

# Producer OF THE *Month*

DECEMBER 2022



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

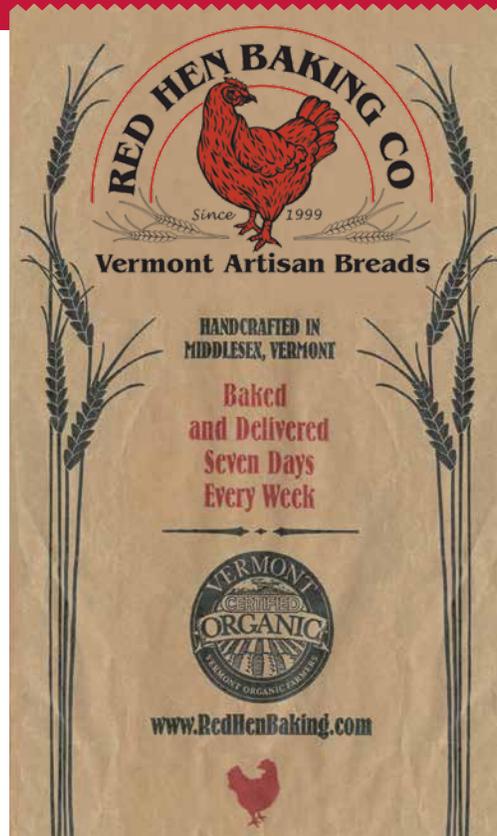
# Producer <sup>OF</sup> THE *Month*

By Ruth Garbus



**R**ed Hen is a bakery located in Middlesex, VT, dedicated to bringing delicious artisanal breads to their local community. Sounds simple, right? But the reality involves so much more. Randy George and Liza Cain have delved into each aspect of their business with an enormous amount of care and integrity, from local agriculture to workers' rights. As a result they've contributed a lot more than beautiful, nutritious food to our area. If there's one thing you take away from this article, it should be that there is a lot of overlap between great food, a healthy environment, and a flourishing community.

Randy attended Marlboro College in the '90s, where he started his experimentations with naturally leavened breads in earnest (though he actually majored in theater). After some moves back and forth from the West Coast, he and Liza moved back to her home state (she's originally from Waitsfield, VT) with the intention of opening a bakery, which they did in 1999. Now, over twenty years later, they sell about 2,000 loaves a day



wholesale, entirely to cooperatively or independently-owned businesses, and also have a café attached to the bakery in Middlesex that serves as a vibrant community hub.

## The Grain

Red Hen has been part of a great change in Vermont over the last two decades. When Randy first set out, the idea that he could ever make any quantity of bread out of 100% Vermont-grown grain, let alone milled fresh in his own bakery, seemed completely impossible. But today, Red Hen's 100% Whole Wheat and Kingdom Rye varieties are just that, and 90% of the flour for the rest of their breads comes from within a 150-mile radius.

Randy's intention from the beginning was to source grain, mill flour, and sell to customers as locally as



possible. They were also organic right from the start, and got their official organic certification in 2000. Randy had been introduced to the concept of sourcing a few years before, when he managed a small organic bakery in Portland, OR. In the early days of Red Hen, he purchased what he could from the only two farms that grew small amounts of grain in-state, and the rest came from as nearby as possible.

In the early 2010s, an agronomist named Dr. Heather Darby began her career at the UVM Extension School. Randy speaks of her as a farmer's hero. Whereas Heather's ultimate goal is sustainability and environmental health, and Randy's is to bake delicious bread, when it comes to agriculture, the path to those ends is the same.

You see, grains can be an important part of crop rotation, cover cropping, and intercropping—all of which increase the organic matter in soil, thereby helping to lessen runoff of fertilizers and/or pesticides into lakes and streams. Runoff creates terrible environmental

*Dr. Heather Darby in the center looking at test plots with farmer Loic Dewavrin at his farm in Les Cedres, QC. This farm grows and mills about 70% of the wheat used at Red Hen.*



consequences, so growing grains can have a direct impact on improving farming's impact on the natural environment, like Lake Champlain and other beautiful places in our beloved Green Mountain State. There is also evidence to show that increased organic matter in soil positively impacts climate change through carbon sequestration. Encouraging and supporting Vermont farmers in growing high-quality local grains, therefore, is one part of an overall effort to improve the environmental impact of Vermont agriculture. Connecting farmers with bakeries like Red Hen has been an important way to ensure these farmers are able to sell their crops to happy customers.

Over the last decade Heather has initiated numerous projects to reach her goals. Randy spoke of three in particular that have had a huge impact on grain growers. First, she and Jack Lazor (the now-deceased founder of Butterworks Farm dairy, RIP) started the Northern Grain Growers Association, which has allowed grain growers and bakers to increase their knowledge, share skills, collaborate, and form other invaluable connections. Randy has been on the board of the NGGA for years. Another endeavor started by

Heather is the Borderview Research Farm. The farm grows hundreds, if not thousands, of test plots in order to study different plant varieties, soil effects, and more. The information they've gathered and shared through that project has been invaluable to all farmers, including grain growers. And the third contribution she has made is the grain-testing lab at UVM, which is an incredible resource available for free to farmers all over the world. It provides yet more information that helps farmers understand their crops, like protein levels and the potential presence of toxins. Vermont is not the ideal climate for growing grain—there are still challenges. But the result of all of Heather's work is that there are a lot more farmers growing grain in Vermont than when Red Hen began.

