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COLLABORATIVE TO LAUNCH GRAIN LAB IN CHICAGOLAND TO BRING ARTISAN GRAINS TO LOCAL MARKET

Effort helps overcome market barriers, bring sustainably and locally grown grains into the local food movement

CHICAGO, IL -- As the breadbasket of the United States, the Upper Midwest region uses the majority of its agricultural landscape to mass-produce grains for feed and food to distribute across the globe. A newly formed collaborative has received funding through Food:Land:Opportunity to launch a grain hub that will bring new, artisan, food-grade crop varieties into Chicago markets. This will not only help the bottom line for farmers, but also promote a more sustainable approach to agriculture that yields healthier soil and more nutrient-dense grains.

The Artisan Grain Collaborative brings together key players throughout the grain value chain, including bakers, chefs, nonprofits, farmers, millers, distributors, agriculture researchers, market developers, and school nutrition experts, under a common banner of increasing access to small-batch and artisan grains in the Midwest. Delta Institute is administering the grant and developing a platform for system integration.

"Right now, when agronomists introduce new grain varieties, the farmer wants to know where it can be sold, and the baker wants to know how to use it," said Karen Lehman, Director of Fresh Taste, a co-founder of the collaborative. "Our grain hub will provide a channel to introduce new grains and legumes to the market and create the feedback loops necessary to link experimentation in the field with innovation in the kitchen."

Using the Food:Land:Opportunity grant, the Collaborative will launch a Grain Lab Without Walls that will function as a hub connecting farmers, university researchers, bakers, and distributors to measure and improve agronomic and culinary performance of local grains and legumes. The lab will:

- Test four grains and legumes to introduce to the Chicago market in 2017-2018.
- Develop curriculum to educate bakers, chefs, and other culinary professionals about how best to use whole and stone-ground grains.
- Provide local grains and legumes to underserved communities through school food service providers and the emergency food system.

“Market forces make it hard for farmers to consider switching to regenerative crops that would rejuvenate our soil and water while yielding delicious, nutrient-dense grains,” said Bill Schleizer, CEO of Delta Institute. “The efforts of the collaborative, and specifically this grain hub, will help create market demand for grains that can be grown in a regenerative system.”

Founding members of the collaborative include Fresh Taste, Delta Institute, Baker Miller, Earth’s New Ways, Lonesome Stone Milling, Publican Quality Bread, Plovgh, Spence Farm Foundation, Laine’s Bake Shop, Floriole Cafe & Bakery, The Kitchen Community, University of Illinois Extension, and Gourmet Gorilla. The collaborative has continued to expand in recent months, with new members including: Goldmine Farms, Janie’s Farm, Edgewood Farm, Hewn Bakery, Pleasant House Bakery, Bootleg Batard, University of Illinois Pilot Lab, Greater Chicago Food Depository, and the Sustainable Local Food Investment Group (SLoFIG). It is also being advised by food writer and activist, Amy Halloran, and community grain champion, Don Lewis.

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About the Artisan Grain Collaborative

The Artisan Grain Collaborative was formed in 2016 with the goals of lowering barriers to growing and utilizing small-batch and artisan grains in the Midwest and promoting a more regenerative food system. Learn more: www.graincollaborative.com.

About Food:Land:Opportunity

Food:Land:Opportunity—Localizing the Chicago Foodshed is a multi-year initiative that aims to create a resilient local food economy that protects and conserves land and other natural resources while promoting market innovation and building wealth and assets in the Chicago region’s communities. Funded through Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust, Food:Land:Opportunity is a collaboration between Kinship Foundation and The Chicago Community Trust. www.foodlandopportunity.org