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## Bob Moore: A man with a mill and a mission

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Bob Moore's office in the Portland, Ore., suburbs is filled with vintage model airplanes strung from the ceiling, a bucket of hard red wheat and a pile of books by Pliny, a 1st-century philosopher who wrote about the natural world. Moore has a thing for the past, but he can't decide which days of yore he likes best. "I'm interested in everything," he says. From his office window, he admires his 1931 Model A Ford, one of two he drives to work as founder and chief executive of Bob's Red Mill. The man who is interested in everything built his business on one thing that has proved timeless: whole grains.

Sometimes the 82-year-old Moore starts the day at the upright piano on the mill floor. He's a little more relaxed these days, no doubt because on his 81st birthday last year he began transferring ownership of the company, in the form of stock, to his employees. "I like partnerships," he says.

Although Moore's face graces every one of the company's 284 products, which he says will bring in more than \$110 million in revenue this year, you probably haven't heard of him. He keeps a surprisingly low profile, preferring that customers stay on a first-name basis. On each Red Mill bag, Moore serves as folksy ambassador, wearing a derby cap, glasses and a bolo. In real life, he adds a red jacket. If Whole Foods sells a latte-fueled dream of healthy '90s decadence, Bob's Red Mill peddles a more populist fantasy of prairie days, a manufactured nostalgia.

In reality, Moore is harking back to early-1900s wisdom by pushing whole grains, high fiber and complex carbohydrates. Doing so positioned him ahead of the curve 37 years ago, when he opened his first mill with his wife, Charlee, and two of his three sons, in Redding, Calif. Moore's Flour Mill, as it was called then, had nine employees.

Today, the "Mill" is an impressive 320,000-square-foot building the company moved to in 2007; it is flanked by silos on the side of a highway in Milwaukie, Ore., about 15 minutes from downtown Portland. Inside are putty-colored Danish-made mills, each fitted with a millstone that grinds whole grains into cornmeal, flax meal, brown rice flour and more.



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Though mechanized, the mills are consistent with “slow food” thinking. Moore rejects a faster metal-roller process, which he says heats the products and shortens their shelf lives. “We built these machines,” he says. “The others that existed, they screamed, got hot and went 94 miles per hour. I don’t live my life that way, and I don’t want my food that way.”

His father’s death of a heart attack at age 49 planted the seeds of Moore’s health-consciousness, as did early exposure to his wife’s grandmother’s books, such as “Let’s Get Well” by Adele Davis. “I thought she was a real nut,” he says. “Now I make my living being a nut.”

Moore honed his work ethic as the owner of a gas station in Los Angeles in the 1950s but eventually moved his wife and three sons to the resort town of Mammoth Lakes to escape the L.A. smog. There, his second gas station business failed miserably, and the Moores ended up so broke they had to move the family into an empty rental property owned by their minister.

Moore eventually found work and gradually saved enough to buy a five-acre goat farm listed in the “too late to classify” section of the newspaper.

“It was made for us,” he says. “It was heaven on earth: a little farmhouse with chicken sheds, a workshop and little outbuildings.” His sons had an egg route. The family began to shop at two local health-food stores, and Charlee began to experiment with whole grains.

Then he read “John Goffe’s Mill,” which chronicles how an archaeologist with no previous experience restored a rotted ancestral mill. Emboldened by the story, Moore wrote letters to 20 companies that made mill equipment and ultimately located some in North Carolina. The makings of Moore’s first mill sat in the shop behind his house for a few years until he left his last employer, J.C. Penney, and enlisted his sons to set up what became Moore’s Flour Mill, in Redding. That was 1974. (One son still runs it, providing the company’s granola and corn grits.)

Deciding that the business couldn’t sustain them and their sons’ families, Bob and Charlee left the mill with other plans. “We disposed of our assets, turned them to cash and moved to Portland to attend seminary,” to read the Bible in its original languages. While walking with Greek flashcards one day, they passed an old mill for sale — and bought it.

