

Whole Grain Treat

Condon bakery makes a crunchy snack from homegrown wheat

By Lee Farren

A few years ago, when the price of gas was so high that Paul Bates was paying more to grow wheat than he could get for his crop, his wife Donna wondered if there was more she could do to help.

She already was working full time as the librarian at Condon Elementary School. She knew she wanted to do something with the wheat Paul farms, but she never thought she would end up running her own business.

Now she is three years into it, and her popped wheat berry snacks are starting to take off.

Donna pops, flavors and packages the wheat in an old bunkhouse on the Bates farm east of Condon that the family has converted into Wheat Springs Bakery.



Popped wheat berries are good for munching straight out of the bag.

Her son, Sam Bates, and her daughter, Heather Stephens, help with the business.

It all started when Donna was searching the Internet for bread recipes and stumbled on one for popped wheat. She made some, liked it and took it a step further, using the popped wheat in place of popped corn in caramel corn. She took the new snack to church, where everyone liked it. That year the Bateses gave “wheat berry brittle” as a Christmas gift, and the response was overwhelming.

“People said, ‘You have got to market this,’” Donna says.

For the next four months, she worked to get a product she liked, cooking up some new variation every day after school. When Paul and Sam came in from working on the farm she would have eight different things for them to try. She wanted a healthy product, and one of the biggest challenges was figuring out how to pop the wheat without using oil.

Today, Wheat Springs Bakery produces wheat berries in four flavors: plain,

Italian, ranch and wheat berry brittle.

Donna uses a soft white wheat variety with a supersoft kernel that makes it especially good for baking and popping.

“It pops up better, softer, not as hard and crunchy and more friendly to the teeth,” she says.

While developing

her product Donna also worked on financing and marketing. The Gilliam County Extension agent put her in touch with the Food Innovation Center (FIC) in Portland. Part of Oregon State University’s Agriculture Extension Service, the FIC helps companies create value-added food products using Northwest ingredients.

Paul, Donna, Sam and his wife spent two days there in 2007.

“We went into the lab and they showed me how they were making their product,” says Sarah Masoni, the FIC’s product development manager. “We worked together to refine the process and made it a little bit healthier.”

“They have a test kitchen, a huge facility, they are set up to take a product from start to the shelf, and they go through everything with you,” Donna says. “They help you find and meet people who can help you develop the product.”

While they were in Portland the Bates did some market research at New Seasons and Whole Foods grocery stores. They visited a packaging company and a spice company that could blend their spices. They met with artists to talk about creating their brand and brainstormed the name of the company. The name they came up with, Wheat Springs Bakery, refers to their wheat farm and Condon’s original name, Summit Springs.

“We want to make sure people are educated and we try to help them realize their dream,” Sarah says. “It usually takes longer and costs more money than people think. It has a lot to do with perseverance and believing in your product and being in the right place at the right time.”

With a lead from the FIC, Donna



Donna Bates began Wheat Springs Bakery to create a value-added product from her family's wheat. Learn more about the bakery at www.wheatspringsbakery.com.

Tractor Fire Injures Farmer

On June 28, Paul Bates' tractor caught fire and became fully engulfed in flames. Paul escaped by jumping free, but was badly burned. He was life-flighted to the Oregon Burn Center in Portland, with burns over 18 percent of his body, mostly on his arms and back.

Donna Bates has stayed in Portland in the couple's fifth-wheel trailer to be close to Paul at Legacy Emmanuel Hospital.

In early July, Paul was slated to receive skin grafts for small third-degree burns.

He is expected to make a full recovery and expects to be home by mid- to late August, depending on his progress.

Meanwhile, the Bates' daughter, Heather, is keeping Wheat Springs Bakery open, while their son, Sam, runs the family farm with help from Heather's husband, Dean Stephens, and other family and friends.

Stay current on Paul's progress at CarePages, a website of patient blogs. Go to www.carepages.com and search for "survivingthefieryfurnace" or Paul Bates. Registering with an e-mail address is required.

received a grant from the Lower John Day Regional Partnership to renovate the house that is now the bakery. Mary Merrill was at the meeting where Donna gave her presentation and was impressed by what she heard.

Mary directs the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in The Dalles. The SBDC provides business consulting services, most of them at no cost, to startup businesses in Wasco, Hood River, Sherman, Gilliam and Wheeler counties. Soon Merrill was helping Donna develop labels and bar

codes for her wheat berries.

"It does take a long time to develop something from start to finish, especially when dealing with food that will be consumed by humans," Mary says. "We are able to help guide people through the maze of federal and state regulations."

The Bateses decided they were a bakery rather than a processing plant, a decision that affected their licensing and the type of regulations covering the operation.

Early on in the process Donna spoke with Laura Pryor, a past Gilliam County

judge. "She said to develop a product and get it on the market, plan for at least five years and you will never work harder in your life," Donna says. "I think we are on schedule."

At this point Donna is doing her own distribution and focusing on increasing her points of sale. She visits farmers markets in Central Oregon to introduce customers to the product and tell them where they can find it locally. She has given away several gift boxes of popped wheat to various local organizations for door prizes and gifts.

"Donna is definitely on the right track for getting her business positioned to be moving forward," says Mary. "I've seen it over and over again, where they bring samples of their product to a meeting and if the people taste it they are just sold on the thing. It's a very tasty product."

"If you would have told us 10 years ago that we were going to end up doing this we would have said you were crazy," says Heather, Donna's daughter. "Now it's taken off and has the potential to grow. I don't think there are any limits on it."

And although Wheat Springs Bakery has not yet turned a profit, Paul is optimistic. "We got into this with idea we could make money down the road." ■