

A new year has begun and we are geared up to share with you some of our favorite recipes, as well as to share information on topics of interest that we often get questioned about at our store. One such topic concerns the use of alternate types of flour. Just recently, we had a visit from a reporter from the Daily News Record (our local newspaper) who was interested in writing an article about the rising popularity of alternative flours. We were so impressed with the story by Andrew Jenner that we received permission to share it with our readers in our newsletter. We hope that you will find this article useful:

Baking Outside The Mold: An Introduction To Alternative Flours

Story by Andrew Jenner

Beside the old flour standards (pastry-, bread-, whole wheat-, etc.) on the shelves at Grandma's Pantry in the Shenandoah Heritage Farmers Market sits a diverse contingent of more exotic milled grains: spelt, rye, oat, millet, barley, flaxseed and a dozen or so more. In the 21 years that Brenda Shenk has been running the store, her offering of "alternative" — i.e., non-wheat — flours has grown in both quantity and variety. "I think people are looking at something beyond your typical white bread," said Shenk, who's noticed a significant increase recently in the demand for these alternative flours. Her customers' interest in non-wheat flours is usually health-related, Shenk said, sometimes motivated by a specific allergy like wheat or gluten intolerance, or else a general desire to diversify and fortify a diet. (The flour and baking tips that follow are geared toward the latter — general health — rather than managing food allergies, FYI.)

"If you're already a person who's baking ... it's easy to incorporate these grains into your diet," said Kelly Heatwole, a whole-grain enthusiast who teaches a twice-yearly seminar on the health benefits of milling and baking with alternative flours in the basement of her home just outside Harrisonburg. "The one I like the most and use the most is Kamut, and I use it a lot," said Heatwole.

Kamut, which is higher in protein, amino acids and lipids (and therefore, higher in energy) and lower in carbohydrates than wheat, was developed for commercial production by a Montana farmer in the late 20th century from seeds collected in Egypt by an American soldier in World War II. The grain is thought to have been cultivated in obscurity for centuries by Egyptian farmers, according to Kamut International, which holds a trademark on the grain. Kamut, which became commercially available in 1991, looks like large brown rice and tastes a little bit sweeter than wheat, said Heatwole. She uses Kamut flour in recipes as a direct one-for-one substitution for wheat flour, and often bakes Kamut bread and muffins.

Abbey Whetzel, owner of Staff of Life Baking Company, said Kamut has become so popular that it was sold out everywhere all summer. Whetzel, who finally got her hands on some Kamut flour in November, suggested baking with a 50-50 blend of Kamut and high-gluten wheat flour. One thing to keep in mind when baking with Kamut and other alternative flours, she said, is that they are almost always whole-grain flours. This means they'll generally absorb more water than regular white flour. When substituting these for white flours, don't hesitate to add a little extra water to achieve an appropriate consistency, Whetzel suggested.

Another relatively common alternative flour is spelt, a close relative of wheat that's enjoying a resurgence (it's been under cultivation for millennia, however) as alternative flours gain in popularity. "It has an interesting, nuttier, earthier flavor [than wheat]," said Whetzel, adding that spelt's similarity to wheat makes it one of the easiest alternative flours for a baker to experiment with. Whetzel said that spelt flour can be used as a direct substitution for wheat flour in baking recipes. Because spelt doesn't have quite as much gluten as wheat, a spelt bread dough has to be kneaded longer than regular dough

(gluten is what allows a dough to form bubbles and rise as the yeast gives off carbon dioxide — wheat's high gluten content predisposes it to easy rising, and is one of the reasons that wheat pretty much became the default bread ingredient throughout much of the world). Kneading is somewhat analogous to bubble gum chewing, Whetzel said, allowing the gluten in the dough to develop the elasticity for bubble-forming. Be careful to knead gently, though, she cautioned, as too much or too vigorous kneading can damage the gluten and defeat the whole purpose.

A third option — rye flour — offers both baking challenge and, if you like the distinctive flavor, reward, said Whetzel. She recommended that beginners practice with other flours first, but said it's her favorite flour to use. Again, getting bread dough to rise is one of the tricky parts of baking with rye flour. If a bread dough contains more than 20 percent rye flour, Whetzel said, it won't rise unless you use a sourdough culture (complicated chemical reasons at work here, involving pentosans and amylases and other organic compounds that play under-appreciated roles in kitchen processes). Alternately, a baker could blend rye (less than 20 percent) and high-gluten wheat flour. Rye bread, which is rich in vitamins and minerals, stays fresh longer than wheat bread, Whetzel said. Heatwole said she's noticed a change for the better in her health and wellness since she began baking exclusively with whole-grain flours. "It's real food," said Heatwole, who bakes two to four loaves of bread a week with alternative flours. "It's a real bread product made with whole grains that haven't been processed at all."

[Thanks to Mr. Jenner for granting permission to reproduce the above article. (Daily News-Record, January 7, 2009)]

Here is a recipe that may be of interest to those of you who would like to try an alternative bread flour. All of the following ingredients, as well as many other flours and grains, can be found at Grandma's Pantry. Happy baking!

Recipe for Kamut bread:

2 ¾ cups hot water

1 ½ teaspoon sea salt

1/3 cup honey

¼ cup canola oil

¼ teaspoon cream of tartar

1 tablespoon active dry yeast

6-7 cups Kamut flour

Mix first five ingredients together. Sprinkle in yeast and stir until dissolved. Add five cups of flour, one cup at a time, adding flour until dough forms a ball. Knead dough on floured surface until smooth, approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Place dough in a large, oiled bowl, turning until dough is covered in oil. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let rise until double in bulk, about an hour.

Return dough to floured surface and knead until air bubbles are removed. Divide dough in half and place in greased pans. Let rise until double, about 30-40 minutes.

Bake at 400 degrees for five minutes then reduce heat to 350 degrees and bake for about 25 minutes.

—From ehow.com

“So, whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (I Cor. 10:31)