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Let Them Eat Whole Wheat

By Kate Harrigan

For centuries, whole-grain foods were peasant fodder, filling the bellies of the masses but scorned by those able to afford something “better.” Processed food was the stuff of royalty.

But today, refined foods are held in disdain by the nutritionally aware. People are again searching for something “better,” encouraged, in part, by USDA’s 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which call for at least three, 1-oz. servings of whole grains per day.

Diners are looking for more natural and healthful foods, for rice with varying textures, for pasta that doesn’t rely entirely on sauce for its flavor, and for breads that are chewy, rich and dense. Increasingly, diners are looking for whole-grain foods. “People are looking for flavor and something they can sink their teeth into,” says Thomas John, executive chef, Au Bon Pain.

Data from Food Beat, Inc., Wheaton, IL, shows the nation’s leading restaurant chains are responding to diners’ desires not only with whole-wheat toast, but also with such innovative items as whole-wheat penne pasta and multigrain pancakes, three-seed

baguettes and other chewy, flavorful, nutritious treats. Total mentions of whole grain—which might include terms like multigrain, rye, wheat and whole wheat, in addition to whole grain—on the menus of the top-200 U.S. restaurant chains are up 14% over the last five years. Mentions of “wheat” and of “whole wheat” increased from 116 to 161, and mentions of “whole grain” went from 1 to 18.

“Whole grain,” in fact, is an increasingly important phrase. A count of “whole grain” mentions by food category shows whole-grain “bread, buns and rolls” increased from 1 to 11 between 2001 and 2006, and mentions of whole-grain flatbreads increased from 0 to 2, and of pasta from 0 to 5.

These numbers from Food Beat indicate increasing enthusiasm for whole-grain foods. There is, however, one extremely important caveat—diners are unwilling to sacrifice flavor for nutrition.

“For far too long, Americans have associated nutrition with foods that don’t taste good,” says Lorna Sass, Ph.D., author of the newly released cookbook, “Whole Grains Every Day, Every Way,” and culinary advisor to the Whole Grains



Photo: Panera Bread

Breads that pull characteristics from both refined-white and whole-grain breads help ease consumers into a wider range of textures and flavors.

Council, Boston. “Chefs are perfectly positioned to change that. These are not just the hippie foods of the ’60s... Chefs are educators in terms of convincing people to try things for the first time, and it’s here that they can play such an important role—by showing how beautiful, how delicious, how sexy (whole grains) can be. They are the ones who have the creativity and the imagination.”

BREADWINNERS

Americans are coming to appreciate a great loaf of bread. “Diners are moving away from white bleached breads and want a more hearty and wholesome bread—something artisan,” says Harold Midttun, master baker, Au Bon Pain. “They want something chewy, dark, and whole- or multigrain. We have switched to all artisan breads, and we now have only one white bread within our portfolio of seven or eight. There are still some customers who want white bread, but we have seen a significant shift from white to other breads, most noticeably in the past two years.”

Midttun says Americans are coming to prefer a richer texture and mouthfeel. “We used to get comments like, ‘It’s too chewy,’” he says. But now, when Midttun reads through the customer comments, he sees requests for denser, chewier, fuller-flavored breads.

“Americans have come a long way from the days when breads were just carriers for the fillings inside them,” John says. “Now, the bread is an important part of the sandwich—the bread is



Photo: McAlister's Deli

just as important to the sandwich as the filling.”

In 2006, Panera Bread launched a line of whole-grain breads. Sandwiches made with the bread were run on a trial basis at first, according to Julie Somers, company spokesperson. Like Au Bon Pain, Panera wants bread to be as important to a sandwich as the filling is, and wants whole-grain bread to be viewed not merely as a substitution, but integral to the sandwich’s flavor profile. The whole-grain bread “really has a great, rustic flavor that has a lot to contribute to the flavor combinations,” she says.

“We’re committed to healthier products,” Somers says. “This is at the root of who we are and what we do.” Panera’s breads are made from stone-ground whole wheat flour, a process that involves much less heat and no particle separation, thus preserving more minerals and fiber.

David Groll, corporate executive chef, McAlister’s Deli, agrees that Americans have come to appreciate a great bread. He was raised in Europe, on that grand tradition of chewy, crusty, full-bodied breads,

and says that when he arrived in the United States, he was surprised at “the rather uninteresting breads here.” Today, he is delighted the European tradition of great breads is being adopted in his new homeland.

Groll says the chain’s multigrain breads have become a major drawing card. “Diners are attracted to the fact that we have multigrain breads,” he says. “They are looking for foods that are better for you and have a distinctive, healthful message.”

There was a time when the more calories and fat a food had, the better it would sell, but that’s changing. “People are beginning to understand that we have to turn the page and make some alternate choices to control obesity and risk factors in our diets,” Groll says.

Customers at McAlister’s can custom-build their sandwiches, and they tend to do so with nutrition in mind, he says. At present, McAlister’s serves seven- and nine-grain breads and is working with its bakery vendor on the possible addition of a 12-grain bread.

But Americans aren’t ready to move too far or too fast. The trend is

more artisan breads, but Groll notes that McAlister's is making the move gradually. "The crusts are not so hard that they scratch the roof of the mouth," he says. "We are trying to find a middle road and really improve the flavor. The trend is to make robust and full-flavored breads with interesting ingredients. We are modifying the artisan breads and describing them in detail. We make the breads appealing and then we describe them so that they sound appealing."

