

taste

north east
england



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THE smell of fresh, warm milled flour and bran hangs in the air. A film of fine white powder covers everything: the floor, machinery, shelves, Hessian sacks and the garden shed.

Flour motes circle lazily as the sun shines in through the floor-to-ceiling doors.

It's a sight and smell that evokes our rural past, when every settlement would have had its own corn mill.

This is Gilchesters Organics in the heart of Northumberland, where flour for baking is milled, packed and sent on its way to the Orkney Islands to the Bristol Channel.

Produced from rare breed, organic grains that can trace their ancestry back 2,000 years, the five varieties of flour, semolina and a new range of savoury biscuits produced by Gilchesters, give a reassuring taste of the past that is far removed from the mass-produced, commercial brands we have now all become accustomed to.

But while the raw ingredients and process may hark back to yesteryear, there is nothing old-fashioned about the setting of what is quickly turning into a North East success story.

Think of a mill and you immediately conjure up old-fashioned images of either a Windy Miller-type set-up with circling sails, or a stone built edifice complete with its own water wheel set amongst rolling fields.

Gilchesters Organics is neither. The first stone-grinding mill to be built in the North East for 150 years, it is unashamedly 21st Century.

Housed in a purpose built barn near Stamfordham, the mill is a single large, square room. The two-and-a-half tonne mill stones are encased in a round, pine box and rather than water or wind, electricity is used to power the operation.

There are no ropes or pulleys, cogs or buckets. It's a thoroughly up-to-the-minute operation and as Andrew Wilkinson puts it, "a very traditional process in a very modern setting."

The self-financed mill only opened three years ago. But already Andrew, 44, and his German-born wife Sybille, 39, are reaping the

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Flour to the people

Andrew and Sybille Wilkinson have gone back to the grind of the old days for what is turning into a thoroughly modern North East food success story. Jane Hall reports.

KITCHEN GODDESS Sybille Wilkinson and her daughter Florence are baking with their own Gilchesters flour.

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benefits. Gilchesters has quickly established itself as the flour of choice for bread makers across the UK.

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It is on the menu at top restaurants and is stocked by some of the finest food emporiums, including Harrods and the Fenwick food hall in Newcastle. BBC *Great British Menu* judge and restaurateur Oliver Peyton, is a fan, using Gilchesters' flours in the bakery he co-owns.

The reason for the businesses success is simple - indeed, it can be summed up in that one word. Nothing has been added, and nothing taken away from the end product.

The rare-breed organic wheat varieties are grown without the aid of artificial fertilisers. The grains are then stone ground and put through a series of sieves to achieve flour of a remarkably silky smooth quality.

So fine is the flour, Sybille maintains it can turn even the most basic cook into a kitchen goddess, citing herself as an example.

An accomplished cake maker who was taught to bake by her grandmother in her native south Bavaria, she admits to having avoided homemade bread thinking it was a "dark art."

She recalls the failures made by using commercial flours. But having been persuaded by Andrew to give their own flour a try, the results were altogether more palatable - good volume and, most importantly, taste.

Now she produces a range of breads that daughter Florence, seven, and step-children Rosie, 18, and Harry, 16, are happy to eat.

The Wilkinsons seem an unlikely couple to be spearheading a food revolution (if going back to your roots can be described as such).

Andrew used to work for North East-based TV production firm, Zenith North, while Sybille's background is in marketing and sales, first for five-star hotels in Germany, then British Airways.

But Andrew, born and raised in Lancashire, had always dreamt of being a farmer "When I was at school and people would ask what I wanted to be, I would always say a farmer."

"But like many people I left school and did a great many other things instead. Then my job brought me to the North East and I immediately fell in love with the region.

