

Old Gristmill Creates New Grits Business

Rescuing two old stone burr mills has led retired engineer Ron West into a second career. West produces up to 500 lbs. of grits a day, selling his product at area farmers markets and to area restaurants. The key to his success is his old stone mills.

"A friend of mine restored an antique engine-powered grist mill, and I fell in love with the idea," says West, who started looking for one himself.

The first mill he found was in such bad shape that West had to reverse engineer it. However, the 20-in. granite stone wheel was in good shape.

"I would be standing there holding a part and wondering what it did," recalls West. "I researched the company that built it and discovered they were still in business."

He was able to get many parts for the 100-year-old mill from the company, Meadows Mills, which not only makes parts, but also restores grist or burr mills for customers or for resale. The company also makes and sells new gristmills. West also located a small foundry to make some parts he couldn't find.

In addition to replacing and mending metal parts, including pouring new babbitt bearings, West had to replace all wooden parts. That included finding traditional close-grain, yellow pine for the pillow blocks that hold the shaft. West also trimmed the machine in black walnut. Any wood surface that would be touched by the corn kernels was lined with steel to protect it from wear.

The engine was a 1926 Hercules made in Evansville, Ind. The twin flywheel, 6 hp engine weighs about 1,200 lbs. It required

only a valve job with new push rods, resetting the timing gear and cleaning and painting.

"I hadn't planned on that much work. It took about a year," says West. "I even had to learn how to pour babbitt bearings."

West also had to learn to "dress" the stones, which are made from native North Carolina, Balfour pink granite. Meadows Mills sponsors miller training programs at a local community college. West says there are also how-to videos on stone dressing and babbitt bearing pours on YouTube.

Once the mill and engine were restored, West fired them up and poured corn kernels into the hopper. What came out was some of the best grits West or his wife had ever enjoyed. The process also produced corn meal and corn flour, each of which was screened out of the grits.

After finishing restoration of a second mill, this one with a 16-in. wheel and powered by an electric motor, West had everything state inspected. This allowed him to produce grits and meal for sale.

Since then West has become a grits expert, making the yellow grits preferred in South Carolina, the white grits preferred in North Carolina, and roasted grits. He even makes cracked corn for moonshiners (legal), as well as corn meal and flour. He also makes and packages coarser Geechee grits, named for the islands off the coast of South Carolina. These are especially popular with chefs, as they can be kept on the heat for hours, slowly cooking.

"Roasted grits were my innovation," he says. "I roasted the first batch of corn in a rotisserie basket over my grill. I let them cool down and then milled them. They made the whole shop smell wonderful."

West is now working with a coffee roaster



Ron West uses a pair of antique engine-powered gristmills to produce up to 500 lbs. of grits a day. He sells the product at area farmers markets and to restaurants.

to roast his corn for the grits. He has also experimented with popcorn grits and blue corn grits.

The key to quality grits is the stone grinding and careful quality control, says West. The stone burr mill shears the corn or other grains, rather than crushing it as steel wheels do. This keeps the temperature down, which protects the flavor and nutrition of the grain.

"Sifting produces the different products," says West. "I bought a multi-screen sifter from Meadows Mills so I can produce all stages of product, including the coarser cornmeal for pizza making."

West has his 20-in. gristmill mounted with its engine on a trailer he can take to farmer's markets and special events. The bulk of the grits he sells are made with the stationary 16-in. mill. That mill was modified to make

it easier to clean.

"The housing comes apart easier, and it has a vacuum and air blower system," says West. "When I change from yellow grits to white, I have to be able to purge the system."

West did most of the restoration work himself. However, Meadows Mills has a fully reconditioned, 1932 12-in. wooden frame, stone burr mill for sale. It's priced at \$4,250.

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Pigeon Passion Pays Off With White "Dove" Enterprise

Dennis Kuhn has turned his passion for pigeons into a full-time job. He sells young pigeons and breeding pairs and races pigeons competitively. He also sells all types of pigeon supplies and releases white "doves" at weddings, funerals and other special events.

"I do releases within 150 miles of the pigeon's loft or home," says Kuhn. "Most of my releases are within 60 miles. The birds fly about 40 mph. It takes them about 3 1/2 hours to fly 120 miles, depending on the weather."

Kuhn uses the same birds for release as he does for his racing. Racing distances can be as much as 600 miles from home. He says it takes the same instinct and athletic abilities.

At 18 days a young pigeon can eat and drink on its own. By 4 months it can fly around its loft. Keeping young birds locked up in a loft for several weeks before releasing them imprints the loft as home.

Kuhn turns his birds out for an hour to an hour and a half in the morning and again in the evening to build up wing strength. In a few months he can start their training by taking them away from home and releasing them.

"You want to slowly build up their strength like a marathoner does," he says. "Start out at real short distances of 1 to 5 miles and build up to 25 to 30 miles. Then you bump up to 100 to 150 miles. They have the natural ability, but you have to nurture it."

A competitive racer with white pigeons,

it was easy for Kuhn to make the switch to white dove releases. He says the demand has grown in recent years.

"More churches have gotten away from rice throwing and balloon releases due to environmental concerns," he says. "White dove releases really stand out in people's minds and don't hurt the environment."

Kuhn brings birds to the site, usually two for a wedding and one or more for a funeral. He has a small chapel-shaped container that can be used to release the birds or he can hand the birds to the bride and groom.

"I did funerals where each of 5 children released a bird," says Kuhn. "Every release is different and can be customized as you wish."

Rates are \$125 for a single bird and \$150 for 2 birds. A 3 or 4-bird release is \$175. There is a surcharge for any release more than 60 miles from home to cover added gas and time.

At all releases the pigeons come first. Kuhn won't release at night, indoors or in bad weather. He also won't ship birds for self-release or beyond a range that allows the bird to make it home the day of the release.

Kuhn says it's a good business and one he has helped others get established. He advises starting with 3 breeding pairs and raising birds to use for release.

"You should have at least 20 trained to fly at least 20 miles before starting to advertise," he says. "Then start with releasing 1 to 3 at a time. If there is a problem, you won't put your business in jeopardy."

Kuhn says setting up a loft with birds, feed, training crates and such, including watering and feeding stations, can be done for less



Dennis Kuhn sells young pigeons and breeding pairs as well as pigeon supplies. He also releases white "doves" at weddings and other events.

than \$1,500. The loft can be as simple as a repurposed garden shed. Pigeons require no heat, even in subzero weather. Breeding pigeons start at around \$25 each, with racing pigeons ranging up to \$200 each.

"If you buy an older breeding pair, don't let them out unless you can afford to lose them," he says. "I've had birds come back 7 years after they had been donated to another racing club for a fundraiser."

Kuhn keeps several distinct families of colored pigeons in addition to his white racers.

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