

GROWING GRAINS IN THE HIGH DESERT

Flood irrigation in the moonlight at Big Wheel Farm. Photo courtesy of Metate Mill Co-op.

REESTABLISHING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

By Jessica & André Kempton

"Basically, I want to grow things you do not need to refrigerate," Daniel Hutchison says of the inspiration for Big Wheel Farm. "There are people who produce vegetables, meat, eggs, and dairy very well but no one was really doing grains. And grains are a cornerstone of our diet." Raised in Questa, Hutchison established his sixty-acre farm farther north, in Costilla, in order to fill what he had come to perceive as a void in the regional agricultural system: growing grains and pulses (beans, lentils, and peas).

We first met Hutchison shortly after he purchased his land in 2019. When André approached him and asked if he would grow White Sonora wheat for us to use at Wild Leaven Bakery, Hutchison "figured that it's good as anything."

White Sonora wheat is a preindustrial grain brought by the Spanish to what are now the borderlands of Sonora and Arizona. In collaboration with André, Chris Pieper, and Jim Avery, Hutchison acquired his first one thousand pounds of White Sonora wheat seeds from Arizona.

In addition to this drought-tolerant grain, Hutchison grows lentils, field peas, quinoa, buckwheat, bolita beans, naked oats, and platinum hard white wheat. Due to its naturally milder, sweeter flavor, platinum hard white wheat is used for breads, tortillas, flatbreads, and some Asian noodles; White Sonora wheat's buttery yellow color and sweet flavor make for delicious tortillas, cookies, and breads. We use Hutchinson's White Sonora wheat and platinum hard white wheat flours in making our sourdough bread, pastries, and cookies.





Daniel Hutchison and André Kempton inspect the harvest at Big Wheel Farm. Photo courtesy of Metate Mill.

"Wheat is one of the easiest things to grow, but marketing it is another menagerie of machines," Hutchison says. "Most people don't buy wheat berries even though they're perfectly edible. Wheat is generally applied to the food system as flour, so it's been another enterprise to have the mill running again and figure out the art of milling and packaging."

The grain production, milling, and distribution are handled through the Metate Mill Co-op, which Hutchison created in 2020. As a continuation of the now-closed Sangre de Cristo Agricultural Producers Cooperative (SCAPC) that produced organic wheat in northern New Mexico for almost three decades, Metate Mill Co-op aims to provide power-packed foods for local people, reward small farmers who produce staple grains, and build food sovereignty in northern New Mexico.

"If I must sell my wheat into the commodities market, I will compete with big farmers. There is no way I can compete economically in the system as it exists," Hutchison says. "You have to create a parallel system, and that's what's great about what you and André are doing. You are sourcing very deliberately and valuing that well above and beyond what your average value of wheat will be in the commodity market."

Located in the southern tip of the largest alpine valley in the world, the San Luis Valley, Costilla's dryness and elevation offers Hutchison favorable weather conditions to grow his wheat without the use of highly specialized equipment.

"Wheat needs about half the water that alfalfa needs. Here, it is not subject to many diseases since we live in a dry place," the high-desert farmer explains. "At the elevation where the farm is, it creates premium wheat, the finest wheat you can grow in the world."

For irrigation, Hutchison considers himself "lucky to be located on a good ditch that generally delivers a lot of water." "Our mayordomo is excellent; he makes the best of drought years," he says.

However, Hutchison also has to work with farm soil with no structure and very little organic matter. "If I were to add nitrogen in my field organically, there is no available organic feedlot or broiler house nearby where I can get manure. I must make all of that on my farm using cover crops and soil life because I'm in the middle of this desert," he says. For him, it is not cost-effective to transport manure from somewhere else.

To build his farm soil over time, Hutchison is transitioning from a standard organic farming model to an organic regenerative approach. He wants to create a more holistic and sustainable ecosystem on his

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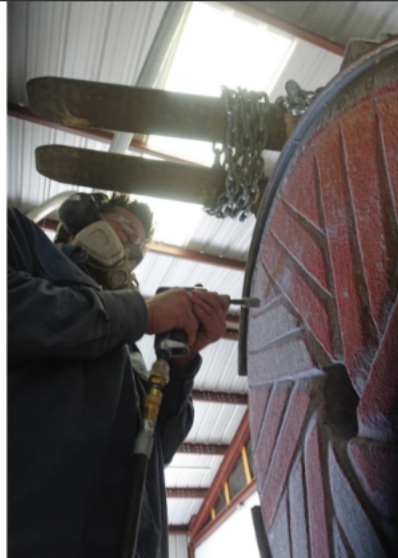
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Top left: Granite millstone at Metate Mill. Right: Daniel Hutchison dresses the granite millstone at Metate Mill. Photos courtesy of Metate Mill. Bottom left: Summer campers help irrigate the wheat at Big Wheel Farm, photo courtesy of Vida Day Camp.

farm by utilizing cover crops, incorporating animals into the land, making use of more human labor and planting perennial fruits. Hutchison states that all these efforts "will make for less labor, more abundant crops, more efficient irrigation, and more dividends in terms of the farm business."

Another challenge Hutchison faces is the absence of agricultural infrastructure in his area. "[Costilla] is a place that has a strong agriculture tradition but does not have a modern food distribution system to supply farms of any scale. There is no place where I can bring my grains and sell them. So I must set up the supply chain myself," he says.

Tracing his farm experience to his youth work as the executive director of Localogy, a Questa-based nonprofit whose mission is to move people and communities from passive consumption to being active producers of local livelihoods and culture. Hutchison states, "The school programs and the summer camps I do always have an agricultural component to help students in their character development, to raise awareness of the food web, and to teach them practical skills."

Over the years, he has hosted various partners and projects at Big Wheel Farm, such as a local charter school that maintains a community garden during the fall and spring. Localogy's residential summer

camp, Sangre de Cristo Youth Ranch, harvests crops to sell at the Questa Farmers Market or to use in preparing their meals.

Hutchison partners with the Taos Farm to School program, whose staff test-bakes for school lunches with local flour, and produces flour for Cloud Cliff Bakery and Intergalactic Bread Company. He has also collaborated with his mentor and longtime SCAPC president Domingo Gallegos, whom he credits for donating some of his farm equipment.

Despite the challenges Hutchison may face, this LOR Foundation and Taos Community Foundation grant recipient is grateful for his support system and for those who understand the value of local food and are fighting against economic disincentives to small farming. Together with his local partners, he is working to reestablish a regionally self-sufficient food system.

Speaking of his overall farming philosophy, Hutchison states, "If you are what you eat, and you are a farmer, you are literally making your friends. So, what we choose to embody in terms of the calories we consume and how we produce these calories is the solution to climate change, fresh water, pollution, soil erosion. Agriculture has implications for fair labor, land use, and the entire ecosystem. You are what you eat. Be a local!"

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