here, he said.

Since buying the mill, Christenson and his wife have enjoyed being involved in the community, donating flour where appropriate and giving tours to local schools.

“I want to be part of the community here, and this is a really community-centered business,” he said. “I like dealing with the local farmers and bakeries and the community interaction we have around good food.”

As part of this work, Christenson supports the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, a nonprofit organization that focuses on helping farmers. He also spoke to USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan when she visited the area to meet with local growers and producers, and hear their concerns and challenges.

In spite of a declining economy, Christenson reports that his business is doing well. While a bakery or grocery store may reduce its orders, consumers seem to pick up the slack by baking more at home. He attributes this to an increased focus on better health and an interest in locally grown grain.

What's next? Fine-tuning the production of gluten-free flour. Currently, gluten-free flour is made using one of the existing mills, following a thorough cleaning to remove any trace of gluten from other grains. Christenson said that consistency in the gluten-free flour is sometimes an issue, however, so they continue to refine the process. He estimates that it will take the Fairhaven Mill another month before it can say that it is using 100 percent gluten-free dedicated equipment. Though the mill is only inspected once a year to be certified gluten-free, Christenson said he feels an obligation to provide a gluten-free environment year-round.

*For more information about the Fairhaven Mill, including a full list of products, visit [fairhavenflour.com](http://fairhavenflour.com) or call (360) 734-9947. The mill is located at 808 North Hill Boulevard in Burlington.*