

# Raw Materials

FOOD INGREDIENTS



Warburtons contracts directly with 600 Canadian farmers who must meet strict production guidelines, including additional cleaning of harvest equipment, separate storage, and additional documentation.

## Certified Wheat Seed Ensures Quality of the Loaf

Quality products start with good relationships | BY **BERNARD TOBIN**

**W**hen it comes to food ingredients, few food manufacturers can match the quality assurance and traceability claims of Warburtons, the United Kingdom's largest independent baker.

A tour through the company's website tells the story of how Warburtons has been building a reputation for quality since Thomas and Ellen Warburton founded the company in 1870. And that commitment continues today, said Brett Warburton, who represents the family's fifth generation to run the business.

"We go to great lengths to deliver the freshest, best tasting, and highest quality products. Unlike most bakers, we don't simply buy

flour. Instead, we have hundreds of farmers growing our own wheat," he said. "We work with experts, our partners who are best in their field, to ensure consistent quality without compromise, every step of the way from seed to crumb."

With 14 bakeries and 15 depots located throughout the U.K., the company's commitment to quality breads, bakery products, and rolls starts with relationships it has cultivated with farmers. About 50% of the wheat used in Warburtons' products is grown by U.K. farmers, and the other half is grown by Canadian farmers who began cultivating specific wheat varieties for Warburtons in the mid-1990s.

## Quality Starts with the Seed

The company's quality commitment starts with certified wheat seed, according to Adam Dyck, Warburtons' Canadian program manager. "We're strong supporters of certified seed and the seed industry, both in Canada and the U.K." Dyck works with grain companies to manage contracts with more than 600 Canadian farmers in the prairie provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

"High-quality, premium bread products is Warburtons' business," he said. "We're not millers, we're strictly bakers. We require high quality CWRS (Canada Western Red Spring) wheat as part of our grist."

In the mid-1990s, Warburtons was not satisfied with the consistency of the wheat it was getting from Canada. As a result, the company started its own identity preserved (IP) program that would allow it to test many CWRS varieties and select the ones with the required attributes. The company began contracting directly with farmers to produce the chosen wheat varieties in specific growing regions.

"We did a lot of research and found that not all CWRS varieties perform the same in the Warburtons' baking process. Specific attributes contribute to shelf life, color, freshness, and overall appearance of the bread," Dyck said. "We know that the varieties we're contracting make that loaf special and that it will stand out from our competition."

Those valuable attributes, however, can be lost if preferred varieties are commingled with other wheat. That's where certified seed and IP make a difference, he said.

All Canadian wheat produced for Warburtons is grown from certified seed. Canadian seed growers that produce certified seed must follow stringent production requirements to ensure quality standards. Third-party official inspectors from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspect certified seed fields and seed processing plants to ensure that all quality assurance requirements are met.

The seed is inspected for varietal purity and must meet standards for parent-seed pedigree, minimum isolation distances, land-use history, and maximum levels of off-types or other varieties, explained Dale Adolphe, executive director of the Canadian Seed Growers Association. Germination is tested in government-accredited seed labs, and field and processing plant inspections verify that seed is free from impurities such as weeds and other crop kinds. In contrast, common seed is multiplied without any officially recognized third-party inspections to confirm varietal purity or quality.



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## Requiring More of Farmers

"We do require that our farmers do things above and beyond compared to when they are growing generic wheat for the Canadian Wheat Board," Dyck said. "We're asking them to do additional cleaning of their equipment, provide separate storage, and complete additional documentation." Warburtons also requires growers to complete an on-farm food safety program.

Without certified seed, Dyck said, the Warburtons program would be very difficult to rationalize and maintain. "We have selected these varieties for specific reasons; if we didn't have certified seed, we wouldn't know what we were getting.

Those excellent bake characteristics that are in our selected varieties would be lost.

"We understand the importance of wheat and how it can directly relate to our end product," he said. "It makes a big contribution to Warburtons' commitment to excellence from the seed to the crumb."

Certified seed and the required steps for identity preservation also ensure traceability. "If there are any problems, we can trace all the way back through the value chain, if needed," Dyck said.

Warburtons' commitment to sourcing wheat comes at a premium, but the company believes the benefits outweigh the costs. One of the strengths of the program, Dyck believes, is the strong relationships the company has forged with plant breeders.

"We're trying to give them as much information as possible to let them know what Warburtons is looking for in new varieties. That dialogue with the breeder is helping us pinpoint some wheat varieties and crosses that are working better for us. In the last two years, the breeders here in Canada have come across more lines than ever before that are near fits to our program." ■

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