

The Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company: Organic, sustainable and profitable.

Written by Mireille Theriault

On a table set away from the kitchen bustle of the Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company in Winnipeg, co-owner Tabitha Langel hovers over a group of preschoolers on tour from a day care.



Tabitha Langel, co-owner of Winnipeg's Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company, introduces grains and whole grain products to kids from a local day-care centre.

“Does this look like bread yet?” she asks the half-dozen children as they run their fingers through shallow bowls of grain.

They are gathered at the Forks Market location, which opened in 2002. The original store at 859 Westminster Ave. opened in 1990 and has since become regarded as a cornerstone of the area. Although she and her staff have conducted dozens of tours over the years, Langel never tires of sharing her love for making bread. She has also found that children are not the only ones enthralled by the process.

“We’ve done many, many tours over the years with farmers. We’ve hosted grain chemists that work for the federal government and have done bread-making sessions with Parks and Canada workers to re-inspire them by showing them what comes from the land,” says Langel. “I treated that group very much like I am the day care: getting them to make dough animals; getting them to feel the process. I start with the kernels, then have them hold their hands under the mill as flour falls like a soft, dry rain through their fingers.”

Today’s tour, organized as part of a program called “Growing Up Organic,” which aims to get more organically grown produce and products into day-care centres, makes for a particularly good fit with Langel, herself a passionate booster of the uncompromised nutritional attributes of organic food. The level of knowledge among the general public varies greatly but most people readily appreciate the health benefits of produce grown without pesticides and chemical enhancements.

Both Tall Grass bakeries use only certified organic or locally produced grains, seeds, produce and basic ingredients, passing on to their customers as much of the whole foods that have gone through as little time and processing as possible from the field to the table.

This is certainly true of the approximately 25 bushels per week of whole grain the bakery grinds on site every week at the Forks using two small mills.

“The process of milling and baking should never have been separated,” says Langel. “So many of the chemical processes like bleaching were a result of the war. We don’t need flour with a shelf life of 10 years anymore but the practices that came about for necessity became entrenched by the desire for profit.” She shrugs. “I understand that, but

I still hope that one day bleaching will stop because we all know how terrible that is. Here, with our own mills, shelf-life is a non-issue.”

Growing Up Organic

In early 2007, the Canadian Organic Growers (COG) launched the Growing Up Organic project nationwide as part of an effort to shift Canada towards increased organic production by exploring ways of getting more organically grown food served in Canadian institutions, beginning with child-care centres. www.cog.ca/guo.htm

Langel means that quite literally, since very little of the great variety of goods prepared each and every morning at the bakeries ever remain on the shelves at the end of the day. In addition to the baked goods, Tall Grass sells plenty of its freshly ground flour for those who love to bake at home. In Langel’s opinion, more and more people are realizing that what is sold as 100 per cent whole wheat flour is actually just white flour with just enough bran added back to pass government regulations, and that the term “whole wheat” doesn’t hold as much weight with informed consumers as it once did.

Aside from the nutritional benefits of including whole foods in our lifestyles, events like the “100 Mile Diet” have contributed to the awareness of environmental factors such the fuel burned to transport foods, even if it is organic, as well as the emphasis on supporting the local economy. A network of a dozen Manitoba agricultural businesses form the heart of Tall Grass suppliers.

Langel ruefully admits that conducting tours is terribly expensive as far as productivity and time are concerned and unless the participants are part of their customer base, it makes even less business sense.

“The reason I do it is because I love spreading the word about organic and raising awareness. To me it’s a social service. Tours of the first store started because we wanted to thank our customers there. Those kids lived on our bread. We’ve always felt very grateful for people having bought into what we were trying to do.”

What she and fellow founders Sharon Lawrence and Lyle Barkman started nearly 20 years ago has forged a stronger bond between those who worked the land, themselves and their customers.

“The banks thought we were crazy,” Langel says. But they were right on the money. Knowing where their food came from and what went into it did matter to people. The trio also found that the ethical division of profits mattered just as much and that their customers supported their philosophy as much as they loved the bakery’s bread.

“Back then, they called us a hippie church,” she laughs. “We were and still are very connected to a social justice ideal, but all that means is that we believe in giving everyone their fair share and customers a fair price.”

Tall Grass’s owners are also very concerned about responsible and sustainable agricultural practices. At the time of the bakery’s founding, many farmers were literally losing their shirts and their land. Farmers were getting about two cents for every loaf of bread sold. Today, Langel estimates about four cents is average while a farmer dealing directly with Tall Grass nets 11 cents per loaf.

When it comes to the business, this is only one of two instances where Langel is keen to talk about money. The other side of the coin is about paying skilled bakers their worth. “You can’t pay artisans minimum wage,” she says emphatically.

All three businesses combined, she reckons the bakery has 25 full-time positions, with another half-dozen part-time jobs. For the most part, those are students who combine their need for an income with their studies in food sciences, environmental studies, and agriculture.

“We always have a resident philosophy student or two as well,” adds Langel. Philosophical considerations aside, there is little doubt that nutrition-conscious consumers are prepared to pay more for products they perceive as having value-added benefits. The success of the Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company is proof positive that it is possible to strike a

balance between the ideal and the practical for a company of that size. As much as Langel would like to see the same adaptation of processes on a larger commercial scale, she appreciates the limitations of the industry and is content to live and work in her chosen lifestyle.

“There is no question that for me, this is a whole life choice,” she says.