Locally Grown Grain Feeds Johnnycake Revival

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While the word "local" is driving consumer interest in finding food close to home, New Englanders have a long history with another term — native. Pride in regional products is deeply rooted in this part of the country, and when it comes to food, one of Rhode Island's most famous is jonnycakes.

The state has a few gristmills that still grind corn for these emblematic griddlecakes. johnnycakes are made from white cornmeal grown in Rhode Island.

Rainy days at the beach drive some tourists to mills that operate primarily as museums, but Kenyon Grist Mill is history that keeps happening. The West Kingston, R.I., mill is the site of a large Johnny Cake Festival in October, drawing 10,000 people. Spring and summer, the mill hits the road for other festivals and fairs, setting up booths to sell clam cakes and chowder and clam cake and fritter mixes.

"That's the only way we can keep the little mills alive," said Paul Drumm, owner of Kenyon Grist Mill. "Every old mill has something extra going for it."

Drumm named the Tuthilltown gristmill in upstate New York as an example; that mill used to survive on the specialty of grinding kosher flour. Kenyon Grist Mill developed their niche of clam cakes in the 1950s. Sales of clam cakes pushed demand for the mix, which is now as much of a signature product as the mill's johnny cake meal and mixes.

"People really fell in love with them, and it exploded from there," Drumm said, noting that the clam cakes and chowder are featured prominently at the Big E, the Eastern States Exposition.

The stones for the mill are made of Westerly granite, which was a coveted material for millstones. The horizontal mill is 4 1/2 feet in diameter and sits in a building constructed in 1886. The original mill at the site dates back to 1696. Though the mill now runs on electricity, the dam that was part of operations was flood damaged in 2010, warranting a considerable investment in restoration.

The mill has been running for more than 300 years and began to grind a dent variety of corn in the 1930s when sources of the traditional flint corn became hard to find.

"New England got out of growing grain for grinding," Drumm said. "There's a lot of sweet corn, and cow corn, but not suitable corn for grinding."

The mill has been in the Drumm family since 1971, and they used to get their corn for johnnycake meal from Maryland.

"We found a nice family farm in Virginia," Drumm said "And they do a really nice job with the grain, grow it without chemicals or pesticides, and plant a non-GMO seed."

Now that more area farmers are growing grain again, the family is able to source some white flint corn locally for jonnycake meal. They also mill wheat, rye and oats from a farm on Long Island, spelt from Vermont or Pennsylvania, and Kamut from Montana.

"Historically millers were very tightlipped, but since these mills have gone out of business it's more of an open-door policy," Drumm said of his industry.

Cooperation is more the name of the game than competition. Gray's Grist Mill in Westport, Mass., at the Rhode Island state line, has Kenyon Grist Mill mix its pancake mix, which is a blend of wheat, rye and corn.

Gray's Grist Mill makes mostly jonnycake meal, about 1,000 to 1,200 pounds a month. Farmer Harry Records grows the Narragansett, R.I., flint corn that Thornton Simmons has been milling for 12 years.

Ralph Guild, who lives in Florida but vacations nearby, owns Gray's Grist Mill and renovated it in the 1980s.

The demand for local foods has helped this grist mill, which also gets a boost from the coffee shop Simmons and his wife opened last year. The shop is adjacent to the mill, which is open for self-guided tours most anytime — guests can just unlatch the lower half of the double Dutch door and look at the framed photos and writing that describe the history and equipment at hand.

Thornton Simmons keeps that equipment in shape, taking apart the 4-foot granite millstones in January or February and dressing them for another year's work. At 1 1/2 tons each, the stones are demanding.

A retired contractor and carpenter, he credits his father for lending him a natural mechanical aptitude, and teaching him a lot. He learned milling by watching a video of the former miller at Gray's.

"Must be in my blood," Simmons laughs. "My ancestors had the first grist mill in Little Compton 1650 to 1675."

The mill, and an associated sawmill, used to run on water. The next source of power was an old Dodge motor and then a tractor. Now, a 10-horsepower electric motor sitting under the flour mill powers it.

The corn he mills sits refrigerated in 50-pound bags until milling and is also refrigerated after milling.

"Supposedly, it's the same strain of corn that the Pilgrims got from the Indians," Simmons said. "University of Rhode Island has improved it. The cobs at one time were 4 to 6 inches and are now 12 to 16 inches."

In addition to the coffee shop, the meal and mix are available at local stores and online. Around the holidays, orders come from Germany, England, California and Florida. The amount Simmons mills varies from year to year, but ranges between 1,000 and 1,200 pounds a month in the summer.

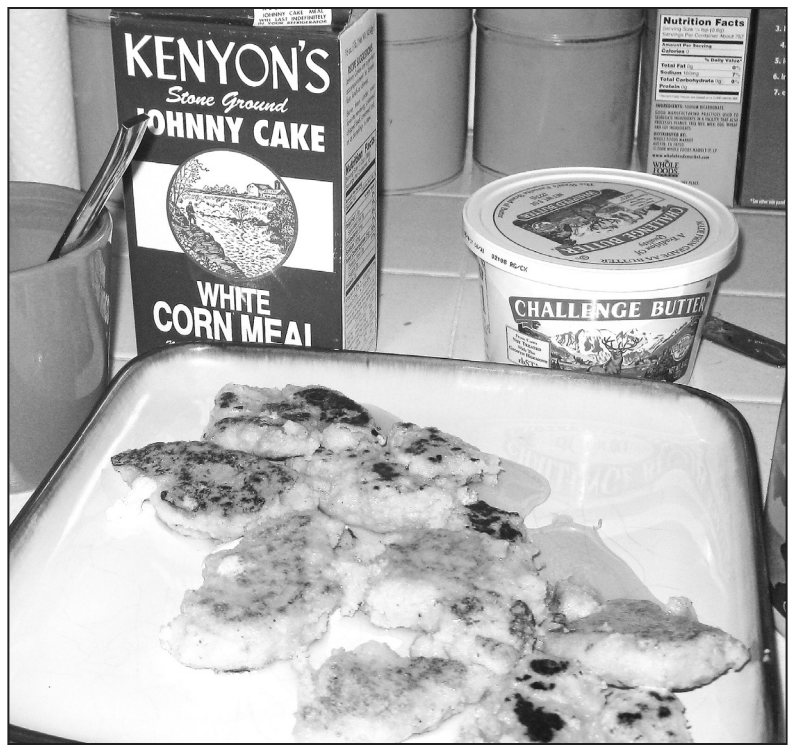

Photo Kenyon's Grist Mill

Johnnycakes made from Kenyon's stone ground corn meal are a Rhode Island favorite.

"People have been looking for gluten-free products," he said. "It's kind of full circle. Corn took the place of potatoes in the 1600s. They cooked jonnycakes three times a day, so it's coming back into vogue again."

Restaurants use the meal for jonnycakes, Indian pudding and cornbread. It's also used to coat fried green tomatoes and fish.

Simmons said he never gets tired of jonnycakes and has them once or twice a week.

"The secret is the hot skillet, well greased," he said. "All you have to do is add milk, you can add salt, but I don't add any."

Some people add sugar to the batter, which makes the edges a little crispier. Within the state, he said, the type of cake varies. South County has one that is a little bit thicker and softer in the center and there is another type called neither thick nor thin. The old way of serving them was just butter, but now people use butter and syrup.

The meal is one of his favorite parts of milling, but he also enjoys the people the mill attracts.

"I've met a lot of people really interested in old mills," he said. "I've learned quite a bit from people coming in, even learned about my ancestors from people that came by the mill."