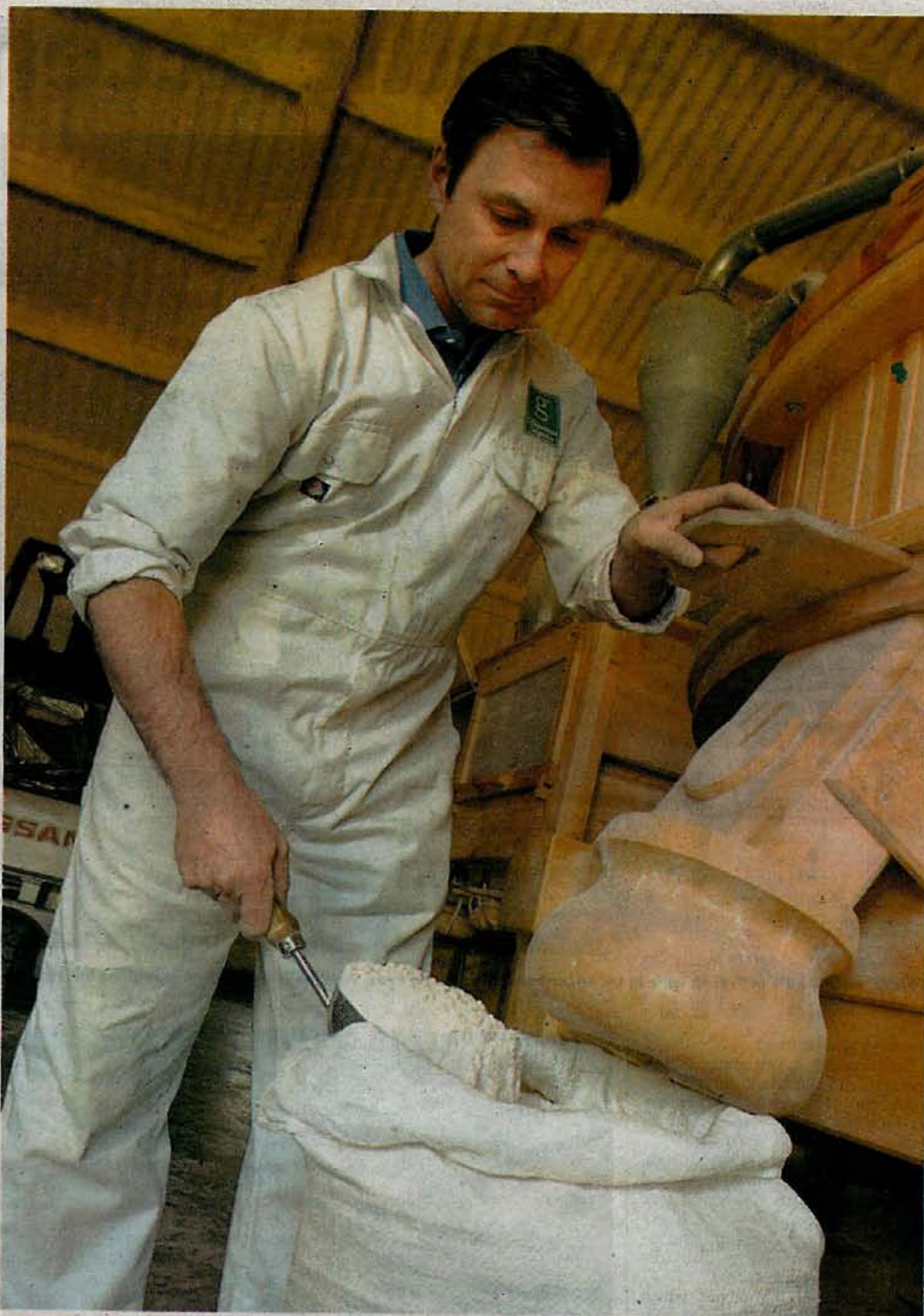
"Through a bizarre set of circumstances, I ended up here in a house that happened to be adjacent to a block of land that was for sale."

In 1992 and in his late 20s, Andrew decided on a dramatic change of career.

He took himself off to Newcastle University where he gained a BSc with honours in agriculture and reunited the house and land that is Gilchesters Farm.

He inherited the rotation crop pattern of his predecessor of "two years of wheat, barley, cold seed rape and fertilizer from a bag."

