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BREADS • SWEETGOODS • SNACKS • TORTILLAS • PIZZA

French Meadow
revolutionizes
bread baking



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Remember when bread was considered the staff of life? One Minneapolis-based bakery is doing everything in its power to return bread to the top of the food chain by manufacturing and marketing functional breads that are chock full of healthful ingredients.

By **Keith Seiz**, editor

The demise of the bread industry has been greatly exaggerated. Yes, the category is not performing like it used to and unit sales are slightly declining. However, questionable research that reports 40% of Americans are eating less bread than a year ago simply do not hold up when looking at data from supermarket scanners. Instead of a mass consumer exodus away from the bread category, consumers are merely looking for new products in the bread aisle. And, number one on their wish lists are premium breads that not only offer great taste but also provide healthful benefits. This shift is one of the many reasons why Minneapolis-based French Meadow Bakery has consistently grown its sales by 15% or more for the past 20 years.

Returning bread to its proper position as the staff of life has been Lynn Gordon's ambition since she founded French Meadow 20 years ago. "The products that French Meadow sells are always born of my personal needs as a consumer," Gordon says. "Generally, they are products that are not available, and products that I want."

French Meadow's four functional breads are Men's Bread, Women's Bread, HealthSeed Spelt Bread and Healthy Hemp Bread.





Mike Simon, bakery production manager, conducts a quality check on ingredients found in French Meadow's breads. From left to right, starting at the top: roasted soy beans, pumpkin seeds, rice bran, hemp nuts, cracked wheat, cranberries, sesame seeds, brown flax seeds, oat bran, hemp flour, poppy seeds, sunflower seeds, fava beans, millet, dates, quinoa, spelt kernels, amaranth, lentil, soy grits, barley, brown rice, pea concentrate, and peas.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JEFFREY GROSSCUP

Gordon's first foray into bread baking was formulating a loaf that could conform to her macrobiotic diet, which prohibited her from consuming breads loaded with yeast and sugar. Baking a great tasting bread is difficult enough, but doing so without yeast and sweeteners posed immense challenges. However, French Meadow overcame these challenges by incorporating natural leavening and sprouted grains into its baking processes. Today, the bakery still uses these same processes, but on a larger scale.

In its 20-year existence, French Meadow has moved from Gordon's kitchen, to the night shift at a cheesecake factory, to a 25,000 sq.ft. bakery in Minneapolis.

French Meadow's line of breads can be purchased from the freezer case in both natural stores and conventional supermarkets nationwide. Although its largest customers are Whole Foods and Wild Oats, its products have found freezer space in Safeway, Publix, Wegman's and Kroger. "In a conventional supermarket, we work best in a store within a store concept," John Lough, French Meadow's national sales man-



After proofing, loaves of French Meadow's breads are rolled into a series of rack ovens.

ager, says. "It does not work to place our products in the regular freezer case."

Selling bread from the freezer case has been one of many challenges that French Meadow has faced since it was founded in 1984. However, the company has overcome these challenges by sticking to a simple business plan: provide consumers with a great tasting bread that contains a laundry list of healthful ingredients.

Bread without yeast?

French Meadow's dedication to enhancing the value of the bread category has not come without its challenges. Number one among these challenges is the bakery's insistence on manufacturing certified organic loaves of bread without bakers yeast.

French Meadow's Minneapolis bakery is yeast free for two reasons. First, the bakery believes that the natural leavening process creates a better tasting product that is both naturally sour and naturally sweet. Second, Gordon says that bakers yeast creates an imbalance in intestinal flora, and does not allow for important nutrients to be digested. "The natural leavening process breaks down the complex carbohydrates and the glutens, rendering the bread more digestible and the nutri-

ents more easily absorbed," Gordon says.

Although the natural leavening process has its obvious nutritional and taste benefits, most wholesale bakers stray away from this process due to its time constraints. "Instead of being proofed and ready in 45 minutes, our process is spread in a cycle over three days. The dough must adapt to a seasonal cycle to allow for a consistent product year round." Mike Simon, French Meadow's bakery production manager, says.

To prepare its doughs for bread baking, French Meadow uses a starter that dates back almost 20 years. The company mixes this starter with stone ground flour and allows it to rest overnight in a controlled temperature environment. After resting, the dough is divided, moulded and proofed three to six hours before baking. The company also uses various sprouted grain mixes in its line of functional breads. For example, the company's Men's Bread uses a sprouted grain mix of organic quinoa, organic amaranth, organic alfalfa, organic spelt, organic kamut, organic barley and organic oats. These grains soak in cold water from 48 to 56 hours. After soaking, the bakery grinds the grains and adds them to the mix.

