

Grit and Grain

LOCAL FAMILY-OWNED MILL USES TRADITIONAL METHODS TO BRING QUALITY GRAINS AND FLOURS TO THE REGION.

Alyssa Thayer



Mark and Fran Fischer run Castle Valley Mill with support from their kids, Deming, Curran and Liesel

NOVEMBER IS A TIME WHEN MANY OF US REACH for heirloom family recipes to honor our histories and celebrate the season. We do our best to recreate childhood favorites, but often are left wondering, “Why did it seem more delicious back then?” And while nostalgia certainly plays a part, so too does the evolution of our ingredients.

“It’s the difference between tasting a store-bought tomato in December and a garden-picked tomato in July,” explains Fran Fischer, who owns and operates **Castle Valley Mill** with her husband, Mark. That’s her way of comparing generic off-the-shelf flour to the stone-ground products created with their antique buhr mills in Doylestown.

Mark’s grandfather, Henry Fischer, was a master miller in Germany and immigrated in search of opportunity. In 1947 Henry purchased the Castle Valley Mill property, which included a farmhouse and an abandoned 1800s grist mill. After some renovations, the house became the family’s primary residence and the barn and machinery his perpetual pet project.

Having always enjoyed visiting this special place, Mark and Fran jumped at the opportunity to purchase it in 1997. Mark shared his grandfather’s interests, and when graced with a bit of extra time, he began restoring one of the smaller mills.



Castle Valley Mill sits on the picturesque banks of Neshaminy Creek in historic Bucks County.

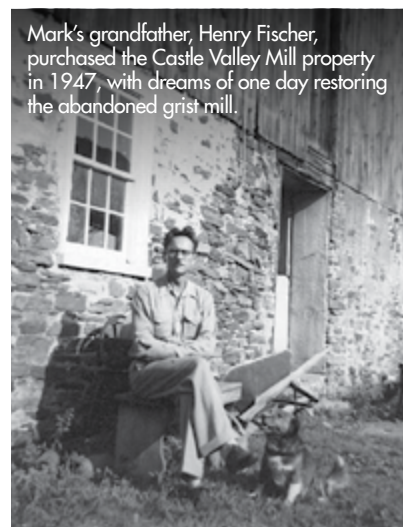
On the first day Mark got the mill up and running, he handed Fran a pile of freshly milled flour to try out. She brought it into the kitchen to use in her grandmother’s old banana bread recipe. Fran remembers pulling the bread from the oven, slicing it and giving it a taste. “I couldn’t believe how delicious it was,” she says. She grabbed another slice and ran it down to Mark, saying, “You’ve got to try this.”

From there, the Fischers began selling their products locally, and it wasn’t long before chefs and bakers came knocking. Before they knew it, they had a burgeoning business on their hands.

Prior to the pandemic, 90% of their business was wholesale. But that all changed in March of 2020 when the hospitality sector slowed to a halt. After a nerve-racking first week of diminishing orders, the tides changed. The *New York Times* and *Food and Wine Magazine* spotlighted Castle Valley Mill as a place to purchase flour online—during the home bread making frenzy—and the flood gates opened. Suddenly, they could hardly keep up with demand.

Today, Castle Valley Mill sells their flours, rolled oats, cleaned whole berries, grits and pasta online and at various retail locations (full list on their website). While wholesale numbers have begun to steady, they’re excited to see their new following of enthusiastic home bakers and chefs seems to be holding strong.

As we plan our menus, order our birds, and sharpen our knives in preparation for the upcoming holidays, let’s do so with the intention of supporting our local food system and bringing our family heirloom recipes to life!



Mark’s grandfather, Henry Fischer, purchased the Castle Valley Mill property in 1947, with dreams of one day restoring the abandoned grist mill.

Recipes

The mission of Castle Valley Mills is threefold: help farmers keep farming, use the traditional technology of the 1800s and provide really good food to the community. The ingredients and recipes below support all three goals (emphasis on really good food) and we hope will serve to introduce you to the wonderful world of stone-ground flours and grain berries.

Cornbread

When days get shorter and the air gets crisper, cornbread is simply a staple. Enjoy it warm, slathered with butter or use the recipe below to turn it into stuffing/dressing. Whatever you call it, it’s delicious!

- 1 C. CVM Cornmeal
- 1 C. CVM Soft Wheat or Spelt Flour (whole or bolted)
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1½ C. buttermilk (You can substitute whole milk with lemon juice or vinegar to sour it.)
- 4 Tb. melted butter or oil

Optional: sweeten with 2 Tb. sugar or maple syrup

Preheat oven to 425°F and grease a cast-iron skillet. Mix together dry ingredients and set aside. Whisk together eggs and buttermilk. Add in dry ingredients. Mix gently (batter will be lumpy). Add melted butter and stir until just blended. Pour into greased skillet and bake for 25–30 minutes. Serve warm! Serves 6–8.