By 1998 the agricultural recession had hit home and by 2000 farming was "in meltdown." The foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001 pushed farmers like Andrew even closer to the precipice. To survive, he realised he needed to offer something different.



BACK TO BASICS Andrew Wilkinson in his mill at Gilchester Organics in Northumberland. Spelt biscuits, below, are the latest addition to their product portfolio.

It was meeting Sybille that finally tipped the balance. In 1999 Andrew went to visit family in Munich and met his wife-to-be at a party. Confident and outspoken, Sybille's first question on hearing Andrew's background was why his farm wasn't organic. "I grew up in Bavaria where organic is very important. I came right out with it and asked Andrew why he too wasn't organic. Germans are very direct people!"

The couple married in September 2000 - at the same time as the first seeds of Gilchesters' organic conversion were sown.

The first organic cereal farm in the North East, Andrew admits to being naive about what to grow. A decade ago organic was seen as a cranky and expensive alternative to conventional farming.

Andrew approached various bodies - including Newcastle University's organic research centre at Nafferton, near Stocksfield - seeking advice on what the considered custom was for farming

organic cereals in the North East. "We found we were the only ones and no one really had any information on it.

As a trailblazer, instead he was the one who found himself in demand, and was persuaded by Newcastle University to sign up for a research PhD looking into improving production methods for the baking quality of organic wheat.

"I discovered things our grandfathers would have known and would have taken for granted, but which we had all but forgotten."

In 2003, Gilchesters Farm became a research centre for organic cereal production.

At the same time, the Wilkinsons began producing rare breed organic grains for use in their own stone ground baking flours.

The move to chemical-free farming sounds easier than it has been. The Wilkinsons found themselves in a classic Catch-22 situation.

"There was virtually no incentive at that time to get into organic. It was seen as the preserve of the Birkenstock brigade. The argument was Prince Charles could afford to be

organic because he had the money," Andrew explains. "To be certified organic you have to have the land out of production for two years, so you have to do it field-by-field."

"But to do that you are leaving yourself with no income, so we did it with the grassland first and went into beef production by introducing our own herd of organic rare breed white Galloway cattle to keep us going."

"We then started on a rotation of blocks of land to get it into organic production. It was going to take six years to convert the farm."

"But in the middle of all this the government changed its views on organic, which meant we could fast-track."

The Wilkinsons went back to basics and sought out ancient, rare-breed wheat varieties. They had been prepared for production to drop, but Andrew says: "The organic crops outstripped all the regular ones. These wheats are the result of 2,000 years of crop production."

"In the name of progress and to feed the nation, I can understand why we went down the other route, but..."

"I only managed to gain milling quality wheat once in 11 years with all the chemicals, but since we've gone back to growing these old varieties, we have always managed to achieve baking quality, even last year."

Gilchesters now has 400 acres devoted to crop production with 200 acres permanent pasture for the 40-strong Galloway breeding herd.

Andrew and Sybille opened the



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mill in 2006 at a neighbouring farm on the other side of Stamfordham.

The couple know they are on to something special.

While other businesses are struggling in the current economic downturn, Gilchesters is bucking the trend with steady growth, despite their range of flours selling at the top end of the market. A 15kg bag of organic farmhouse flour costs around £2.69.

"We are in year three and most business advisers would say it takes five years to set a business up," says Andrew.

"We are seeing the business growing when others are struggling, but perhaps that says a lot about the quality of what we are producing."

In July the Wilkinsons are adding to their products with the launch of a range of savoury cheese biscuits made from spelt - honey and mustard, thyme and original. Two London-based hamper firms have already placed orders and there is interest from a number of North East restaurants. There are plans for a sweet biscuit based on a Roman recipe and Sybille dreams of one day opening a farm shop.

Nine years after moving to England to be with Andrew, Sybille admits to still being amazed at the turn her life has taken. "I was a real city girl, living in Hamburg and Munich. I had never lived near the country. And look where I have ended up!"

"But I have since discovered that my great-grandfather was a miller, so it seems it may be in my genes. Things have turned full circle."

