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Pancakes From Perennial Wheatgrass Grain

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From **GENE LOGSDON**

I hope I don't sound too self-important when I announce an historic moment in our kitchen. Carol just made pancakes with flour from a new and startling source. Wes Jackson, the celebrated plant geneticist, author, farmer (and years ago a fairly good football player), has been experimenting for decades now with the bold idea that perennial grains can be developed to take the place of annual grains, thus revolutionizing agriculture by making it unnecessary for so many millions of acres to be cultivated annually. I raise my forkful of wheatgrass pancake and I salute you, Mr. Jackson.

This flour has the trademarked name, Kernza TM and comes from selected strains of wild intermediate wheatgrass grain, which Jackson and his staff at the Land Institute near Salina, Kansas are crossing with annual wheat varieties to breed a commercially practical perennial grain. The flour makes a light dough and the pancakes taste just a tad sweeter than ordinary wheat flour. It is Jackson's hope that within ten years, he and his staff can develop Kernza TM for use in commercially manufactured foods. It is exceptionally high in some nutrients known to be important to human health and deficient in many modern diets: Omega 3 fatty acids, calcium, lutein, and betaine. It is particularly high in folate, important for preventing stroke, cancer, heart disease and infertility. Folate is also believed to be important for maintaining good mental health in old age. My mind generally glazes over when reading about nutrient values of various foods so that folate might come in handy. To me the important thing is that for once something that is good for me tastes good too. Kernza TM does not have enough gluten in it to use alone for leavened breads, but as more and more crosses are made with it and regular wheat, all things are possible.

The work of developing perennial grains at the Land Institute is enormously fascinating, involving growing, harvesting, recording, classifying and then crossing thousands of individual plants. Annual plants obviously had to have developed from their wild perennial ancestors. Now it is a matter of reversing that process in a way that results in a perennial that yields as much as today's annuals.

Perennial wheat is not the only grain being developed. Much progress has been made breeding up wild perennial sunflowers toward eventual perennial commercial varieties. The vision of an agriculture where we don't have to tear up millions of acres of soil every year, saving all that money and fuel energy, is most alluring. You need to be around Wes hardly five minutes to get as excited as he is about the prospects. Other institutions are catching the fever. Michigan State University has started a program in developing perennial wheat. Chinese scientists are intensely interested in perennial rice. I can't think of any development so significant to a truly sustainable agriculture.

If you want to find out more about Kernza™, the Land Institute, 2440 E. Water Well Rd., Salina, KS 67401 puts out a lively quarterly report on its activities. I find The Land Report is especially interesting because not only is the genetic research going on there extremely significant to the future of agriculture, but Wes always includes articles and pictures about how art reverberates through the science of farming. I don't know any other scientific journal that does that and it heartens me greatly. I think that farming is more art than it is science. The taste of wheatgrass pancakes is one more proof.

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