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

Diners looking for the benefits of whole grains have a number of options other than breads. For example, Uno Chicago Grill menus a whole wheat tortilla wrap that is lightly coated with a sun-dried tomato spread, stuffed with vegetables and goat cheese, and drizzled with balsamic vinaigrette.

Chris Gatto, executive chef and vice president of food and beverage, says the chain is incorporating whole-grain items but refuses to sacrifice flavor. "We try to incorporate highly nutritious items wherever possible, and whole grains are a great way to meet diners' demands for foods that are both nutritious and delicious," he says.

As an example, Gatto cites the penne used in the Chicken Portobello Penne. He was looking for a multigrain pasta, but until he found Barilla Penne Plus, none had met his flavor expectations. Now, he says, the dish of diced chicken, spinach, and plum and sun-dried tomatoes tossed with the multigrain penne and a portobello sauce is a perfect example of an entrée that meets nutritional demands and flavor expectations.

Other whole- and multigrain pasta items are appearing on the menus of all types of venues. Noodles & Company menus five dishes made with a whole-grain Tuscan fettuccine. At Olive Garden, diners can substitute a whole-wheat linguine. Romano's Macaroni Grill also has



White whole-wheat flours like Ultragrain® from ConAgra Mills, Omaha, NE. ... "a revolutionary, 100% natural, whole-wheat flour that looks and tastes like white flour but retains the nutritional value of whole wheat."

Mike Veal, director of marketing, ConAgra Mills

a whole-wheat penne. Ruby's Diner and Village Inn offer multigrain pancakes, and whole wheat tortillas are showing up everywhere.

A MATTER OF TASTE

However, one problem remains. The truth is that, however readily available whole-grain foods are, however many forms they take, however many restaurants serve them, not everyone likes whole-grain foods.

One solution may have arrived with the increased availability of white whole-wheat flours like Ultragrain® from ConAgra Mills, Omaha, NE. Mike Veal, director of marketing, describes Ultragrain as "a revolutionary, 100% natural, whole-wheat flour that looks and tastes like white flour but retains the nutritional value of whole wheat." The product was developed for customers who wanted the benefits of whole grain but preferred the "taste, texture and color of products made with white flour," he says.

Some people simply don't like that taste of traditional whole-wheat bread. "The dark tannins in the wheat give it a heavier, sometimes even tending toward bitter flavor," says Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies, Whole Grains Council. Ultragrain has the same nutritional profile as whole wheat, but has a less bitter flavor. She says that white, or albino, whole wheat has been around as long as the dark (actually called red) variety that's so familiar. However, the red wheat worked better with mechanized farming and production methods.

Because we were disposing of the grain anyway, she explains, using

the red wheat seemed the obvious answer. But now we've realized that we do need the "whole grain," and ConAgra and other companies have developed a method to process white whole wheat into an extremely fine product that has the same nutritional benefits as dark whole wheat.

"White whole wheat is a major trend," Harriman says. "Because it has a lighter color, people don't look at it and say, 'That's not the right color. I don't want to eat that.'" She adds that, in addition to being lighter in color, Ultragrain has a mild flavor.

Jim Villemaire, manager of research and development, Schlotzsky's Deli, says that, although people ask for whole-wheat bread, many like the idea of whole wheat better than they like the taste. "If you can give people the taste and texture they want, but in a whole grain, it's a win-win solution," he says.

Panera is now using Ultragrain for its all-organic children's menu. As every parent knows, preschoolers are rather militant on the subject of white bread. If the nation's smallest food critics can be sold on white whole wheat, we'll be on our way to a healthier nation—presuming everyone has the good sense to cut the sandwiches into triangles.

Kate Harrigan is a freelance writer and editor specializing in food and travel. She lives in Massachusetts. Food Beat, Inc. (www.foodbeat.com), based in Wheaton, IL, tracks menu activity at the top-200 U.S. restaurant chains. It provides the industry with in-depth menu analyses and related trend information.

Menuing More Whole Grains

Incorporating whole grains into new and reworked menu items can prove tricky. Consumers have long grown accustomed to refined grains, and therefore find their palates unfamiliar with the varied flavors and textures whole-grain ingredients can lend to food.

Luckily, an increasing trove of resources exists to help product developers get into the swing of regularly—and effectively—working with whole grains in a wide variety of menu categories. One resource that promises inspiration is a book in the works involving the Whole Grains Council, Boston, as contributing editor. Len Marquart, assistant professor, Department of Food Science & Nutrition, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, along with a handful of colleagues, is working on the book, scheduled for release in 2008, will have information specifically geared toward chefs who want to learn how to create delicious whole-grain dishes. Marquart is an editor of the recently released “Whole Grains and Health” (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), as well as “Whole-Grain Foods in Health and Disease” (AACC International Press, 2002). “Because the needs of foodservice to learn more about whole grains are immediate, however, and this new book is still in the works, the Whole Grains Council is promoting two other short-term options in the meantime,” notes Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies, Whole Grains Council. She highly recommends “Whole Grains Every Day, Every Way” (Clarkson Potter, 2006), a new book by Lorna Sass, for chefs who want a thorough reference on cooking with whole grains. She also notes that, this June, the Whole Grains Council will release a whole-grain resource guide for chefs and foodservice.

In the wake of these emerging resources, it should come as no surprise that the Whole Grains Council is placing emphasis on developing ties to foodservice throughout 2007. “We have several exciting programs for foodservice in the works,” says Harriman, “including a new category of restaurant membership in our organization.” She also notes that their annual conference, “Just Ask for Whole Grains,” Nov. 5 to 7, will have a foodservice theme.

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—Douglas J. Peckenpaugh, Editor



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