

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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Tall Grass Prairie Bakery

In 1981, the seeds of a vision were beginning to grow into what has now become a nationally recognized enterprise that builds community, impacts the local economy in several ways, and models food system justice.

It all began when a group of people in Winnipeg's Wolseley neighbourhood began to dream together about what "community" meant for them and their families. Through long conversations about what it would mean to share lives, build rooted relationships, live in a spirit of peace and faith, and integrate respectful treatment of the Earth, the decision was made to create the Grain of Wheat Church Community. However, this was not to be just about church, this was to be a space through which to continuously explore how members of the community could work together.

The Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company was born out of these conversations. Original discussions focused on finding a mechanism through which to bake bread for the whole church. Thus, the first Bread Co-op in the neighbourhood was formed through humble beginnings as people baked every Saturday

night in a local rented kitchen. In true community spirit, many neighbourhood people joined as well, earning "sweat equity" points and helping out in whatever ways they could. In an effort to create a pricing structure that created access for those with fewer resources, those who were financially better-off were invited to pay a little more for their →



➔ bread, so that others could pay less.

To understand what the Bread Co-op was committed to doing in terms of economic and food justice, it is important to remember that in the late 1980s grain farmers were receiving the lowest grain prices Canada had ever seen. Tracking the distribution chain of a loaf of bread, Bread Co-op members discovered that farmers were getting about 2 cents for every 50-cent loaf that was sold. Members of the Co-op were convinced that if they purchased ingredients directly from farmers and then milled and baked the bread themselves, they could pay more than 2 cents a loaf. Of course there were many questions regarding this approach: “Is a just and healthy food system possible? Is it possible to run a viable business driven by ethical values? Can we form stronger and more direct urban/ rural links?”

In exploring these questions, developing the Bread Co-op, and building relationships with other partners in the community (the Mennonite Central Committee, The Land Institute, many Hutterite colonies, and the local Wolseley Harvest Collective) many different ideas and ventures were considered. Clarity emerged around a desire to establish a local, ethical food operation that would respond to needs of the community, producers, and the land. As a result, four members of the Grain of Wheat Church Community and another individual interested in social and employment justice decided to open Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company. Their dedication to paying a fair price to farmers meant Tall Grass would sell more expensive bread, but they were confident that consumers would be willing to pay a higher price for a just cause.

However, the financiers were not convinced that consumers would pay \$2 for a loaf when the going rate 50 cents, and they refused this “outrageous”

initiative a business start-up loan. Not to be refused, and building on the strong neighbourhood connections already built, money was loaned from people in the community. Opening Day soon arrived, and in preparation Tall Grass baked about 30 loaves of bread, 2 dozen muffins and 12 cinnamon buns. When they opened their doors at 10 o’clock, there were 200 people from the community lined up at the door. They had made careful plans for failure, and strategized how they could exist selling 12 loaves of bread a day, but they had not given any thought to what would happen if they were extremely successful.

Apparently a need had been filled, and there was a community yearning for more connections to the farmers that grew the grains for their bread, and to the people who baked it. In 2002, a second branch of the bakery, and in 2006 the Grass Roots Prairie Kitchen were opened at the Forks Market, one of Winnipeg’s major tourist destinations. The growth of Tall Grass has significantly impacted producers and local workers, as the overall company currently supports five farm families and employs about 50 people.

The owners have learned that you can’t get rich when fair wages are paid to both farmers and staff, but you can make a decent living. One of the owners, Tabitha, says that they continue to ask questions in looking to be a good community business with integrity regarding labour, producers, and the environment. These “outrageous” questions, coupled with a few “outrageous” ideas and some risks, continue to contribute to Winnipeg’s local and sustainable food economy, the creation of local jobs, and continue to foster connections between producers and consumers.