Cornbread Stuffing



In honor of all the holiday feasting on the horizon, we turned this already fabulous cornbread recipe into something even more scrumptious—stuffing. The richness of the butter, mirepoix and savory herbs, elevate the hearty cornbread into something worth roasting a turkey for.

- ¾ C. butter (if salted, leave out additional salt)
- 1 large onion, diced (3 C.)
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- ½ tsp. each, salt and pepper
- 3 large carrots, finely chopped
- 3 celery stalks, finely chopped
- 2 Tb. fresh sage, minced

Grain 101

Unless you’re an artisan baker or grain-centric chef, you may have a few questions when glancing over Castle Valley Mill’s menu of products: what is bolted flour, what’s a grain berry, how do I substitute? Here’s a primer to get us all started.

Wheat/Grain Anatomy – The wheat seed is made up of bran, germ and endosperm and is protected by a husk around the outside. The bran and germ provide the bulk of the nutrition, while the endosperm is just the starch. Generic flour is almost exclusively endosperm and is fortified to replace the nutrients lost in the commercial milling process.

Stoneground – This method of milling (as contrasted with industrial high-speed steel rollers) processes the grain more slowly and at lower temperatures to preserve the flavor and nutrients. Fran likes to say, “Everything that’s contained in the seed goes into the flour.”

Bolted Flour – Bolting is an old miller’s term that means ‘to sift.’ After the grain is milled, the bolting process is used to remove some of the coarsest bran to give a finer consistency to the flour, which offers bakers a higher rise.

Keep Cool – Because stoneground wheat contains more protein and fat, Fran recommends keeping it in the fridge or freezer (40°F and below) to retard oxidation. “We want people to get what they paid for,” she says. Flours can stay fresh in the fridge for up to 6 months and in the freezer for up to a year.

Hard Wheat – This is higher in protein and gluten. It tends to work well with stretchy/chewy doughs like bread, doughnuts and pasta.

Soft Wheat – This is lower in gluten and higher in starch. It works great in crumbly-textured recipes like biscuits, cookies and quick bread.

Subbing In – Fran says their bolted or whole flours tend to need more hydration than commercial flours. When using their products, either add more liquid or cut back on the flour, as well as let the dough or batter sit for 20 minutes before baking.

Ancient Grains – Just like we have ancestors, our grains are also products of a long line of growing, selecting and modifying. Ancient grains are defined as any variety that has remained largely unchanged through the years. Modern wheat has been bred for high yields and easy harvesting, not for flavor and nutrients. The good news is, the traditional bygone varieties are still available and seem to be making quite a comeback.

Emmer/Einkorn/Spelt – These are early varieties of wheat and offer more fiber, protein and antioxidants than their modern cousins.

Rye – While most people equate rye to pumpernickel bread, there’s a subtle nuttiness to rye that makes it wonderful in all sorts of applications, like the rum cake in this article.

Grain Berries – These little gems are grains that have been cleaned but not ground into flour. They’re often boiled to make a great breakfast cereal, cold grain salad or risotto.

The Final Word: Fran says folks should think of their CVM products as ‘peasant food’—simple, not hard to use, minimally processed and true to this area’s Colonial roots.

- 1 Tb. fresh thyme, minced (may also use a combination of marjoram and thyme)
- 1 batch skillet cornbread (see recipe above)
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 1 C. chicken broth

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Heat all but 1 tablespoon of butter over medium heat. Once fully melted and bubbling, add onion, salt and pepper, and saute for 5 minutes. Then add carrot, celery and herbs and saute until carrot is soft and onion and celery are translucent (about 15 minutes). Remove from heat.

Use the last tablespoon of butter to grease a large baking dish.

Using cooled cornbread (can be baked up to 2 days prior), tear or chop into ½ inch pieces.

**Note: If using an extremely crumbly cornbread, arrange pieces onto a baking sheet and bake at 375°F for 15 minutes. If using a bread that holds together well, skip this step.*

Add cornbread cubes into saute pan with veggies and toss to combine. Arrange bread and veggie mixture into the bottom of your baking dish.

In a medium-size bowl, whisk together eggs and broth. Pour over bread-filled baking dish and toss gently to combine and coat.

Bake for 35 minutes at 425°F or until liquid has been baked out and top layer has become brown and crisp. If the stuffing seems to be getting too toasted too quickly, cover with aluminum foil for remaining bake time.

Serves 6.

Autumn Emmer Pilaf



Whether you enjoy them warm or cold, emmer berries are a great grain option to add to your repertoire. Even after cooking, they maintain a delicious texture and delightful nutty flavor. This wholesome salad can be tailored to any season, this one just happens to highlight some of our fall favorites!

Grain:

- 1½ C. emmer berries (can also use wheat/grain berries, if substituting, consult cooking directions)

1 Tb. olive oil

Vegetables:

- 4 C. vegetables, cubed (we used a combination of winter squash and root vegetables)
- 2 Tb. olive oil
- Pinch of salt and pepper

Sherry Maple Vinaigrette:

- 2 Tb. oil
- 3 Tb. sherry vinegar
- 1 Tb. maple syrup
- 1 tsp. mustard
- ½ tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. pepper

Optional:

- ⅓ C. toasted nuts
- ⅓ C. dried cranberries or cherries

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Bring a saucepan of water to a boil and add emmer berries. Turn down to a simmer and allow to cook covered for 50 minutes. When cooked, drain excess water. Toss with olive oil and set aside to cool.

