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ILLINOIS Grain

SWEETS and TREATS

Kernel of TRUTH

## From the Good Earth

by Monica Kass Rogers



# Expanding the Horizon of Illinois Grain: BRESLIN FARMS

Father-daughter farmers John and Molly Breslin had plenty of farming in their backgrounds, but didn't at first choose farming as a career. Both John and his wife Peg (Molly's mom) worked as lawyers—Peg as a Third District Appellate Court judge before John retired to become a jack-of-all-trades, vegetable gardener and fly-casting instructor. Once college-age, Molly headed off to the University of California in Berkeley to study linguistics. But working as kitchen manager for the Berkeley Student Co-op there, Molly found she really enjoyed her interactions with the farmers and organic growers she sourced from for the co-op. Those farmers taught Molly about organic and biodynamic practices, seed saving and more. That led her to work for the Chicago Botanic Garden's Green Youth Farm and for Earth First Farms, selling organic apples.

While John's avocation as a vegetable gardener blossomed, Molly's dreams of bettering the world through organic farming were taking root. So when Peg's farmer father had left her 87 acres of prime

farmland in Ottawa, Illinois, Molly and her dad combined forces, enthusiasm and energy and started Breslin Farms on the land the family inherited.

When John and Molly took serious stock of the rural Northern Illinois acreage they planned to transition from conventional to organic row crops, the big question was what to grow. Their paired experience had mostly been with vegetables. But during the Stateline Farm Beginnings class they took through Angelic Organics Learning Center, instructors encouraged John and Molly to figure out what products were missing in local markets. "So," says Molly "we looked around at the CSAs, and Chicago-area farmers markets and determined that you could buy vegetables, meats, cheeses—just about anything, with the exception of locally-grown grains and beans."

Setting out to fill that gap seemed simple enough. But after three

years of hard work, the Breslins have learned the process of growing heirloom beans and food-grade grains in Illinois is fraught with challenge and complexity. Transitioning a farm from conventional to organic practices is in itself difficult. “When we took over, the soil was rock hard,” says Molly. “Because of that, a huge portion of our efforts has had to go into rebuilding and rehabbing the soil toward a living, balanced and healthy ecosystem, above and below ground.” Additionally, the infrastructure for processing food-grade grain in Illinois just isn’t there. “There was a time when people grew a much wider variety of food-grade grains here, and there was a mill in just about every town,” says Molly. “But that’s all long gone.”

As a result, Molly and John’s first crop of hard red winter wheat (best for baking bread) which they harvested last July created a sensation in the neighborhood. “People in neighboring farms would look out and see this glorious acreage of waving, golden winter wheat and say, ‘What is that?’ They’ve grown so used to everything around here being sown in corn, the wheat was a real novelty,” Molly recalls.

Figuring out how to store and mill the wheat was a challenge. “We realized, wow, we have to have a way to clean and store and move the grain all at the food-grade level, which is significantly different than if you’re growing for animal feed or to make ethanol,” says Molly. The closest source the Breslins could find for grinding the grain into flour was 100 miles away at the Rogers Creek Gristmill in Milledgeville, Illinois. Marketing the product was yet another hurdle. Because the cost of milling the grain exceeds the actual wholesale cost of the grain itself, the finished flour is a bit pricey for commercial bakeries.

Weather is a constant concern, more so than for corn farmers who can replant if bad weather hits early enough in the season. The Breslins raise full-season crops—so if one fails, there isn’t an opportunity to plant a second one. “Wheat is fragile, particularly susceptible to wind and hail, so we worry about it all the time—every thunderstorm has us wringing our hands and crossing our fingers,” they say.

But they balance that stress with the positive aspects of their job. “Watching things grow is really gratifying, but I also enjoy interacting with people and watching them get super



## MEET THE BRESLINS AT THE GOOD FOOD FESTIVAL

March 17 at UIC Pavillion, Chicago Illinois



“I have never heard anything quite like the sound of the breeze rustling through acres and acres of papery wheat, except maybe the ocean.”

— Molly Breslin



## From Wheat to Flour

As Told by the Breslins

We harvested the wheat in July and trucked it to Kaneville, Illinois to have it cleaned. After cleaning, it was placed in a combination of 50-pound bags and large plastic hoppers, and then we trucked it back to Minooka, Illinois to a cold storage facility where we pay by the pallet/month to keep it cold and fresh. Cold storage is necessary because the germ and bran contain essential oils that can go rancid, ruining the product for human consumption.

When we have orders placed for flour, or when we run out of our stock, Molly puts 6 bags (300 pounds) of wheat berries in the back of her little silver Prius and drives it to Milledgeville, Illinois (just north of Dixon). She drops it off with Roger, at Roger's Creek Grist Mill. He mills it over the weekend (he works another job during the week), and she picks it up a few days later. When we are milling to order, our goal is to get our flour to the customer within 7 days of milling.

Since the weather has gotten cooler, we can now drop off 6 new bags when we pick up a batch of freshly-milled flour. Roger stores the wheat at the mill for us until the next batch is needed, and we just call him to ask him to mill it—thereby saving a bunch of driving.

Roger's standard whole wheat flour, which he tells us is consistent with the industry standard, has about 50% of the bran sifted out of it. This process is called "bolting." When selling our flour at the Green City Market during the Locavore Challenge, we offered both "bolted" (basically pre-sifted) and "unbolted" (completely whole grain) flour. We found that most people who visited our stand were interested in the complete whole grain, and that we had a hard time selling the bran on its own. As a result, we now sell unbolted flour as our standard "whole wheat flour" and are only offering bolted flour to customers who want to purchase it on a large scale.

We think it has a richer, nuttier taste—probably because it has been well-cared for, kept cool, even during the milling process so that the germ doesn't get rancid.

excited about closing the local food loop," says Molly.

Once the wheat turns ripe and golden in mid-summer, Molly finds it particularly alluring. "It stands out beautifully against the green of the surrounding crops, but also because of the sound. I have never heard anything quite like the sound of the breeze rustling through acres and acres of papery wheat, except maybe the ocean." John's favorite sight is "driving through the waving wheat and seeing the harvested grains fill up in the bin behind me," he says.

The father-daughter team is also looking forward. The recent purchase of their first combine made mechanized planting and harvesting a possibility for the first time this year, drastically reducing labor. They've also started researching and experimenting with growing rye, barley, and older, non-hybridized wheat varieties. "We're especially hopeful about that wheat," says John. They are not only increasing their yield with new varieties, they are also expanding the horizon for organic grain grown in Illinois.

*Currently, the Breslins sell whole wheat flour, five kinds of heirloom beans and hard, red, winter wheat berries through their website [www.breslinfarms.com](http://www.breslinfarms.com), and local Chicago outlets including Dill Pickle Food Co-op in Logan Square, Green Grocer Chicago in Ukrainian Village, and Open Produce in Hyde Park. ec*

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John Breslin



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John Breslin, courtesy of Molly Breslin