

Beyond the Law: Beth George, baker

AS YOU BAKE, SO YOU eat," goes an old maxim. If you are one of Spelt Right's customers, you eat well, enjoying artisan baked products made from a grain called spelt. Spelt Right is the creation of Beth George, a lawyer at Wright and Associates in Portland, who maintains a practice in product liability defense. She recently sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her interests.

interview and photos
by Daniel J. Murphy



Please tell me about your company, Spelt Right.

Our company, Spelt Right, is a baking company that specializes in baked goods made with organic spelt flour. I don't call it an organic baking company yet, because we're not certified organic, but 95 percent of the ingredients we use are organic. I started the company in June 2007 because I couldn't find spelt baked goods in the marketplace that were kid-friendly, and about three years ago we learned that my son, who's now ten, is wheat-sensitive. He had issues connected with wheat, which prompted me to start baking in spelt.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, how would you describe spelt?

Spelt is a species in the botanical genus *triticum*. It is an ancient cousin of what we know as common wheat, *triticum aestivum*. Although it is not what most people consider wheat, the Food Allergen Labeling Act of 2004 requires that spelt be labeled as a wheat product because it is in the genus *triticum*. So often on packaging for spelt products, you will see an explanation that it is a different species. Spelt has a nutty taste and is very nutritious. It dates back about five thousand years to Mesopotamia as one of the original five grains mentioned in the Bible. Some people find that it is easier to digest than common wheat because its gluten is water-soluble. Spelt also differs from common wheat in that it is more difficult to harvest, requiring that you thresh it, crack the outer hull, and then mill it. Common wheat requires only the two steps of threshing and milling. This, along with its scarcity and heirloom nature, accounts for the difference in expense for spelt. We just love this grain.

Tell us about Spelt Right's current product line.

Our product line started with bagels. We hope to keep expanding it. The reason why I started with bagels was that I asked my son what common wheat product he missed. He said bagels, so we started with that. And then we developed a kid-friendly pizza dough and, I have to tell you, everyone just loves it, whether they love spelt or wheat. I also make a focaccia, which is a kind of soft, airy flat bread. We use that as sandwich

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bread for my son now. So, these are our three bread products we sell commercially. As we grow, we intend to develop other products for sale.

Where can we find those products?

In greater Portland, they are available for retail sale at Royal River Natural Foods in Freeport, Lois' Natural Marketplace in Scarborough, and at Whole Foods and Fat Baxter's in Portland. They also are available at Axis Natural Foods in Auburn from time to time. They are currently available in the fresh bread sections at these stores, but by the time this article is published, they should be available in the freezer sections as well. Bates College also has our bagels on its dining services menu, and, hopefully, soon they will be offering pizza using our dough. Spelt Right products are available at cafés and restaurants in Portland, such as North Star Café, Hot SuppA!, Artemisia Cafe, West End Deli, Portland Coffee Roasters, The Pepper Club/Good Egg, and a few other establishments. Our customer base continues to grow.

How did you go from your home kitchen to developing a larger scale operation?

I was fortunate to meet a baker named Dave Moran, who has a bakehouse in Portland, which is adjacent to an art space, Zero Station, which a friend of mine owns. At Zero Station, friends and I created a public forum space, known as Citizen Salon, where we have held educational, informational, political events for several years. The owner of the gallery knows the owner of the bakehouse, and an introduction was made.

What type of feedback have you received from customers?

I think we have a fan club! People are very happy with the product. They're happy to have an alternative, and even wheat-eaters like the baked goods. I have an email list going, so I have correspondence going on with individual customers. We keep getting repeat orders, so I think that's a good sign. Almost everyone who has had one of our bagels says it is lighter than a regular bagel, or that it doesn't have a heavy "sit-in-your-stomach" feel. Some have even commented that it is the best bagel they have ever had. The pizza dough has a following, which has led to

some recipe sharing. For now, I send the notices and comments through my Spelt Right email list. Soon we will have an active blog on our website, www.speltrightbaking.com, where we can share recipes and inform people of events.

What is it about baking that gives you joy?

It must be the Mediterranean in me that loves feeding people. Anybody who comes to my house knows that there is always food there. Also, I get such a different response from people when I say I'm a lawyer and a baker. I usually start with, "Well, in one life, I'm a lawyer, and in another, I'm a baker." People are very interested in these two contrasts. Once I share Spelt Right samples, it feels like I've made a lifelong friend.

