

The pressure for us to reduce our carbon footprints when it comes to buying food is constantly increasing.

MITYA UNDERWOOD meets one North East family helping us along our way

ON FIRST impressions Andrew and Sybille Wilkinson seem like an unlikely pair to be at the centre of cereal research in the north.

OK, it doesn't sound like the most interesting job in the world but for the couple, who swapped busy lifestyles for a quiet life in the country, it's perfect.

And what started off as an experiment in growing organic corn has now turned into a countrywide, money-making success.

They have built the first new milling windmill in Tyne-side for more than 100 years and are the only organic flour producers in the North.

They grind their flour on a 250-year-old watermill just a few miles from their home and have built up an impressive client list. The site they farm on has been occupied for 2,000 years and can even be seen on maps dating back to the 1640s.

Based at their farm two miles north of Hadrian's Wall, the Wilkinsons and their three children Florence, four, Harry, 13, and Rosie, 15, run Gilchesters Organic Farm, producing beef, lamb, flour and seeds.

Couple are sowing the seeds of a revolution in food

Their wheat fields are free from pesticides, herbicides and fungicides and some are stocked with traditional English and Scottish cattle raised on the farm.

Despite the obvious professionalism, Andrew, now 42, and Sybille, 39, didn't start farming until 1992. With no previous experience other than an Army career, Andrew packed himself off to Newcastle University to try to learn the dos and don'ts of running a successful farm.

"I didn't come from a farming background but it was something I

had always wanted to do. I decided the only way to do it was to get off to university and learn from scratch.

"We always wanted to have an organic farm but there wasn't a lot about it at university as it wasn't the done thing. It was quite new."

By the late 1990s, Andrew had managed to secure his farm, and land, and set his grand plans into action. But it wasn't long before disaster hit his farm and thousands of other farms around the country.

"By 1998 the agricultural recession really started and by 2000 we were in meltdown," he explains.

"Then we were hit by foot-and-mouth and things went horribly wrong. There was a clear need for us to do something different."

The Wilkinsons then decided to go organic. But it took two years of hard graft to rid their land of 30 years' worth of chemicals and start from scratch.

It was at this point they decided to try something very different and go into cereal production.

Their aim was to produce 100% organic flour, growing, harvesting, milling then packaging it all on site.

But at the time there was very little research into the processing of organic cereals so the Wilkinsons took it upon themselves to do it.

"At the time we didn't really know where to start so I approached all sorts of organic bodies and research institutes and asked 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. It wasn't very helpful."

Despite organic food being the "in" thing in the past few years, just a decade ago it was simply thought of as an expensive alternative to perfectly acceptable cheaper versions.

At the time the family wanted to branch out into organic arable farming. But there was still very little known about it so they were told they needed to take the research upon themselves.

So they joined forces with Newcastle University - one of the leading researchers into organic produce - and set to work.

"They convinced me I should do the research myself. I needed to see how the land

changes, how the pesticides affect the cereals and what I could successfully grow.

"I did a major PHD research project into organic arable farming methods. It was fantastic and I really enjoyed it. We managed to convert the land, and after 30 years of chemicals you really need to detox everything."

Once the land was converted to organic, the Wilkinsons started producing various types of grain. "We realised we had something pretty special straight away."

"It was tremendous. No matter how much chemistry you throw at something, it doesn't work the same way nature does. But none of the industrial millers were interested in taking those varieties so I thought, 'To hell with it, we'll do it ourselves.'"

"When you have an industrial miller who produces massive amounts of produce, we can't match that. We don't produce grain on an industrial scale because that's where chemicals come into it."

And as they say, if you want a

job doing well...So the Wilkinsons invested in a 250-year-old wheel, and last year they set about creating their own flour mill.

"Having worked for so many years on the research behind the varieties, I just knew we had something special. If I didn't have faith in what we were doing I wouldn't have allowed myself to go this far."

"Like any business you're carried along by your enthusiasm to a certain extent but we then have to convince people that we've got something worth buying, which we have managed to do."

Now, with the help of experienced miller Colin Graham who has worked with Greggs, they produce thousands of tonnes of varying types of flour, which is used by top local restaurants and delis, such as Matten Deli and Fenwick.

