

## WHEAT

In the December 12th copy of the New Yorker magazine there is a cartoon on page forty-seven which shows two women Christmas shoppers on a crowded city street. The ~~em~~ smaller woman has her arms full of packages; the larger one, wearing a mink cape, ~~does~~ not carry a single package. The caption under the picture is, "This year Bartley and I are just giving each other wheat futures." This attracted my attention because at Christmas my mother and father exchanged wheat futures for years! My mother never owned a mink cape or lived in a city and my father never dealt with a grain broker, but wheat futures were as realistically exchanged as though the paper transaction had been made! They ran a wheat farm for thirty years and the market value of wheat regulated their economy---size and number of Christmas gifts, clothing, food, vacations, even the allotment of tobacco my father chewed. As the market fluctuated he lived the Chownings---good years, luxuries---poor years, bare necessities. This was before there was any form of government regulations and the law of supply and demand ruled supreme.

My father moved to Western Oklahoma in 1910, learned to grow wheat, and was actively engaged in doing so until the thirties. He was not superior in his methods or dedicated to this means of making a living---just an average wheat farmer. "The independence of the farmer is his greatest asset. Western Oklahoma is a healthy place to live and

farm---is high(4000 feet above sea level), dry(less than ten inches of rain in any year) and there is always a breeze so you can get a breath of fresh air," he would say. Whatever the reasons were the results of his and my mother's endeavors were imposing.

They bought a farm which they never had to mortgage ( a source of great pride); built all the improvements including the house and storm cellar; fed and clothed a family of five and sent the offsprings through high school and college.

Perhaps the years of working with wheat gave them a respect for that grain and a deep romantic attachment which they passed on to their children. This legacy, the pride of growing wheat, is through vivid memory a joy to their descendants.

Wheat is beautiful at any stage of its growth. The deep beige color of the hard grains sparkle in light. The size may vary with the strain but the smallest resembles the size of rice. Sometimes the grains are long and may have a reddish golden cast. When the plant is young, it is brilliant green with grass like leaves. The single stem grows tall---maybe five feet depending on moisture, soil, etc. The long head or seed pod forms at the top of the plant. It may be four to six inches in length with two rows of symmetrical grains inclosed in ~~thin~~ husks. Out of each husk grows a spine, called a beard. When the wheat is ripe, the head is pale gold in color, the beards are twice as long as the head and very stiff. The heads never droop. The stem is also golden and hollow. Its surface shines in the sun.

The leaves have turned yellow and dropped from the stem. A field of winter wheat sowed in September is a pleasure to behold at the first appearance of the dark green plant. It enlivens the browning countryside. It may grow to six inches height before the January, February and March snows cover it with a thin blanket. Snow seldom drifts on a flat wheat field. Then comes the warm sun of April and the plants hurry to grow and ripen for a June harvest. During these spring months the plants grow tall and the color fades in streaks until the ripened fields are ribbons of shining gold waving in the ever blowing wind, a sight to awaken all the aesthetic emotions of a human being.

Wheat has a far away sound during each stage of growth. As the wind blows the young plants rustle so faintly that only the avid listener could hear. By March the stronger winds change the rustle to a slight scratching sound which grows in intensity as the wheat ripens until the sound in a mature wheat field is like cymbals crashing a million light years away. If a single head is rubbed between the palms, the sound is like slightly crinkling tissue paper. The harvested grains ping faintly as they collide or touch a scoop. If they are forced through a conveyor the pings become a calm roar not unlike shifting sand.

The odor of the wheat plant is only a faint clear smell. The ripened head and dried straw assume a dusty tinge which also belongs to the threshed grains. Even though dust is the predominate odor, it seems to be clear dust, like a

faint, unperfumed powder. In the sunlight the dust from wheat makes only a shadow of a sunbeam. Truly it is a clean smelling plant.

The blade of wheat is smooth to the touch. The sharp edges could cut the skin if drawn quickly through the fingers. The head is rough and beards very prickly. A stinging sensation is the result of beard or straw thrust inside ones shirt. The grain is hard but soft inside and when moistened has a doughy feel not unlike a softened piece of toast. The slickness of the surface of the grain make it easy to shift from one position to another but difficult to handle neatly. Nothing is shed from the threshed grains so barefeet look even more clean after a walk through the half filled wheat bin. The smoothness is like the surface of highly polished wood.

The young wheat plant has little taste to a human being though cows and horses will eagerly break through a fence to eat it. The blades are like most grasses, just an unflavored string. The mature hollow stem has a woody taste much like the cereal, shredded wheat. When water is sucked through the straw this flavor is easily discernable. The grain is tested for its degree of ripness by chewing. If the outer coat is hard to break, it denotes full maturity and continued chewing of the grain gives the taste of a slight sugar flavor and starch. In fact wheat is delicious in its raw form.

I feel so fortunate to have experienced all the wonderful



sensations. The reason I have been able to do so is because my mother, at Christmas time, could have said like the woman pictured in the New Yorker, "This year, Bob and I are just giving each other wheat futures." Undoubtedly she added a silent prayer, "Please, Lord, let all our wheat test number one and don't let the bottom fall out of the market!"

Send this to Fay, if you want to.  
I realize I gilded the lily  
a little. Has written for  
description of wheat.