Has your family been involved in the business as well?

Yes, very much so. This is a family endeavor. It started because my son Spencer has food sensitivities. A lot of food sensitivities, not just wheat. We've found that artificial colors, artificial flavors, high-fructose corn syrup—the kind of things that sneak their way into foods that are marketed to kids—all impact him adversely. And when he was much younger he was really exhibiting a lot of issues, both behaviorally and with his digestive and immune systems. I wanted to know what was causing the problems, and it took us years, but finally we were able to pinpoint certain foods and food additives.

All of the kids are involved now. We have two daughters, Emma, fifteen; and Olivia, five. We have named bagels after all the kids. There's the Everything Emma, which has sesame, poppy, garlic, onion, salt on top of it. It's pretty spicy. There's the Outrageous Olivia, which is pretty sugary and sweet. And then there's the Simply Spencer, which is our classic, plain bagel.

Olivia also drew Spelt Right's logo. As with most everything else with this company, it happened kind of organically. We were at my mother's house baking and I was afraid to let her near the dough. I gave her a piece of paper and a pencil and said, "Why don't you just draw me a picture." She ended up drawing this incredible picture that can be interpreted several ways, but it looks like a bagel board loaded with bagels with a heart handle. So a close friend of mine took that drawing and stylized it and it became our logo. And I cannot leave out my husband, Tim Kane, who is a VP at MECA [Maine College

of Art], who does all the bookkeeping, some of the delivering, works on the website, and has offered incredible moral support. My mother, Helen, as well, who is eighty-two, has offered great moral support. She constantly reminds me, "You can do this!" and shares stories of dedication and perseverance of her fifty-plus years in business with my father. Also on days when I am baking, she shows up at 7:00 a.m. to put the kids on the bus. Everybody's helping; it's a family effort.

You mentioned your two separate worlds of baking and practicing law. Has there been any intersection of these two words?

Absolutely. My son's health issues prompted me to explore nutrition as an avenue for helping kids. For the ten years prior to working with Steve Wright at Wright & Associates, I represented kids in crisis, both in the juvenile defense system and serving as a guardian *ad litem*. I felt my personal and professional worlds colliding as I was trying to sort out the issues with my son and work with my juvenile clients.

I am really bothered that so many diagnoses are being placed on kids and that so many drugs are being prescribed. After my own personal experience with my son and witnessing some of my young clients being prescribed with up to eight different drugs, I started speaking out in court, talking to policy makers and others, saying that there was something wrong with the paradigm. But somehow, I felt my voice wasn't being heard.

In starting Spelt Right, I was hoping to use the company as a vehicle to get the word out—my "soapbox"—to speak on the role that nutrition and diet play in the wellbeing of children. And so that is one of the missions of Spelt Right: to get the word out that we really need to be paying attention to what our kids are eating and how they are responding to different foods. For some, wheat may be a problem; for others, it might be corn or eggs or some other food. And, I think, for everyone, high-fructose corn syrup and artificial additives serve no useful purpose, and can be potentially harmful.

Of course, I am not saying that diet is the end-all, but before we're quick to diagnose children with anything, I think that we need to examine their diets. And so I'm out there telling "our story" on our packaging and website, getting articles published and written, trying to talk to different groups, trying to get the word out. This is one of our missions, and I hope we are going to make an impact.

What is the best advice you've ever received?

Bob Carter, who's one of the founders of Fresh Samantha, and his wife, Julie, are close friends of our family. At dinner together, one night, I asked, "How did you start Fresh Samantha?"

I was looking for them to give me clear answers, and say first A, then B, then C, then D. Bob looked at me and said, "Beth, you just do it."

I asked, "That's it?" and he said, "Yes."

And he is right. If you try to plan every step along the way, there is no way you will be able to get it done, because it's overwhelming. So along the way I've taken baby steps. First with the licensing, and the corporation, then finding the space, and then just marketing, going out to many places I eat and shop and saying, "Hey, have any interest in trying my bagel? Let me tell you my story."

And one other person who ties for giving the best advice is my Dad. He's no longer around, he died in 2002. He did not know I was going to do this, but I remember in high school I was a pretty intense kid wanting to do well at everything.

He looked at me and said, "The best thing that could happen to you is if you fail at something, because you'll get up and realize that you survived and you will go on." And so it was my Dad who took that whole fear of failure out of me. Just keep your eye on the prize and just go for it. That's it.

Thank you for your time. ⚖️