

# Premium to Pizza

How to make **wheat** pay!

Farmers get a 20 to 40 cent per bushel premium and work with such food giants as ConAgra and Papa John's.

By Angela Dansby

**T**HE VALUE CHAIN SUCCESS STORY in wheat is all about the dough, as exemplified by Papa John's which uses a proprietary flour to give its pizza crust a "consistently hearty flavor and texture in each bite."

The secret of the flour? It is low in polyphenol oxidase (PPO) and high in protein, two desirable qualities that impact the taste, color and consistency of dough. The flour is milled from Platte, a specialty wheat variety.

"PPO acts like an aging banana," says Paul Morano, National Marketing Manager of AgriPro Coker, the North American cereal operation for Syngenta. "The more PPO, the shorter the shelf life and more bitter the taste of the flour. Low PPO flour has a sweeter taste and requires fewer additives to improve its taste and consistency. It keeps the ingredient list down."

Papa John's, the third largest pizza company in the world, buys Platte from ConAgra, which contracts with farmers to grow the wheat. AgriPro Coker supplies farmers with the seed and ConAgra has exclusive rights to mill 100% of what is produced. Currently, 40,000 to 75,000 acres of the wheat are grown each year.

ConAgra charges more for flour made from Platte, but it also got into this specialty crop business to offer a differentiated product, says ConAgra grain merchandiser John Bartels. "The baking and flavor profile of Platte is unmatched and it performs well agronomically," he says.

Farmers benefit from a premium of 20 to 40 cents a bushel for growing Platte as well as from high yields, Morano notes. PPO content is exclusively dependent on genetics, but protein content can be augmented through good management



practices, such as fertilizing at the right time. For every fifth of a percent of increased protein, a grower gets more money (a dime for every increased percent protein from 12 to 15%). The higher the protein, the better the strength and consistency of dough.

"In our area, Platte is the highest yielding (up to 145 bushels an acre) and best standing wheat variety of all," says Bill Andrews, a grower in Yuma, Colorado. "Most growers find that the benefits of growing it outweigh the risks of sprouting."

"We hit a home run with Platte," Morano adds. "We haven't been able to match it since."

Platte was developed in the 1980s through wheat variety testing and Platte 2 with disease resistance genes was introduced last year. The former works better on irrigated land and the latter on dry land. The varieties contain less PPO and higher protein (13-15.5%) than traditional wheat varieties which contain between 11 and 13% – qualities that are attractive to millers and bakers.

"Millers and bakers look for consistency in a flour," Morano said. "Anytime you have a controlled environment (identity-preserved), then end-users get more of what they want. This makes it easier for them as they don't have to do anything else to the flour. Consistency builds loyalty among customers. What non-consistency costs a company is staggering."

Currently, less than 1% of all U.S. wheat is grown under contract, but this percentage is expected to increase as more specialty wheat varieties emerge, including perhaps an even lower PPO variety.

"The milling industry is moving towards non-commoditized products, which are based on quality versus price," says Bartels. "We're trying to make the BMW equivalent of flour with Platte." **SW**

Platte, a specialty wheat variety, is grown under contract for use in Papa John's pizza crust.

