

## **Workshop Title: Growing Breakfast–Plant, Harvest, and Process Rolled Oats**

Speaker(s) & their title(s): George Wright, Castor River Farm

### Summary

*With conventional bulk grains, the producer only gets a small fraction of the 'food dollar' on a food product, as retailers, and all the hands in between production and consumption take the bulk share. The key to breaking out of this system is the direct marketing of organic grains. Taking a suggestion from a friend, George tried rolled oats, and now it's 90% of his sales at market. This talk focused on oats, but Castor River grows a variety of grain, along with raising pastured pork, poultry and beef.*

### Direct Marketing

Typically without direct marketing, organic oats will go for \$350/ton, which works out to 0.15/lb. However, at a farmer's market, you can charge \$0.50/cup, which is about \$2/lb (and \$6,300/ton). The key is a good farmer's market.

### A Year at The Farm:

The ground is prepared the year before, as oats go in first thing as soon as he can get his seed drill to work the ground (no matter how cold). He seeds at about 150lbs/acre, a hullless variety called Gehl, and does a return pass in the opposite direction to ensure good seeding. Currently does not own a roller, so rents it for \$4/acre to ensure good soil to seed contact; recommends talking to 'old conventional guys' for borrowing equipment. (Also recommends being a regular at auctions, and spending time to trol online auctions)

After planting, uses a small glass window in the field to gauge the timeliness of emergence: as soon as there is emergence under the window, it's his cue to cultivate the field (as it's just before actual emergence in the field). This usually happens anywhere from 4 days to 2 weeks after planting, depending on the season. Uses an 18ft Pony Harrow for this. At 2-leaf stage, he'll do another cultivation pass with the same tool. At 4-leaf stage, he clips a few seed boxes onto the harrows and broadcasts clover right after the third cultivation to underseed the crop.

For harvest, uses a swather and an old pick-up combine (auction-find for \$1,200) which removes grain hairs and weeds in a scour-clean that polishes the grain (newer combines do not have this feature). If the grain coming out of the combine is too wet, he spreads it out on a tarp and keeps it in the sun for 2 days (covering at night). Humidity can be a guessing game because moisture metres do not have a hullless oat setting, but would aim for 12%.

### Processing:

For cleaning: has a couple of options. A fanning mill, which is hand-cranked but could

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be fit with a motor. Has a scalp screen and a siv screen, for bigger and smaller chaff, plus has a blower. More commonly, uses a 3-screen grain cleaner (Hance). In the beginning he sent samples of his grain to the company that made the cleaner, because the professionals there are better equipped to recommend the type and size for cleaning. Discovered this was quite the science, and best left to people who know what they're doing.

In his first year, 90% of the oats cleaned had no hulls. Nowadays, with 6 passes in the cleaner, the oats contain only 2% hulls, which is good enough for market.

To roll oats, uses a roller with a diesel engine to achieve variable speeds. Discovered that when it is set too fast, the roller will actually cut the grain, and such steel cut oats were added to his product line. Set at the right speed, the results are perfect for rolled oats. Uses hand-rollers at market to create interactive stand, customers' kids love it.

Rolled oats in this manner are raw, and educating the public is required when selling. Conventional oatmeal is steamed and toasted during processing, and its shelf life is virtually forever. With rolled oats from Castor River, need to remind people to refrigerate or freeze them, as they will go bad.

He rolls in advance of the market, and each week needs to roll about 8-10 buckets, which takes 3-4 hours.

For storing at the farm, uses 4'x4'x4' cubes on skids loaded in to an 18-wheeler, with an aerator to move air through cubes.

Rotation:

Generally, oats need to follow something that did not have gluten, as rogue seeds can be a big problem (the gluten-free market is important, and takes precaution of cleaning his combine, including the grain pan, with a 2" water pump when necessary). Generally, he'll have a year in oats, followed by any gluten grain, then wheat, then two years in clover (only mowed, not for hay), then back to oats.