Cooking with Local Grains

By Amy Halloran
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<lead-in line>Here's a twist on going locavore—diversify your plate with some of New York State's great locally grown grains.

Adding more local grains to your diet is a great challenge to try during NOFA-NY's Locavore Challenge. The learning curve might seem steep, but understanding a few basics about how to prepare grains will go a long way to increase your kitchen repertoire. All grains have three major parts:

- the outer layers of bran
- the starchy endosperm
- the germ, which is the portion of the seed that will start another plant

Eating whole grains is good for your health. When you use whole grains, you are taking advantage of all the nutrition available.
Rounding out your plate to include more locally produced staples is not only a benefit to you, but to the regional food system as a whole. This is because organic farming requires crop rotation to help soil health. If farmers grow the same crops year after year on the same ground, problems develop. Switching from vegetable to grain crops, for example, helps prevent crop diseases and pests from building up in the soil. Growing grains helps improve soil structure, too. By supporting a market demand for locally grown grains, you help vegetable farms stabilize their economies as they build soil.

Great Grain Flavor
Aside from the ecological and nutritional virtues of whole grains, the most important reason to gain facility with local whole grains and flour is taste. Think about the difference in quality between a supermarket peach and one grown close by. The same stunning differences can be found in grains and flours.
We think of flour as an anonymous substance produced far from sight. Functionally, white flour stands in the background, too, performing a structural job in baked goods without competing against ingredients like chocolate or butter. However, bran and germ lend a lot to the way food tastes, and can help grains and flour speak as loud and clear as other ingredients.
Just what can flour say? Here are some basics to help you articulate great baked goods using New York state flours.
Wheats are classified as *hard* and *soft*, according to the texture of the starch in the endosperm. Pastry flour is made from soft wheat. Bread flour is made from hard wheat. All-purpose flour is a blend of the two.
Stone mills grind all parts of the grain—the bran, germ, and endosperm—together. Roller mills work by first separating the parts of grain kernels, and, in the case of whole-grain flours, putting the components together again.

Farmer Ground Flour stone mills organically grown NYS grains. Other mills in the state that grind organic, regional grains include Wild Hive and Champlain Valley Milling. Not all flour labeled local is locally grown, though; some of it is only locally milled. Some farmers sell grains and flour at farm stands and farmers markets, including Gianforte Farm and Hawthorne Valley.

Tips for Better Batter

Locally grown grains tend to have lower protein overall, which can be challenging for bread baking. Plenty of people figure out how to do it—Stefan Senders of Wide Awake Bakery offers great classes in the skill. You can skirt this hurdle by sticking to quick breads, noodles, and crackers. Crepes made with fresh flour and sunny-yolked eggs are kind of extraordinary. Rye crepes are my favorite these days.

I mix and match whole-grain flours in most recipes. For pancakes and crepes, I like buckwheat/rye, cornmeal/buckwheat, and cornmeal/rye/wheat. I tend to use whole-grain spelt flour by itself. The texture is velvety, and the taste is nutty. I've made nice pancakes, noodles, and crackers from emmer. Crackers are pretty flexible, flourwise; many combinations can make really nice crackers.

Whole-grain concoctions may need a bit more liquid because of the bran, which is very absorbent. Adjust for this in recipes by paying attention to the consistency. Also, it's always a good idea to let whole-grain batters and doughs sit a few minutes after mixing to allow liquids to be absorbed. This feels wrong, because the maxim with baking powder is to get it to heat as quickly as you can, but trust me. Biscuits, cornbread, and pancakes improve with a 10-minute rest in the bowl before baking.

Ideas for Cooked Grains

Take a cue from oats and make porridge from cracked grains, on their own or in combination. Soak 1 cup of cracked grains in 3 cups liquid overnight, and simmer in the morning. How long to cook depends on the coarseness of the grind.

Many farm stands have lovely varieties of cornmeal to highlight in polenta. I use 4 cups water to 1 cup cornmeal and 1 teaspoon salt. Cook slowly, and stir often. The starches in corn are different than other grains, and you need to pay attention. For a real novelty, use half buckwheat flour.

Another way to enjoy local grains is whole. I think of whole wheat, rye, or barley berries as rice, and I cook them the same way. Wash your grains first, skimming off any chaff that rises to the surface. (It might look like little bits of stalk.) Rinsing more than once is sometimes necessary.

The cooking ratio for whole grains to water varies with the grain. One cup of wheat, barley, or rye berries takes 3 to 4 cups water. (Choose soft wheat rather than hard because the texture will be more pleasing.) Bring to a boil, and turn the heat down to a simmer. Cover the pot, and check after 35 to 45 minutes. Taste a few berries and see if they are soft enough for your liking. If not, make sure there is more water for the grains to absorb, and let it cook a little longer. Let sit in the pot for 5 minutes before using, so that the grain can rest and fully absorb the liquid.

Some people soak their grains with a little yogurt, whey, or vinegar before cooking. This helps to mitigate the phytic acids in grains that can interfere with nutrient absorption. I

keep a pot of cooked grains in the fridge so they are ready for anything I decide to make. They're good in soups and stir-fries, and even to grind in the blender with pancake batter!
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A Grains Mini-Primer
Grains are the edible seeds of certain grasses, including wheat, spelt, emmer, rye, barley, triticale, oats, rice, and corn. Except for rice, all of these crops are grown commercially in our region. Think of these seeds as the very stable fruits of staple crops.
Ancient and heritage varieties of wheat, such as *emmer* and *spelt*, are available from New York state farms and mills. These grains have unique flavors. They are also desired because they have a different gluten-forming capacity than other wheats. Some people who can't tolerate common varieties of wheat find they can eat emmer and spelt. However, don't try to push these foods on people with celiac disease. Gluten is gluten.
Buckwheat, which is in the same family as rhubarb and sorrel, is also regionally available; it is not a grass at all, and contains no gluten.
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Wheat or Rye Berry Chowder
2 slices bacon, chopped (optional)
2 ounces butter (if not using bacon)
1 cup chopped onion
¼ cup flour
1 teaspoon thyme
3 cups chopped turnip or mustard greens
3–4 cups milk (depending on desired thickness)
2 cups cooked whole grains

Cook the bacon pieces until crisp or melt the butter. There should be 3 to 4 tablespoons of liquid fat in the pan. If needed, remove excess fat. Add the onion, and cook over low heat for a few minutes until soft. Add the flour, stirring with a fork or flat whisk, and cook on low heat until the flour/fat mixture is light brown. Add the greens and half the milk. Simmer until greens are cooked to your desired tenderness.
Add remaining milk and grains, and cook through. Season to taste with salt (if needed) and fresh ground pepper.
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Whole-Grain Crepes
1 cup whole grain flour
2 cups milk
3 eggs
½ teaspoon salt

Put all ingredients in a blender and mix until everything is incorporated. Or, use a whisk and mix by hand in a bow bowl. Let the batter rest for at least 10 minutes. Alternately, set the batter in the fridge for 30 minutes or overnight. You want all the ingredients to combine well.

Heat the griddle as you would for cooking pancakes, until water dances on the surface. Use up to a full tablespoon of butter to lend a lot of flavor to the crepe. Pour ¼- to 1/3-cup batter onto a 10-inch griddle, turning so the batter reaches the edges of the pan. Flip after the first side stops looking shiny at the edges. Serve with everything—savory or sweet.