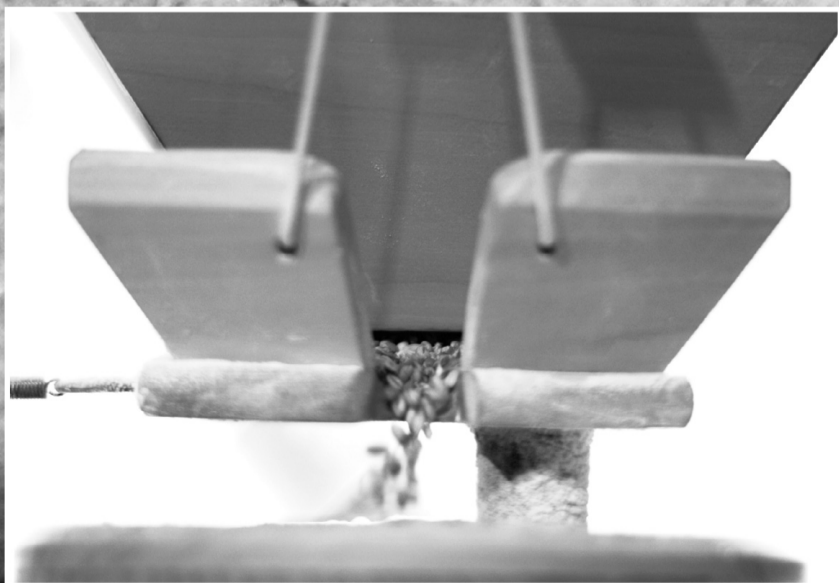


Sowing the seeds: Series part 9

Last stop: the stomach



Sarah Simpson holds up her pride and joy: a loaf of freshly-baked bread made from grain she grew herself this year in a Cowichan field. Yum!



Grain drops into the grinder of the mill at Island Grains, the last stop for the grainiacs who gave growing crops a go in 2009.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SARAH SIMPSON
CITIZEN STAFF

There is good news on the wheat front! On Nov. 1 Cowichan Bay miller and owner of True Grain Bread, Bruce Stewart, welcomed us into his bakery to mill our grains with his fancy stone mill.

Imported from Austria, Stewart's mill is an Osttiroler Getreidemuehlen. "Das Original," claims their website.

My wheat was in good hands.

Covered with "pine wood of eternal beauty" according to the web, the true secret of that particular mill's success is its stone, which promises to deliver superior flour.

Only the best for my little kernels.

Clutching my paper bag of wheat that I'd planted, weeded, harvested and threshed myself, Makaria Farm's Heather Walker guided me into a flour-covered back room where her partner, Brock McLeod, wearing a miller's hat for the occasion, was waiting.

McLeod set up the mill and I climbed onto a step and ever so gently dumped the contents of my bag into the hopper. Grainiacs Martin and Judy MacDonald watched through a window as McLeod flipped the switch, turning the machine on.

Within minutes my wheat had been crushed and was passing through the machine's outlet and into a different paper bag.

I held onto the bag for dear life as 11 months of work — and my pride — was flowing into it.

When the milling was complete I was left with just enough flour to make one loaf of bread.

Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald's bounty was larger.

"Five pounds of whole wheat flour represents the material results of our participation in the Island Grains Project," they reported after their wheat went through the machine. "The real reward was the fun and education we had during the growing season. Brock and Heather did a great job administering the project, instructing, and making us feel welcome at their farm. They also went out of their way organizing special sessions lead by professionals in the art of grain growing."

It all began in January when the young farmers put out the call to those wanting to participate in their latest project.

"Island Grains is a new form of community-supported agriculture. It is a club, an educational course, an experiment, and a movement. It is a way for eaters to be growers, to face the same challenges as our farmers, to learn to fear the weather, and to understand the value of food," said Walker. "We welcome families, individuals, groups, risk-takers and food enthusiasts. And you don't even need to own a hoe."

I was hooked.

The first actual meeting of the group started in March so I spent February researching the history of grain-growing in the Cowichan Valley specifically, and on Vancouver Island as a whole.

It turns out the Island is quite capable of producing quality grains.

Citizen columnist and local historian T.W. Paterson said one of the first commercial crops exported from Vancouver

Island was in fact wheat.

The Hudson's Bay Company did it after they settled their Fort Victoria base in 1843.

And then I got a call from Maple Bay's Bob Johnston. He said in the 1950s he used to work the threshing machine for a farmer at St. Ann's school farm — what's now Providence Farm.

"He had a field of, if I remember right it was oats, on Maple Bay Road," related Johnston. "He had about 25 acres there — a beautiful crop."

By March I was chomping at the bit to learn to grow my own grains.

A couple of guest speakers later and it was April and there we were, preparing our plots and planting our crops.

During the months when our little seeds were percolating under a layer of freshly turned soil, I dove into some research on the bigger picture, particularly as it relates to genetically modified (GM) seeds. I learned a lot about Saskatchewan farmer Percy Schmeiser's case against agro-business giant Monsanto, who he said had contaminated his farm with GM canola in the late '90s. In a true David versus Goliath battle, Schmeiser eventually prevailed.

Throughout the summer I also learned all about heritage seeds, community supported agriculture and why there's such a push to establish better food security.

We weeded our plots in August.

"Almost to death," McLeod said of mine.

I learned how to harvest and thresh with a shoe, then store my booty so the bugs wouldn't get at it.

Then came the milling, and finally making bread with my small paper bag of fresh flour.

The MacDonalds had said, "You cannot measure physical input with material output as part of the slow food movement, but rather the pleasure you receive is in the process itself."

They were right. There was one thing left to do to earn the ultimate satisfaction, however.

I needed to bake.

I let my flour sit for a few weeks, pondering how best to utilize it. In the end I decided to do what they might have done in the old days, and invite my family to help me.

We gathered the freshest of ingredients and then cheated.

I used a bread maker.

Hey, I never claimed to be Julia Child. And besides, with just enough flour for one loaf, I needed to ensure I didn't ruin it. The pressure was on.

The smell in my kitchen was heavenly as the bread began to form. By the time the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the cooking process, I was wiping the drool from my mouth.

Just like my plot after weeding and my photo in the third installment of this series of articles, my bread was ugly.

"Let it sit for a minute," said my stepmom as we pulled it out of the machine.

But as soon as she turned her back my dad and I grabbed a knife and cut into the loaf.

Hesitantly, I took my first bite. As soon as it hit my mouth, I grinned.