Functional foods

The ingredient listing reads as follows: Organic whole wheat flour, organic low fat soy flour, organic wheat flour, filtered water, organic flaxseed, organic rice bran, oat fiber, soy germ isoflavone concentrate, organic sesame seeds, dried cranberries, organic roasted unsalted soy beans, sprouted organic quinoa, sprouted organic amaranth, sprouted organic alfalfa, sprouted organic spelt, sprouted organic kamut, sprouted organic wheat, sprouted organic barley, sprouted organic oats, unrefined sea salts.

The product, Women's Bread with Soy Isoflavones, is one of four functional breads baked at French Meadow's bakery. And, although these breads don't share shelf space with Wonder bread and Sunbeam bread, they are stealing market share from traditional pan bread brands by offering consumers a bread that packs a nutritional punch.

The foundation of French Meadow's product line is its four functional breads: Women's Bread, HealthSeed Spelt Bread, Healthy Hemp Sprouted Bread and Men's Bread. Besides being unique in their names, these four breads also are unique in their functional benefits and the ingredients in their formulas.



From left to right:
John Lough,
 national sales
 manager;
Mike Simon,
 bakery
 production man-
 ager; **Lynn**
Gordon, presi-
 dent; **Steve**
Shapiro, vice
 president; **Maria**
Joiner, office
 manager; and **Nick**
McCreary, manag-
 ing partner of
 Organic Concepts.

French Meadow's first foray into functional foods was the creation of its Women's Bread. Similar to most of the company's new products, Women's Bread was created to satiate the needs of Gordon. Two events in her life prompted the creation of a bread catered to women. First, Gordon's mother passed away at the age of 42 from ovarian cancer. When Gordon approached a similar age her children and doctors urged her to get a hysterectomy to lessen the chances of Gordon getting cancer. However, Gordon did not want to take the hormone replacement therapy that followed the procedure. "I researched and discovered that soy isoflavones were a good source of phytoestrogen, and I knew I needed estrogen," Gordon says.

In lieu of hormone replacement therapy, French Meadow formulated a loaf of bread that contains 512 mgs of soy isoflavones, which Gordon says lessens the severity of symptoms associated with menopause. Soy isoflavones also are ideal for lowering cholesterol and supporting a healthy heart. The company also uses organic flaxseed, organic sprouted grains and organic cranberries in the formula. These ingredients support healthy skin and increase the metabolism of fats.

After the women's bread caught on, Gordon realized that there was a nationwide market for functional foods

that support healthy lifestyles and specific dietary needs, such as a diabetic diet, an intolerance to wheat, and the growing popularity of low-carbohydrate diets.

The bakery's next bread launch in the functional food category was its HealthSeed Spelt Bread. The company launched this bread after its consumers began requesting a bread that would provide the protein and fiber content of a nutritional bar without the sweeteners. To formulate this product the company turned to flaxseed, pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, and sprouted legumes and grains to deliver a bread with five grams of dietary fiber and six grams of protein per slice. This bread also contains high levels of omega-3 (346 mgs) and omega-6 (1,035 mgs) essential fatty acids.

The popularity of this bread has propelled it to a national stage, and it was recently recognized as the official bread of the *Fat Flush Plan*, a best-selling diet book.

Heart-healthy hemp

Although French Meadow's Women's Bread and HealthSeed Spelt Bread spiced up the bread category with unique, functional products, the company's next foray into functional bread proved how distinctive the company really is. Healthy Hemp Sprouted Bread uses hemp seeds and HEMPO-

LA Hempseed Flour and a combination of more common flours and grains to formulate a bread chock full of nutrients. According to the company, each slice of bread is rich in protein (7 grams), dietary fiber (6 grams), minerals, vitamin E, iron and essential fatty acids such as omega-3 (250 mgs), omega-6 (860 mgs) and omega-9 (380 mgs). The omega essential fatty acids have been shown to promote heart health and suppress tumor growth in breast and colon cancer.

"Hemp bread sales have gone through the roof in the last two years," Lough states. "It's one of the most heart-healthy breads on the market." Despite the bread's health benefits, convincing mainstream supermarkets to carry the product has presented its challenges. "When you really state that the bread is all about nutrition, that it's high in omega-3, omega-6 and omega-9, then our customers start turning the corner," Lough says. "And, when they (customers) try it and taste it, they all love it."

It also does not hurt to have celebrity supporters of the product, most notably George Washington. Each package of Healthy Hemp Sprouted Bread features the Washington quote: "Make the most of hemp seed, sow it everywhere!"

Similar to Women's Bread, Healthy Hemp Sprouted bread also has gained favor on the best-sellers list by being