“Charlee did the bookwork. I printed the bags on an 1890s platen press,” Moore says. “I was going to make a lot of money in 1988.” That never happened. An arsonist burned the mill to the ground that year, and Bob had to start all over again at age 59. Charlee was 60. “We had to do a little thinking,” he says.

In a health-food movement defined by disagreement over what exactly “health food” is, Bob’s Red Mill products commonly are loved by contentious camps: vegans, hippies, celiacs, back-to-the-landers, raw foodists, Seventh Day Adventists and even the (former) Y2K-ers.

Necessarily product-driven, Moore has a vantage point different from those of other nutritional reformers, such as Alice Waters and Michael Pollan, who offer broad and pointed critiques on entire food and community systems. Moore’s contribution is that he offers the grains at a reasonable price and makes them accessible, regardless of where you live.

Artist Alyce Santoro receives 25-pound sacks of Bob's Red Mill products halfway up a mountain in West Texas, where she lives mostly off the grid, in a house built around a camper. She usually orders potato starch and tapioca flour online. The fact that Santoro can get provisions at her solar-powered house on a mountain, and that urbanites can buy chia seed and teff in big grocery store chains, might make Moore one of the most effective nutritional reformers today, for his distribution strategy alone.

Beginning with the Fred Meyer stores in 1978, Moore's contracts with large grocery chains and distributors grew. Around the time of the 1988 fire and later, people were looking to Portlanders as trendsetters in the natural-food market. Distributors were also consolidating, and Moore continued to use a strategy he describes as "pulling the product through the public," which means establishing relationships with stores and customers, as opposed to CEOs. Moore had few competitors; not many companies were willing to sell whole grains when the profit margin for processed, packaged cereals was so much greater.

Another factor in the company's growth is this: Since 1985, Bob's has made gluten-free products, and the plant has one of the most stringent testing protocols in the industry, including an in-house lab. Moore reads the results himself at least three times a day and is especially proud of the company's oats, grown in Saskatchewan on acreage dedicated to gluten-free grains.

Before the fire, Moore even helped the Seattle-based Gluten Intolerance Group buy xanthan gum; he bought an \$880 container and sold them half of it. Xanthan gum is now one of the company's most popular products.

Moore got more serious about gluten-free products after the fire, in the new plant. "I didn't know anything about gluten-free back then," Moore admits. "I thought they were nuts. But you gradually come around."

Shauna Ahern, who writes a blog called the Gluten-Free Girl and the Chef and has a cookbook of the same name, readily sings the praises of Moore, whose company advertises on her Web site. "Bob is a god," she says. Even before Ahern made her living writing gluten-free recipes and cookbooks, she was devoted. "A half-teaspoon of gluten can make me sick for three days," she said, and with other brands, contamination was common.

Ahern and her husband and co-author, chef Danny Ahern, order five to 10 pounds of Bob's gluten-free flours every week, through Amazon, and go through it quickly. "We do four to five rounds of testing before we post a recipe," Ahern explains. Danny's restaurant, the Hardware Store, is now making gluten-free fish and chips, using Bob's products.

Moore has made giving part of his mission. Last year, he and his wife donated \$5 million to Oregon State University to develop a center to study whole grains and child obesity, and over \$1 million to the local naturopathic college, also to study child obesity. Moore discloses little about his future plans, aside from saying that he'd like to go on an archaeological dig one day, near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

He will say that in the near future, Bob's Red Mill is planning to get into lentils, beans and other legumes. "These products have fallen away because the big guys don't like it," he says, citing the slim

profit margin. “You make 30 percent instead of 400 percent, but we thrive on that.”

Moore thinks one of the reasons he makes money is that he cares about more than money. Even back in the gas station days, he says, “I’ve always felt like two people: There were things I really believed in, on one hand, and the necessity to make a living and do a good job.”

Nonetheless, his parting words to me were not exactly about nutrition: “Eat your oats. Keep me in business.”

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