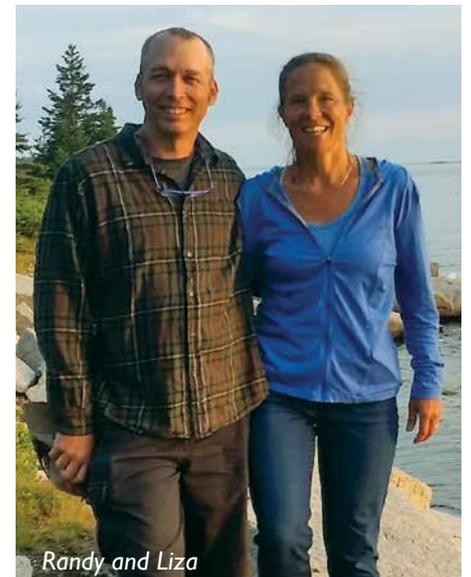
Randy's level of knowledge about farming is vast, matched only by his enthusiasm. "In a way, I wish I was a farmer," he said. No part of the life cycle of a loaf of bread, from the field to the shelf, is less important than the other, he says. He considers it to be part of Red Hen's role to support grain farmers however they can. And going through about five or six tons of flour and grain per year—or 250 acres' worth—means that Red Hen

really can play an important part in the agricultural health of our state.

## Employee Advocacy

There are now over fifty employees at Red Hen, including fourteen full-time bread bakers. Liza is passionate about supporting the Red Hen staff to the best of her ability. Back in 1999, it didn't occur to her that starting a bakery also meant creating a workplace. It thrilled her to be able to build a business that would support staff and their families. They pay a living wage, offer great benefits, and have fostered a healthy culture and community. As a result of Liza's inspired care, many of Red Hen's staff have been working there for five, ten, or even twenty years.

They've also supported wage-earners across the state. Red Hen passionately supported the successful effort to pass Paid Sick Days legislation, and even testified at the statehouse. They've been such a vocal advocate of workers' rights that, a few years ago, the minimum wage increase was actually signed into law by the governor at the bakery. The next frontier is Paid Family Leave, which as of yet has not passed, but Red Hen remains active in that effort. More broadly, Red Hen contributes thousands of dollars every



*Randy and Liza*

year to various charities, and Liza herself works part time as a domestic violence court advocate, which she has done since the bakery began.

## The Rise of Bread

The Serious Home Baker (SHB) movement pre-dates the pandemic, but it really took off during the early days of COVID-19, fueled by more time at home and the shortage of commercial yeast. (The Bread Bakers Guild of America, which anyone can join, has a category of membership called SHB.) Randy said it's not unusual for home bakers to be just as great as pros like himself. But he did have a couple pieces of advice to offer folks who may not be so devoted. One is to not overwork the dough. At the classes he teaches in Fairfax, VT, Randy guides his students to "mix without breaking a sweat." (Mixing is the professional term for kneading.) And the other is to take good care of the starter—it needs to be fed twice a day, every day, and it should never rise for more than twelve hours. Otherwise it will develop off flavors, including too much sourness. Following both of these tips will allow the delicate tastes of the flour and fermentation to harmonize nicely, and enable a tender texture.

The discussion of sour flavors led to an interesting tidbit: Red Hen doesn't use the word "sourdough" in any of its marketing. Why? Because what many people think of when they hear the word sourdough is actually "San Francisco sourdough," which tastes truly sour, and isn't to many people's liking. For whatever reason, the term sourdough became synonymous with this super-sour version of naturally leavened bread. What Red Hen bakes is European-style sourdough, which has a more balanced flavor, and allows the nuanced sweetness of the grains and subtle tang of natural leavening to shine through.

*The bakers' hands are a critical part of every part of the baking process at Red Hen.*



For the fourteen full-time bread bakers at Red Hen, their craft is not mindless, monotonous work. Repetitive, yes, but at every stage they must pay attention to the dough, which literally has a life of its own. Naturally leavened bread uses natural yeast found in the flour and the air, a method that dates back at least 5,000 years. Building the flavor and texture of bread takes a long time; how you handle the dough is of the utmost importance. As they write on their website, "This method of slow fermentation produces a complexity of flavor, a chewy texture, helps the bread to keep longer, and even adds to its nutritive value."

## The Business of Bread

Red Hen delivers their freshly baked breads everyday. Their Sprouternickel and Miche varieties stay on the shelf for more than a day, but all the other loaves that you see on the shelf were baked that morning, and getting them there is always a challenge. As Randy described it, he basically took an urban model, where bread might be delivered to two dozen markets in the span of just a few square blocks, and tried to make it fit here, where the same number of shops could be spread out

over hundreds of miles. They deliver about 80% themselves, and the other 20%, which goes to farther-afield markets like our Co-op, is distributed by various delivery services. Brattleboro used to seem too far away for us to be a customer. But, we approached Red Hen around 2010, and went on to become one of their biggest accounts. Deliveries used to come seven days a week by 10am, but unfortunately the delivery service industry changed during COVID, and as a result, we now get deliveries just six days a week, and the orders arrive around noon.

Randy and Liza expressed deep appreciation for the robust food-co-operative economy in our area. Their top six retailers are cooperative businesses, and over the last couple years they've pulled out of all chain stores. Originally Randy thought that the business would need to include some of these corporate entities, but the co-ops in Vermont and New Hampshire, plus independent stores, have supported them incredibly well over the years. Randy also explained the difference between dealing with independently-owned markets like ours versus big chain stores. Without dwelling on the details, let it suffice to say that those bigger entities make it very challenging for small operations like Red Hen to do business with them, whether it's issues with deliveries, payments, or ill-fitting requirements. On the other hand, we co-ops do a lot of work to ensure that businesses like Red Hen will thrive so that we can continue to eat their delicious food!



**Check out Red Hen  
Baking Co. premium  
breads in the Grocery  
Department!**