



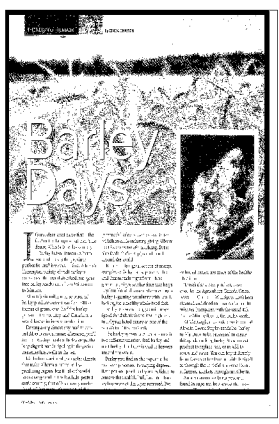
by CINDA CHAVICH



It's not clear what came first – the feed or the forager – but there's no doubt, Alberta is barley country. Barley fattens famous Alberta beef and makes the province perfect for craft brewers. In fact, Alberta's Harrington variety of malt barley is considered the world standard, and goes into barley sandwiches from Milwaukee to Munich.

Alberta's six million or so acres of barley produce more than five million tonnes of grain, over half the barley

grown in the country, and Canada is a world leader in barley production. Driving along almost any road in central Alberta on a summer afternoon, you'll see the nodding heads of barley crops, the long elegant beards rippling in the prairie westerlies like swells in the sea. It's the black soil and the cooler climate that make Alberta a prime barley-producing region, but it's also the wild fescue rangeland in the foothills, perfect cattle country, that offers a ready market for all of that grain. About 80% of the



province's barley is used as feed in the \$4 billion cattle industry, giving Alberta beef its characteristic marbling. But it also feeds chickens, pigs and people around the world.

Because it is a great source of energy, complex carbohydrates, protein, fibre and that miracle ingredient – beta glucan, a unique soluble fibre that helps regulate blood glucose and cholesterol – barley is gaining popularity with people looking for a healthy whole food diet.

Barley is low on the glycemic index (good for diabetics) and low in gluten, too. Oprah listed barley as one of the world's top 10 superfoods.

The barley grown in Alberta comes in two different varieties: feed barley and malt barley. The latter is sold to brewers around the world.

Barley you find in the supermarket has been processed to varying degrees. Both pot and pearl barley are polished to remove the inedible hull, but pearl barley has more of this layer removed. Pot barley, sometimes called Scotch barley or hulled barley, has more of the healthy fibre intact.

There's also a new product, developed by the Agriculture Canada Cereal Research Centre in Winnipeg, that's been steamed and dried so it cooks in just 10 minutes (compared with the usual 40). It's the Minute Rice of the barley world.

At *The Jungle*, a U-pick farm in central Alberta, Leona Staples sends her barley to Manitoba to be processed to create this quick-cooking barley. It's a perfect product to replace rice, or to add to soups and stews. You can buy it directly from Staples at her farm outside Innisfail, or through the Innisfail Growers Co-op at farmers markets throughout Alberta.

Another central-Alberta product, found in supermarkets across the province, is *Hamilton's Barley Flour*, created by the Hamilton family near Olds. This soft, nutty flour is low in gluten, so you can substitute only about ¼ of the wheat

flour in yeast bread recipes. But in quick breads, pancakes, cookies and other recipes that call for flour, you can substitute barley for flour 1:1, adding healthy fibre and a rich toasty flavour to baked goods.

Research is also ongoing at the University of Alberta to "fractionate" barley – that is, break out the healthy beta glucan – so it can be added as a food supplement to everything from breakfast sausages to orange juice.

You may associate whole grain barley with a big steamy bowl of beef and barley soup but there are many other uses for this low-gluten grain. Whole grain barley risotto is turning up on the best restaurant menus across the prairies.

With a spoonful of butter and cream and a little Parmesan cheese, or a bit of yogurt and dried fruit, a pot of plain barley can go from an elegant side dish to a hearty breakfast. Cooled and tossed with fresh vegetables, it's a healthy stand-in for couscous in tabouli or the base for a spicy Jambalaya.

So prairie barley is gaining new respect, even if you're not in the beef or beer business. It's another whole grain to enjoy for both its 100-mile, Western Canadian provenance, and its great, healthy flavour. West

Barley sandwich is slang for beer. I had to look it up. Ed.

ALBERTA BARLEY COMMISSION FACTS:

- Barley was one of the first cereals grown by humans.
- Barley came to Canada with French settlers.
- Most people are familiar with pot barley or pearl barley. But did you know barley also comes in the form of flour, flakes or grits? It can be used to make pancakes, muffins and as a tasty ingredient in breads.
- A bushel of barley yields a bushel of malt. A bushel of malt yields a barrel of beer. That's 333 bottles.
- Barley kernels are polished to remove the inedible hull part of the grain. Pearl barley, the smaller of the two types, is polished three times longer than pot or scotch barley.