

So you want to be a Miller?

So much to learn – you never stop growing

James Cooper, Milling and Grain's contributing correspondent, examines an industry which brings together the best of craft, science and technology through its commitment to training. It's an industry focused on its future, where employment opportunities are changing and a younger generation is being called upon to join

by James Cooper, MAG Correspondent

There's more to being a miller than a love of bread. There are many different careers within the flour milling industry and many benefits of working in it. In one way or another nearly everyone in the UK purchases flour; it is a significant source of a range of vitamins and minerals and protein. That's quite some super-hero status – that both feeds and nourishes a nation.

Also, vital to the smooth running of mills are engineers, food scientists, nutritionists, laboratory workers, marketers, accountants and hauliers among others. A potential big lure to new recruits is that salaries within the flour milling industry are above the average for food manufacturing and on a par with advanced engineering sectors such as aerospace.

According to industry figures the average salary for a Miller in the UK is UK£35,652 (US\$50,000). It's a sophisticated, technical industry, but one that offers plenty of job opportunities both here in the UK and overseas.

I've taken the opportunity to talk with three representative from different walks of life within the industry to offer their views on milling as a career and the importance they place on training.

A word of warning though; working in a mill all day may arouse a passion for artisan baking!



An educator says ...

Nigel Bennett, Training Manager at UK Flour Millers (formerly NABIM)

Nigel Bennett coordinates the development and delivery of training resources for the flour milling industry.

While his prime responsibility is to the UK milling industry, he also finds that overseas students, and their companies, benefit from the programmes as well, such is the international reputation of the training UK Flour Millers provide.

“Our programme has stood the test of 100 years or more.

“It’s constantly being developed, and it’s been found to work for those companies. Many people will know it as our correspondence course, but I prefer to call it a distance learning programme,” Mr Bennett explains.

Up until about 20 years ago the courses led to UK’s City and Guilds examinations but around that time NABIM took over the examining role from City and Guilds.

Each year the scheme enrolls 500-600 students from around the world, between a third and a half are from the UK.

Each student receives by mail a textbook and a workbook. They submit coursework, and then there’s a written examination in May each year. While the qualifications aren’t formally recognised by UK government because, incredibly, flour milling is too small an industry in this country to fit into any of the existing categories.

However, it is an industry-recognised qualification, not only here but around the world, he adds.

“We train all age groups and we’ve always tried, through the programme, to cater for people of all academic abilities; from people who come with no academic qualifications to graduates,” Mr Bennett says.

“Students must have a reasonable understanding of English, so that can be a challenge.

“Our best overseas customer is Australia and we work with the

Australian Technical Millers Association in the delivery of the programme, but we also have many students from Africa and Southeast Asia.

“In fact, I think, usually we have students from every continent bar, maybe South America and Antarctica. We haven’t found any flour mills in Antarctica yet’, he adds with a wry smile.”

Mr Bennett explains that several times over the years, UK Flour Millers have considered introducing a flour milling apprenticeship.

However, in terms of getting recognition from government for an apprenticeship programme, they simply don’t have the numbers of people. But what they have identified, and their members have been identified, is that there are apprenticeships out there which can contribute greatly to training in milling.

They might be in food production, but they might be in engineering or any related subject, he adds.

The industry engineering behemoths are also heavily behind the training scheme. Both Bühler and Satake are associate members of UK Flour Millers and are fully engaged with their training.

“We have an advanced milling diploma programme which is run every three or so years, for about five to 10 candidates each time, and from UK millers. These are people who have progressed beyond our distance learning programme and are perceived as being key employees for companies in the future,” Mr Bennett explains.

Both the Bühler Training Centre in Switzerland and Campden BRI (which is the UK’s food and drink research body), are partners in the delivery of the programme and in the development of key training resources.

“We’ve also had, for example, dealings with Satake and Bühler in the development of our virtual flour mill, which is the most recent training resource we have developed,” he says.

Much like a ship’s bridge simulator for naval cadets; milling students get to operate a mill safely without breaking machinery or ruining the product. But it really points to the high level of sophistication coming into the industry.

Mr Bennett also observes a shifting demographic. “We’ve recognised that we’ve got an ageing workforce, but certainly over the last five or 10 years I think companies have been more active in recruiting from a younger age group, and therefore there’s been a renewed emphasis on training.”

The job opportunities don’t come around too often, and it’s always been the case that labour turnover has been low in this industry. It’s not for everybody, but people who get into milling really love it and often stay in the industry for life.

“Despite its huge importance, milling is a niche industry with few opportunities, but it’s very rewarding and a great career path, if it’s a good fit for you.”



A Miller says ...

Richard Phipps, 38, Mill Manager, GR Wright & Sons Ltd, UK

“With all the technology in the world, there is still a requirement for a well-trained, technical Miller,” explains Richard Phipps.

“There’s a hands-on [approach], being able to touch the flour and the flour streams and work out what’s going on. You can have all the NIR systems in the world (Near Infrared Spectroscopy – the systems that connect the plant to the laboratory), to tell you what your colour is, what your moisture and protein is, but there’s nothing like a guy going out there, opening a roll, checking the flour for himself.

