

1997 Harvest Review

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1997 wheat harvest review

Mark Charlton

The 1997 common wheat harvest of the members of the European Union is provisionally estimated at around 56.6 million tonnes, lower than last season by almost 4%.

There are three large producers of wheat in the EU. France is the largest at around 33m tonnes, Germany at 19.6m tonnes and the UK estimated at close to 15m tonnes. The other members of the EU are not insignificant producers of wheat, but their individual yields are each below 5m tonnes ranging from 0.27m to 4.7m tonnes.

The French and UK 1997 harvests have been more affected by the growing conditions this season compared to the German and other EU members' wheat crops. This has primarily resulted in grain being produced of a lower specific weight and in a few regions, the Hagberg falling numbers have been affected.

French wheat

The protein content of the French wheat crop is slightly up on last season with an average figure of 10.4% at 14% moisture. However, this increase in the protein content is partly attributable to the much lower specific weight of the 1997 crop compared to previous seasons, showing a reduction of almost 6.0kg/hl. From a flour milling point of view, the lower grain specific weights have resulted in a reduced flour extraction rate and increased flour colour grade. The baking performance of the 1997 crop French breadmaking wheats is still good provided a high flour extraction rate is not expected from the mill.

On a varietal aspect, the quantity of the good breadmaking wheats (BPS) has decreased slightly over the past four seasons, but there has been an increase in the quantity of the non-breadmaking types (BAU) being grown in the north and north west of France with the predominant varieties being Tremie and Ritmto.

German wheat

The German harvest this season has been very similar to the 1996 crop with the exception of the slightly reduced protein content.

The German E grade wheats (the Elite grade) are mostly exported from the former East Germany and the protein content of these wheats is expected to be close to 12.2% for cargoes

offered to other member states. The Hagberg falling number, flour extraction rate potential, gluten strength and baking performance are very good and similar to the 1996 crop.

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French Wheat Crop 1997: Key Points Compared to 1996

Increased protein content by 0.2%

Lower specific weight by 6kg/hl

Lower Hagberg falling number

Reduced flour extraction rate

Increased flour colour grade

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UK Wheat Crop 1997: Key Points Compared to 1996

Increased protein content

Lower specific weight

Reduced flour extraction rate

Increased flour colour grade

Flour damaged starch levels up 3-5%

Gluten strength weaker and more extensible

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UK Wheat Crop 1997

Group 1 breadmaking types: wheat quality	96	97
Protein % at 14% moisture	10.9	11.7
Hagberg falling number	336	279
Specific weight (kg/hl)	79.4	74.6

Group 2 breadmaking types: wheat quality	96	97
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Protein % at 14% moisture	10.7	11.3
Hagberg falling number	327	302
Specific weight (kg/hl)	79.3	75.9

Group 3 biscuit types: wheat quality	96	97
Protein % at 14% moisture	9.1	10.2
Hagberg falling number	257	255
Specific weight (kg/hl)	75.0	72.4

1997 Crop Wheats: Baking Performance

Canadian Western Red Spring Very Good

United States DNS Very Good

German E Grade Very Good

French (bread types) Variable*

English (bread types) Variable*

**Dependent on grain specific weight and Hagberg FN*

Home grown wheat

The most significant features of our own harvest this season are the reduction in the grain specific weight of all the four groups of wheats by between 2.5 and 3.0kg/hl. The lower specific weight may have partly contributed to the increased grain protein content of the 1997 crop over and above that of last season.

With the lower specific weights, this has reduced the white flour extraction rate potential but also there has been an increase in the flour colour grades. The grain endosperm texture is harder milling than the 1996 crop with an increase in flour damaged starch levels of between 3% and 5%. The gluten characteristics of all the UK grades of wheat have been found to be less resistant with slightly greater extensibility compared to the previous two seasons.

The baking performance of the bread-making type wheats is good, but only, as with the French wheats, so long as a high extraction rate is not expected from the mill.

The quality of the Riband and Consort for use in biscuit making is similar to last year, although for those customers looking for low protein soft flours for cake making, this may be difficult always to achieve due to the increased protein content of this year's crop.

From a varietal aspect, the level of the Group 3 wheats (biscuit/cake types) is reasonably static. There has been an increase in the amount of Group 2 wheats being grown over the past four seasons which is primarily due to the varieties Soissons and Rialto.

Summary

UK millers this season will still have home grown wheat as a major part of their grist, although there is greater regional variability this season. The use of imported wheats from Canada and America will continue, especially as the quality of these wheats from the 1997 crop has been shown to be of good quality. Millers are almost certain to import German E grade wheats for use in the higher protein flours for breadmaking, and for the specialist markets, the right quality French wheats will be sourced.

Q: If I interpret what you had to say correctly, the yield from the harvest was rather high, but the extraction rate is likely to be low. It seems that the extraction rate would increase the price of flour but the high yield would keep the price of flour down. Could you give us some indication?

The harvest has given us a good yield- you're talking about 15 million tonnes. But don't forget within part of that, the European set-aside has been reduced, so there is more acreage going down to wheat from the 1997 crop than there was from the 1996 crop. You could say that had we not had that change, the yield would have been down, so it's swings and roundabouts on figures.

In terms of prices, that really isn't my remit! But you could say that the flour miller has not got an easy option this year. Farmers are very reluctant to sell their grain. We are having to import wheats from Germany and France, from the US and Canada. Some milling companies have imported from Denmark, some from Sweden.

The wheat on our own doorstep has got to be sifted before the farmers send it on. Some of the grain has got exceedingly low specific weights. Because farmers get their October or November cheque, they are not in a hurry to sell their wheat.

What they may be doing after Christmas is looking at their grain, gravity separating it, cleaning it up and trying to get the best price for it. At the moment there are flour millers who are struggling to get the wheat off the farms in the UK.

Q: In view of Chancellor Brown's decision that we're going to keep a strong pound, will you and your competitors if you are bringing wheat in from North America be able to keep prices down? I might suggest lower prices for flour, especially for the small bakers who are subsidising the big ones!

A: Yes, we are still importing wheats from the US and Canada but we are not **using an enormous** quantity of these wheats. We are primarily sourcing from the UK and Germany. But we're using those [North American] wheats because of their inherent protein quality and It's better than adding dried vital gluten to make it up to the specification you want.

That natural protein is far better for you. But you don't get such a good extraction rate as you do with European wheats. It's at least 3.5% lower, so you may pay accordingly.

Q: Due to the climatic conditions of this year's harvest, are you finding, or are you expecting to find, higher microbial counts in wheats?

A: **The** survey by the CCFRA has already started and the results are out in the later part of November. But there has been regional variation and you could anticipate that if we're not prudent with our wheat sourcing *we* could encounter problems of that nature A lot of the wheat has been wet during harvesting and will need drying.

But when you look at the rest of the wheat that's come through, we haven't got a problem in terms of the micro counts, I'm optimistic at the moment but there isn't sufficient data to give us reassurance.