

National Festival of Breads

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What better place is there than the Wheat State to host the National Festival of Breads? Thanks to some visionary wheat farmers from years ago and a hard-working crew of volunteers and staff, a national festival which celebrates bread-baking is being held in Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Cindy Falk and Julene DeRouchey are co-directors of the National Festival of Breads. Cindy is nutrition educator at the Kansas Wheat Commission and Julene is her assistant. Coincidentally, they are both Pottawatomie County farm girls who grew up presenting cooking demonstrations in 4-H. Julene grew up on a farm near Wamego and Cindy grew up on a farm south of Onaga, a rural community of 702 people. Now, that's rural.

"The credit for the beginning of this should go to the Kansas Wheathearts, which was the women's auxiliary of the Kansas Association of Wheat Growers," Cindy Falk said. In 1990, these women wanted to have a baking contest to promote wheat, the source of bread flour. Cindy, then a part-time staff person for the Kansas Wheat Commission, attended the initial planning meeting. The first year's baking contest went so well that it became an ongoing event under the auspices of what is now Kansas Wheat. Cindy has been involved ever since.

In 2009, the farmer-members of the Kansas Wheat Commission made a strategic decision to elevate the biennial contest to a national competition. This was a big step. It meant promoting the contest nationally and gaining sponsorships from national brands such as King Arthur Flour and Red Star Yeast.

The competition begins with a call for entries from home-based bread bakers (not commercial bakeries) across the nation. For the 2017 competition, more than 300 entries were submitted from virtually every state from California to Florida. There is a youth division and then four categories in the adult division: Time-saving/simple breads, holiday breads, rolls, and whole grain breads.

Entries are evaluated and the top tier is test-baked. These entries go through four rounds of judging from which eight adult finalists are selected. Those eight will compete in-person at the National Festival of Breads in Manhattan, Kansas on June 17, 2017.

In addition to Kansas Wheat, the 2017 competition is sponsored by producer-supported groups such as the Kansas Soybean and Corn commissions plus Kansas Pork Association, Kansas Farm Bureau, and Kansas Agri-Women. There are commercial sponsors such as Hy-Vee, John Deere, and others.

"We keep adding activities to the festival," Cindy said. On the Friday before the festival, finalists and guests will tour a Kansas flour mill, have lunch on a Kansas wheat farm and ride in a combine to harvest wheat. They will return to the Kansas Wheat Innovation Center to learn about wheat research. A pasta dinner is that night.

Early Saturday morning, the Wheat Foods Council will sponsor a 5K race and one mile fun run. Beginning at 8:30, the public is invited to the festival. Admission is free although a donation of a non-perishable food item is encouraged. The eight finalists will have seven hours to mix, shape, rise, and bake their award-winning yeast breads and will

speak briefly to the judges. Entries are evaluated on flavor, texture, shape, nutrition, and creativity.

There is also a People's Choice award where the public votes by placing money in their favorite's jars, with all the proceeds going to the Flint Hills Breadbasket. New recipes, baking and BBQ demonstrations, door prizes and a children's area will be available during the day. On Saturday night, Cindy and Julene will reveal the national champion bread entry by lifting the cover on a – what else? – breadbox.

“Julene and I have an army of volunteers which help put this on,” Cindy said. “We could not do this without the help of our Kansas Wheat Commission spokespersons and county extension agents across the state.” For more information, go to www.nationalfestivalofbreads.com.

What better place is there than the Wheat State to host the National Festival of Breads? We salute Cindy Falk, Julene DeRouchey, and all those involved with this event for making a difference by promoting bread-baking and wheat utilization. They are helping to improve our daily bread.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.