

Now that we are all in lockdown, the effects of COVID-19 have reached nearly every aspect of daily life. A common experience has been panic-buying and hoarding, leading to empty supermarket shelves. This has even impacted the availability of plain white flour on supermarket shelves in the UK and many other countries.

Unlike many other food stuffs, the UK is self-sufficient in flour, producing about 90,000 tonnes every week. Yet, many people are experiencing shortages in supermarkets and shops. In the UK, challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic are being answered by the selfless dedication of many disciplines—including the millers who produce the flour to keep us fed. Every day, the UK bakes up roughly 12 million loaves of bread, two million pizzas, and ten million cakes and biscuits. Approximately one third of all food and drink products sold in a typical UK supermarket contain flour. When all are combined, this requires a daily production of 14,000 tonnes of flour. This, in turn relies upon an infrastructure of millers, engineers and drivers, not to mention adequate supplies of fuel and electricity.

Panic buying upsets the supermarket trolley

Since the first ominous premonitions of the advent of the coronavirus, many UK consumers responded with a wave of panic buying that emptied supermarket aisles of toilet paper. Panic buying then migrated to aisles stocking pasta and pasta

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COVID-19: UK MILLERS WORKING 24/7 TO MEET FLOUR DEMAND

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sauce. Nearly everyone it seemed was anticipating a lockdown and responded by hoarding. Unfortunately, this then became a self-fulfilling prophecy, precipitating shortages where there should have been none.

Flour supplies were likewise hit as demand soared, which soon stripped supermarket shelves bare. However, a shortage of flour was not the problem, as foodservice businesses including McDonalds and Greggs were forced to shut, which greatly reduced demand. However, the shortage of flour on supermarket shelves was a result of shortages in the food chain distribution, which has radically altered. In normal times, with most consumers preferring the convenience of bakery-produced bread, only four percent of the total flour milled in the UK is sold to home bakers through shops and supermarkets. This typically equates to shoppers taking home around two million 1.5kg bags a week.

By contrast, since the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for flour skyrocketed, with UK retail sales of flour up by 145 percent compared to the same time last year. The situation quickly turned surreal when one shameless entrepreneur posted a 1.5kg bag of Waitrose plain white flour on eBay for an asking price of UK £70 (\$86.32) and attracted a dozen bidders.

The vital role of milling during the COVID-19 pandemic

UK millers have responded to soaring flour demand by adding shifts and working 24/7. nabim (The National Association of British and Irish Millers) President, Mr Alex Waugh explained, “UK millers have been working around the clock—genuinely milling flour 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week to double the production of retail flour in an effort to meet demand—some



times for the first time in their history. But merely milling more flour alone has not entirely solved the problem as production has been limited by millers’ ability to pack flour into the small bags sold in retail outlets.”

As demand for flour skyrocketed from both consumers and traditional bakery customers, the UK flour milling industry finds itself facing unprecedented production challenges—while at the same time being subjected to the same rigid COVID-19 precautions faced by all other industries. Fortunately, most modern mills can be operated by a small workforce.

Recently, the dedication and sacrifices made by Britain’s millers to feed our population actually made it onto television news. In particular, Allinson’s mill in Herefordshire was singled out in one broadcast. While as much as 20 percent of mill staff have been sent home to self-isolate, those essential to the production of flour are working 12-hour shifts.