“I am not a blue-chip titled guy, and I like the fact that I don’t get siloed into a specific thing that you’re supposed to do, where you’re not allowed to look at anything else. So I like small to medium sized businesses, and we’re probably the top end of that.

“One of the expectations when you work here, is that just because you are mill manager does not mean that if there’s a choke in an elevator downstairs and you’re the closest guy to it, you’re the guy dealing with it,” Mr Phipps says.

Having previously held successful roles in other food production environments, Mr Phipps saw the job of Mill Manager advertised and thought it would be a great opportunity to further his experience and career prospects towards becoming a Head Miller. He’s now responsible for the milling of 450 tonnes of wheat per 24-hour shifts, every week.

“Wrights have just put me through my MBA, so yeah, we focus heavily on people and training and we don’t necessarily expect people to come in with degrees.

“We’ve got a lot of success stories of people who’ve just come through agencies that have progressed through the business just based purely on merit.

“Essentially, if you have the right attitude, no matter what your background is, we will invest in you and we will spend time training you and the only thing that we expect back is a willingness to continue to learn,” Mr Phipps adds.

And his job is rapidly evolving, “Access to technology is a definite perk for me because I like on-day, online data capture and we’re going through a bit of a transition now.

“Quite a lot of the old mills are being decommissioned and you’ve got companies like Bühler putting technology into mills, which is making the older, more traditional-style of mill look at technology in a different way.

“We’re working at a time where the industry is really changing and it’s exciting, considering that milling is a traditional process that really hasn’t changed over many millennia,” he explains.



An employer says ...

David Wright, Managing Director, GR Wright & Sons Ltd, UK

David Wright is a 5th generation miller, running a family business that has been milling flour for over 155 years. So, where's the appeal for somebody looking to start a career in milling, when they don't have the luck of having a family business to step into?

I asked him about getting a foot in the door: What would it take to achieve the exalted position of Miller?

"Milling is a very practical job mixed with a high degree of technical knowledge required in the background, and so it brings together science, practical skills and data analysis - today's flour mill is highly sophisticated, running on specialised software. But as the sophistication grows in milling, a degree would be useful, but certainly not essential" he explains.

But what's also apparent is that many enter a career in milling, by working their way up from the shop floor. Promotion can rapidly come to capable people from the shop floor, warehouse or laboratory, even through forklift or truck driving.

A career in milling can start at trainee or production manager level, but certainly the lack of a degree is not a barrier to entry as this is an industry with an embedded ethos of continuing professional development.

Rather like the orchestra conductor or head chef, Mr Wright does emphasise that running a shift as a first Miller is really considered in the process to be the peak job,

"Lots of other people in the business do their milling examinations, so I think it's a job that is very well respected within the organisation. It is as much a craft as a science. You're taking a raw ingredient, which is wheat, grown in a field and getting control of it by blending and cleaning and mixing," he says.

Mr Wright is keen to note the steadfast industry ethos that, "Mills have got bigger, and fewer in number, but the principles of milling are the same as they were 100 years ago."

"It's just the level of technology that's now bolted on to flour milling. But it's still a hands-on, 'miller's thumb' type operation, that means they have that craft, that skill, that human feel for the product.

"To be able to produce a product, which people buy and make something from, I think is particularly rewarding.

"In our company people come to work for us, and by and large, the vast majority don't leave which shows something.

"I think you'll probably find across the industry people enjoy working in flour milling partly because there is so much to this job that you never stop."

Conclusion

Culturally this is an industry people want to stay in, but one of the biggest problems Wright's may face in the next five years is its ageing workforce.

But that's the same across the industry, and presently there is no dedicated milling apprenticeship framework at all, so entering as a milling apprentice is difficult.

Flour mills, although they're getting bigger, don't necessarily employ more as a result.

It's a fairly niche market in terms of job opportunities. The whole industry in the UK probably employs around 2500 people.

Perhaps around a quarter are involved in production, but there's a lot of opportunity in distribution, the technical side, business administration and so on. The business of milling is evolving for the better, with more training and incredible technological improvements being adopted and this is creating different and often more rewarding jobs.

From my own personal experience of speaking to people in

the wider milling industry, it's also a very positive group of people involved. They are totally committed, dedicated people, motivated in the same direction in terms of producing quality products that people want to consume every day.

There's a great amount of pride being invested in quality milling.

But crucially, unlike many industries, this is one with no barriers to entry or glass ceilings. It really is a life choice as much as a job. Literally anyone with an ambition and drive can set out on a career path in milling.

To work in milling is to join a dedicated and passionate team, with a diverse platform of opportunities and where lateral moves can lead to fantastic career progression.

Milling certainly hasn't put Richard Phipps off baking with flour; the fruit of his labour.

"Actually, I love sourdough. Though I wouldn't say I'm particularly good at it, I do like baking sourdough on the weekends. My wife laughs at me horrifically, because I make a terrible hash of it, but I do enjoy it."