And most recently they have persuaded the editor of Bread Matters, Andrew Whiteley, to create an exclusive recipe using their new stoneground flour.

"It was very hard work but something we are very passionate about. There are so many loaves of bread on the shelves in shops which just don't have anything natural in them. The bread industry has made an art out of making water stand up."

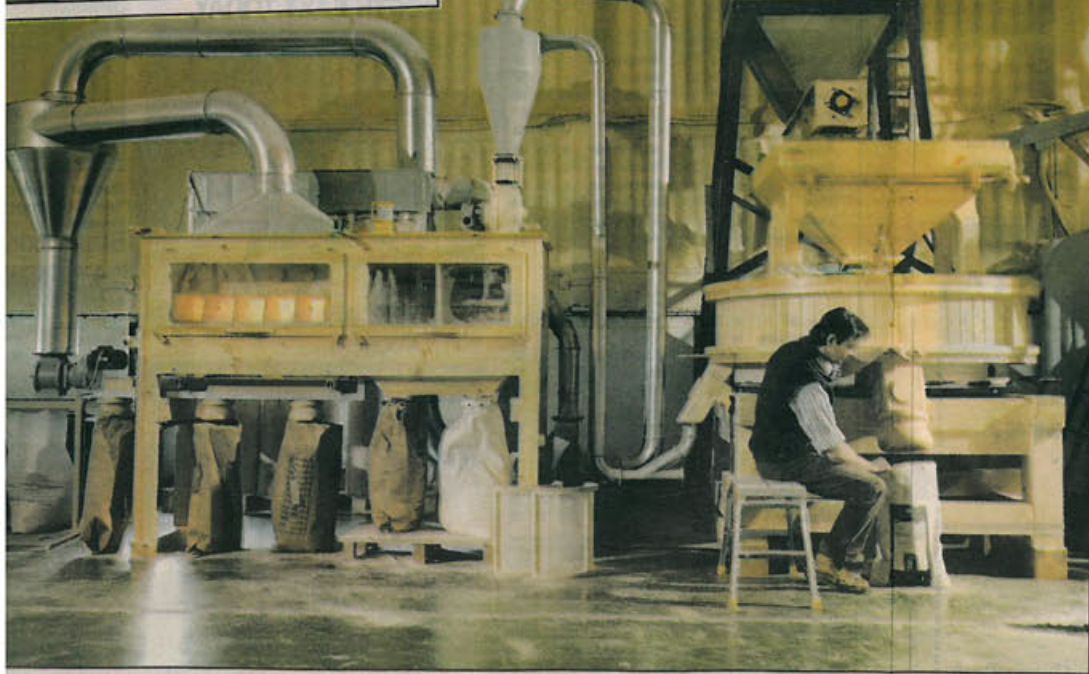
"Our grains produce totally natural, healthy, chemical-free breads and pasta."

"We have got a really good local produce which has all the health benefits of being organic but it also helps people address all the environmental issues."

"It helps cut down food miles. If you're using or buying something that's produced locally you're avoiding the foods that have travelled thousands of miles getting to the UK, damaging the environment. Demand is just going up and up and it's brilliant. The North East has a very strong reputation for producing excellent local produce and this is just another one we should be proud of."

Things you didn't know about GM farming

1. AROUND £120m each year is spent removing pesticides from the UK's water supply, mainly from chemicals used in conventional farming.
2. The average person is responsible for almost 10 tonnes of CO2 emissions.
3. Cox's apples can be sprayed up to 16 times with pesticides.
4. Of the 350 chemicals used in conventional farming, just four are permitted in organic farming.
5. All organic farms and food processors are inspected annually.
6. In April 2004, the number of organic farmers was close to 4,000.
7. Figures from 2005 show that for every 1,000 fruit products bought in the UK, only six are grown here.
8. Only 27 of the 297 additives allowed in regular foods are allowed in organic foodstuffs.



NATURAL GOODNESS: Andrew and Sybille Wilkinson's organic food firm has its own flour mill

PICTURES: DAVE CHARLTON

