

Bread for life

Michael Hanson's heritage grain

Michael Hanson, Lewes' master baker and pizzaiolo, is down to his last 15 bags of flour. But his store cupboard will soon be replenished as 18 tons of Sussex-grown heritage grain is on its way to be stone ground into flour.



The term 'heritage' might seem like woolly marketing speak but Michael's heritage grain goes way, way back. It's a 'landrace' mix, developed to suit the Sussex soil and climate, made up of over 30 ancient varieties: some British strains and others collected from Turkey and all over the 'fertile crescent' in the Middle East. It's specially blended from the seedbank of archaeo-botanist John Letts, who Michael befriended whilst he was a thatcher and John was a thatching consultant.

John has been collecting ancient wheat varieties for 20 years but, unlike modern genetically-modified wheat, the germs need to be sown within five years of harvest to remain productive. So when Michael got back into baking, he was more than happy to help and, with the assistance of the Wetterns at Southease, who've been farming in Sussex for generations, last year they sowed eight acres.

Whilst the grain is ancient, the yield is too; around a quarter of what you'd expect to get from modern varieties, but it's a hardier crop and results in a tastier flour. The tall mixed stalks also make for a very good-looking field. That first field yielded twelve tons of grain, and some of that was sown over 30 acres last November. It's this second harvest that's on its

way to be stone milled, at Offley in Staffordshire. Why stone milled? To ensure all of the germ remains within the finished flour. Why so far? Because Michael wants the miller to have vast experience and the seventh-generation millers at Offley have

been in the business long enough to qualify. Michael will use the flour in everything he makes at the Bakehouse, including the delicious Neapolitan-style pizzas upstairs at The Hearth, for which the flour is blended with Italian pizza flour for stretch. You can also buy it yourself, and £1 from the sale of each bag will go to 'Bread for Life', a Community Interest Company that Michael set up to support the work of the many groups working to feed the refugees in Calais. Proceeds from his 'Soup Aid' initiative raised £10,000 to support the Refugee Kitchen in Calais and the charity 'Hand in Hand for Syria', and his next plan is to buy them a bread mixer and help to source the five tons of flour they need every week.

And if that wasn't enough, by growing the ancient grain and returning a tithe to John's seed bank, their combined efforts will allow native grain to be returned to Syria once the conflict is over. So displaced people returning to their native lands will be able to re-establish their own grain production, feeding future generations and thus rather elegantly closing a truly virtuous circle.

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