

A Look inside Oregon's Breadbasket

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With the holidays quickly approaching, comes an increased demand for delicious baked goods. A main ingredient in most baked items is flour. There are a variety of flours available for baking which range from whole wheat to brown rice and even gluten free. Most baking flours are derived from some type of wheat. Each different type of wheat produces different types of flour.

Wheat (*Triticum* spp), is a cereal grain and is also a member of the grass family. It produces a dry, one-seeded fruit commonly called a kernel. Wheat has been around since the beginning of time, archeologists date wild strains of wheat back as far as 9600 BC. Wheat first appeared in the United States in 1777 as a hobby crop and has been an important crop to Oregon since its origin. Dr. John McLoughlin, Hudson Bay director, ordered that each Hudson Bay trading post needed to grow enough wheat to feed the post and the people it served. Wheat was then traded for furs from the Russians, making wheat Oregon's first farm export. In 1849 during the Gold Rush, Oregon farmers who stayed home to grow wheat made more money than those with gold fever who went south to California. The Star of Oregon, the first Oregon built ship, transported wheat from the Willamette Valley to California for gold miners. Over time, wheat was also shipped as far as the Hawaiian Islands and the East Coast. Profits from wheat were used to purchase necessities for Oregon settlers. The first commercial flour mill in Eastern Oregon was built in John Day in 1865 to help feed over 6,000 gold miners. Once the dollar-a-bushel freight was lifted from railroad transportation, wheat production in eastern Oregon increased dramatically. Wheat had a tremendous economic impact on the development and growth of Oregon, making it a settled area before mountain states.

Today there are over 30,000 different varieties of wheat, which are divided into six different classes; hard red winter, hard red spring, soft red winter, hard white, soft white and durum. Farmers in Central Oregon primarily grow wheat varieties that are either from the hard red winter or soft white classes. Hard red winter wheat is planted in the fall and grows until it is about 5 inches tall. When cold weather and winter begins, it becomes dormant and continues growing into the following spring. It is harvested in late spring to early summer. Combines are driven through fields thrashing the wheat kernels from the stock which are then dumped into truck trailers. Some wheat is stored in silos until the grower wishes to sell it, while other times the wheat is hauled to grain elevators where it is sold and exported. Hard red spring wheat gets its red color from the pigmentation in the bran layer of the wheat berry and has a protein content ranging between 10-12 percent. Hard red winter wheat is used for bread, hard baked goods and added to other flours to increase protein content. Some brands of unbleached all-purpose flour are made from just hard red winter wheat. Soft wheat has a larger percentage of carbohydrates, so it has less gluten forming protein. Soft white winter wheat is generally planted in Central Oregon in the spring and harvested in late summer or early fall in the same manner as hard red spring wheat. Since it has a lower protein content, it is used to make cakes and pastries.