Add vegetables to a large bowl and toss with olive oil, salt and pepper. Arrange on a cookie sheet making sure not to crowd. Bake for 40–45 minutes or until soft browned. Mix and turn veggies halfway through.

Add cooled grain and slightly cooled veggies to a large serving dish.

Whisk together all vinaigrette ingredients. Pour half the mixture over grains and veggies. Toss to combine. Taste to decide if you'd like more dressing.

Top with your choice of nuts and dried fruit.

Serves 4–6.

Polenta Fries

We loved a good polenta even before we tried it baked, coated in butter and cheese, and dipped in a tasty aioli ... now it's safe to say we love it even more. Enjoy these as a fun appetizer or satisfying savory side. Just don't expect leftovers.

For Polenta Fries:

- 2 C. water
- 2 C. milk
- 1 C. CVM grits
- 1 green onion, finely minced (make with ramps in the spring)
- ½ C. grated Parmesan cheese
- Olive oil baking spray
- Salt and black pepper to taste
- 3 Tb. salted butter, melted

For Lemon Aioli:

- ½ C. olive oil-based mayo
- 1–2 Tb. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper

Preheat the oven to 425°F.

In a medium saucepan, bring water, milk and grits to a boil. Slowly whisk in the polenta, and half of the minced green onion (leaving some for the aioli), ¼ cup Parmesan. Season with salt. Con-



tinue stirring polenta until it's soft and thick, about 30 minutes. Turn the heat off, cover the pot, and let the polenta sit for 5 minutes.

Line an 8"×8" square baking dish with parchment paper. Spread the polenta in an even layer in the baking dish. Freeze for 15–20 minutes, until set, or place in the fridge for 1 hour.

Lift the polenta from the baking dish and cut into ¼"-thick "fries."

Place the fries on a baking sheet covered with parchment paper. Spread fries in an even layer, spray with olive oil baking spray, and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Bake for 15 minutes. Then carefully flip and spray with oil. Bake 15–20 minutes more, until extra crispy.

While the fries are baking, mix together the melted butter and remaining green onion.

Remove the fries from the oven and gently toss with the butter and the remaining Parmesan.

For Aioli:

Mix all ingredients in a bowl until smooth and creamy. Serve alongside the polenta fries.

Serves 4–6.

Rum Cake

The deep rich flavors of the butter, brown sugar and rum seep into the cake and pair perfectly with the nutty notes of the rye. Once you bring this one to the table, it's sure to become a new family favorite!

Cake:

- ¼ C. milk
- ⅓ C. sour cream
- ⅓ C. dark rum
- 1 C. butter
- 1¾ C. granulated sugar
- 2 tsp. vanilla extract
- 3 large eggs
- 2 large egg yolks
- 2¼ C. CVM bolted rye flour
- 1½ tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. baking soda
- ½ tsp. salt

For the sauce:

- ½ C. butter
- 1 C. brown sugar
- ¼ C. rum
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract

Whisk the milk, sour cream and rum together in a liquid measure and let the mixture come to room temperature.

Preheat the oven to 350°F and make sure an oven rack is placed in the middle of the oven.

In a large bowl or stand mixer, whip the butter on medium speed for 1 minute. Add the granulated sugar and beat for 4–5 minutes more. Mix in the vanilla.

Add the eggs and egg yolks, one at a time, mixing just until combined in between additions. Scrape down the sides of the bowl.

In a separate bowl, combine dry ingredients (flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt). Add a third of the dry ingredients to the egg batter and mix just until combined. Add half of the milk/sour cream mixture and mix.

Add another third of the dry ingredients, mixing just until combined. Add the last half of the milk/sour cream mixture and beat until just combined.

Add the remainder of the dry ingredients and mix, scraping down the sides of the bowl.

Grease and flour a bundt pan, using butter or shortening.

Tip: Make sure every crevice of the pan is coated!

Pour batter evenly into the pan and bake at 350°F for about 50 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean.

While the cake is baking, make the sauce. Add sauce ingredients to a saucepan over medium heat and stir well until butter has melted and mixture is smooth. Bring mixture to a boil, stirring, and boil for 2 minutes.

Allow the cake to cool in the pan for at least 15 minutes before trying to take it out of the pan.

Tip: Fran likes to remove the cake first, to make sure it comes out easily, then wipe the pan clean and put the cake back in it.

While the cake is still in the pan, poke little holes all over the surface and gently pour most of the sauce over, reserving just a little. Allow the cake to soak up the glaze. Then invert the cake onto a plate or serving platter. Spoon remaining glaze over top and serve.

Serves 10. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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