

# Artisan flour mills rise to the challenge of Covid-19

by James Cooper, Milling and Grain contributor

*"On the Cotswold escarpment, where I spent most of my childhood, the seasons are very much defined by the colour and shape of the surrounding crops. My interest in food production was nurtured from an early age by a grandfather who worked for the ministry of agriculture and a second who was a market gardener for the war effort.*

*I went on to work in engineering, but my own personal journey, baking fermented breads, has fostered a keen interest in flour and the way it is processed and consumed."*

**H**ere in the UK, we all remember this time last year clearly, when supermarkets were being stripped of the most basic ingredients, including flour. What followed was a boom in home baking.

The question I've set out to answer as a result of such a dramatic change in flour usage, is – what evidence is there to show an increase in consumption of milled grains since and if so, is that a trend likely to stick? That's what I want to establish.

The Covid-19 virus defined 2020 as a period of uncertainty, but one thing that bound us together throughout the year was a collective love of baking, with bread emerging as something of a sweet spot.

At the same time, production of bagged flour during the early part of the year was completely derailed. A national lockdown, the return of TV's Great British Bake-off, the Government stay-at-home message, all came together to create a collective panic to hoard storage foods, perhaps even fears of a poor harvest, all fuelled something of a perfect storm in UK milling.

The 2020 summer wheat crop was down by nearly 40 percent on 2019, according the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. But as we now know, there wasn't a lack of wheat for flour milling, but there was a lack of bags to put it in.

A key miller in my region John Lister, who is the Managing Director at Shipton Mill in Tetbury, Gloucestershire, summed it up for me when I spoke to him early this past January, "At the time

of the lockdown, supermarkets ran out of flour largely because there were inadequate stocks of packaging held by the big people, that obviously rolled onto us and we had a busy couple of months whilst the main suppliers to supermarkets sorted out their supply chains and got packaging."

The problem was simply getting it to the supermarket shelves in handy units, it's the modern way, the just-in-time nature of food production.

The UK flour milling industry consists of 32 companies and 51 mills that combine to mill roughly five million tonnes of wheat per year, but they all struggled to cope with the sudden demand as British consumers turned baking into a new hobby.

The shopper's quest for flour turned to a gold rush. And gold dust may even have been easier to lay your hands on at one point.

I saw countless exchanges on Facebook for the latest advice on how to lay your hands on a bag or two of flour. If there was ever any doubt, baking has come of age as a national obsession, with social media sites crammed full of richly filtered images of amateur San Francisco style sour bakes, alongside French baguettes and perfect croissants.

Yeast shortages too were soon reported in supermarkets across the UK and the US, with yeast suppliers calling the demand "unprecedented", a term that would become hard-baked into the national psyche.

In France and Australia, numbers five and six in the top 10 wheat producing countries, flour also became hard to find. Google documented an all-time high in queries about bread, including yeast, and "how to make bread without yeast."

It follows that sourdough, naturally leavened bread in particular,



has experienced something of a cultural revival, spurred on by links between ‘slow dough’ fermented bread, and gut health – as well as health awareness in general, and a healthy appetite for natural foods shown by an increasing number of people.

The UK’s Lockdown 1 caused businesses to shut shop completely, as John went on to explain, “Sadly, so many of the small bakers closed and didn’t really reopen till the summer, then of course they were locked up again in the autumn. I think it’s been a pretty torrid time for small bakeries. Thank goodness for the home baker, though I’m quite sure when their lives get busy once more, they will be the first to return to their local baker.”

A survey from YouGov in the UK revealed that 53 percent of the nation released their inner bakers in the first two months of the lockdown, that’s a staggering 27 million Britons turning to baking. The Bakers Behaviour’s Survey commissioned by NABIM, the National Association of British and Irish Millers (which is now the UK Flours Millers Association) conducted online among 4359 British consumers aged 18-plus in early May found that 34 percent of the respondents used two or more bags of flour between the start of lockdown and mid-May, with bread emerging as the most popular bake overall and a brave seven percent attempting the holy grail of breads, the dark art of sourdough.

Last March, it took me two weeks to get one bag of bread flour for my weekly bake and that’s when it struck me, I needed to head directly to the source. But of course, I was not alone. People were forced to look around for flour and the artisan miller had that gold dust.

In a peculiar twist of fate, the local miller became the go-to destination for the home baker and shopkeeper alike.

Of course, stone-grinding flour is traditionally a slow and simple process in which all the organic goodness of wholemeal flour is retained, unlike steel ‘roller’ milling of white flour claim the artisan miller where the essential bran and germ is engineered away. Perhaps in a bid to differentiate, traditional millers claim the increased heat generated from roller milling can damage natural proteins that are essential to producing the finest breads and dough, as well as being more nutritional.

### A roller-coaster year

But since Covid-19, the slow and simple ethos has been stress-tested and it’s been something of a rollercoaster year for UK artisan flour millers. Incredible sales have been achieved, unprecedented even. Their contribution to UK flour production still remains utterly tiny compared with mass-produced roller milled flour and yet they seem to trade consistently and confidently amongst the giants in the market.

I’m lucky enough to have a working mill just a few miles from my home Gloucestershire where I met Mike Lovatt, miller at the historic Stanway Watermill.

Mills don’t get much more artisan than this one.

A waterwheel fed by a mill pond turning a giant pair of French burr stones, where the only additional piece of automation is the bag hoist, also powered by water.

The site has been used for milling in one form or another for nearly 1000 years and was fully restored only 12 years ago from a derelict state by its benevolent tenant, Lord Wemyss, now with one operational pair of French burr stones driven by a 24-foot diameter (7.3m) waterwheel. Although intended only as a hobby mill for the Stanway Estate, Mike fully embraced the ‘blitz spirit’ and revved up the mill to cope with the rush.

We sat amid the unusually cold and quiet workings of the mill during the post-Christmas shutdown period, socially distanced of course, to disassemble the events that occurred over the last year



Sourdough, a naturally leavened bread in particular, has experienced something of a cultural revival



Mike Lovatt takes a well-earned rest at the Stanway Watermill

and what it might mean for the mill going forwards.

He described a huge surge in sales of their locally-grown stoneground flour during April last year that created issues for them that threatened to halt production completely as the mill reached capacity.

As the supermarket shelves emptied, customers vied with shopkeepers and bakeries alike trying to buy flour direct from the mill. Like the high tide before a tsunami, in the middle of March that year he noticed a steady increase in flour sales at Stanway mill.

“Having been milling and selling flour for over 10 years, you get a feeling for how much flour you need to meet trade and retail needs.”

In an attempt to meet the racing consumer demand, Mike explained how the rate of production skyrocketed from seven tonnes per year to nearly two tonnes per week in April, with one pair of mill stones producing about 25kg of wholemeal every 20-30 minutes for about three-to-four hours running time until the pond emptied.

“It was obvious the general public were panic buying dry goods to stock larders: Our retailers were being cleared of flour as soon as it hit the shelves. There were two phases of it really: Initially it was panic buying then, when people realised they were stuck at home they started baking bread.

“With employees furloughed up and down the country, the mill ran out of just about every consumable in the production line, each threatening to halt production.

“25kg sacks, 1.5kg bags, cardboard boxes, sellotape, bag closing thread, baking leaflets, rubber gloves, masks, and toilet roll. We ran out of everything. We had to open an order book. When a delivery or collection was made they’d go back on the list again, which resulted in a two-to-three week turn round.”

Word got around locally that flour could be bought direct from the mill and generally their outlets were sympathetic to the difficulties. Some helped by taking the flour in 25kg sacks and decanting it themselves into 1.5kg bags which were provided empty, thus saving bagging time.

The mill also picked up four or five new trade outlets. During May, Mike also noted that emphasis had shifted towards home baking (which he speculated was probably due to boredom), this was borne out by a national shortage of dried yeast and even bicarbonate of soda.

“Consequently phone calls to the mill also increased from people wanting advice about why their bread was inedible or so hard they couldn’t cut it,” he added.

On the warm summer nights close attention also had to be paid to quality control, the stones barely cooling between shifts.

“The mill has run faultlessly considering what we have put it through. Apart from trying to keep the stones from running hot, it has behaved extremely well with the minimum of maintenance,” he said, touching a large piece of wood.

Demand continued throughout May abating only slightly.

He explained, “In some ways it has been a marvellous opportunity to introduce or re-introduce the public to proper flour, and we may see a long term overall increase in demand. Time will tell, it will be interesting to see if the new outlets continue.”

As of December 2020 sales at Stanway Mill remained at a steady 200 percent increase on the previous year. I wondered, did Mike have any predictions for the artisan milling industry next year?

“It’s probably done the industry a lot of good in a way. People have been forced to try something good, to try proper flour and some thought wow this is very good, I’m going to buy this again in future, this is really nice stuff.”

This change in buying habits of course carries a premium. The owner of the local supermarket, unable to get the usual 50 pence per bag flour, was happy to pay over twice for an artisan product during weeks of scarcity, but he was, of course, the first to drop the product when things eased off.

The market for the ‘artisan flour’ is encouraging.

Bertinet Bakery in Bath has reported being on track for 43 percent year-on-year growth thanks to strong sales of its sourdough loaves, available in Waitrose, and made with only stoneground Shipton Mill flour.

The artisan milling sector is in a period of healthy growth thanks to evolving consumer tastes, but one thing is for sure: These are uncertain times for business, especially premium products and niche markets. The message for the artisan miller seems to be - know your customer and be loyal to them.

As John Lister explained, “Customer loyalty is key: we are very fortunate that our customers have been with us a long time. There are lots and lots of different sized customers, but we work very closely with the very small ones who are either just starting out or are just small artisan producers, producing wonderful quality bread.

“Everybody likes supporting their local businesses. We are a very small mill so what for us is a pretty big increase is probably nothing to a big producer. I think we’re just steady as you go really, we produce what we can and supply those people who have supported us over the years.”

And as I can attest, it’s much more interesting to buy flour at a local watermill than to buy it on the supermarket shelf, it seems to taste better too. Price will always be a factor for the consumer and artisan flour does carry a premium. The challenge for this niche sector will be to hold on to this wholesome new business the Covid-19 pandemic has inadvertently created.