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Belgrade outfit keeps its circles small

BY DENNIS GAUB
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One of the more innovative businesses in Gallatin County – an example of value-added agriculture – lies at the end of a side road in Belgrade's Bruce Industrial Park.

Montana Gluten Free, a limited liability corporation with three partners, advertises itself as providing oat-based products that are "Gluten Free from Farm to Fork." Six full-time employees and three to four part-timers, depending on production needs, work at the firm.

Gary Iverson, who with Dean Miller and Bruce Wright own the business, said Montana Gluten Free provides Naked Oats, its overall product name for oat flour and oat groats (kernels of grain inside the hull) that are used for bread, baking and pancake mixes.

Naked Oats turn up as ingredients in energy bars bearing labels such as Cliff's, Kashi and Kraft Carnation, according to Iverson.

"We turn out a semi load of groats every day," he said, explaining that the company contracts with growers spread from Eastern Montana (Hinsdale) to southern Idaho (Grace).

The company also has found a market in Israel. Naked Oats meet kosher



Dennis Gaub

Karen Miller, owner of Sister's Bakery, and Gary Iverson, one of three partners of Montana Gluten Free that produces Naked Oats among others, stand in the production facility in Bruce Industrial Park. Karen shows a loaf of bread in her bakery on Kennedy Street. She uses the products of Montana Gluten Free for her wares.



requirements and comply with special Passover kosher requirements when requested.

Montana Gluten Free sent its first shipment to Israel in the 2009-2010 time period. That was not a full container. A full container went to the Jewish nation in about the fall of 2015

or 2016, Iverson said.

Another Passover kosher shipment of the company's oats is scheduled in the fall of 2019, which will prompt an unusual harvest that Iverson has seen

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before.

Generally, a rabbi from Denver comes to Montana and Idaho and supervises the harvest by riding the combine cutting grain destined for Israel. The rabbi then signs the bags and packages loaded on a pallet headed overseas. A rabbi from Israel has participated in the harvest at least once.

"Jewish people can eat anything we make" because Montana Gluten Free abides by general kosher requirements, but Passover requirements are distinct. They include a ban on coffee, water or any other liquids being taken into the plant because even a drop of moisture falling on oats makes them nonkosher food.

"We charge them a little extra for it. It's a lot of fun. I really enjoy the rabbis," said Iverson, a Conrad native and 1967 graduate of Montana State University.

Montana Gluten Free came out of the Great Northern Grower Cooperative, which started in 2004. On January 1, 2009, the Iverson-Miller-Wright group spun off while the cooperative concentrated on production of camelina oil as biodiesel fuel. That was when diesel prices hovered in the \$5 per gallon range.

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Miller's daughter, Karen Miller, operates one local business that uses Naked Oats. Her Sister's Bakery on Kennedy Street sells a variety of gluten-free baked goods.

Miller formerly lived in Boise, Idaho, where she owned a bakery-deli business until her husband died in 2014.

"He (Dean Miller) says, come home. He built me a bakery here," Karen said.

At first, father and daughter attended markets with dry Naked Oats products for sale, but potential customers wanted more.

"People said if it was just baked," they would buy the Millers' wares, Karen said, so she heeded customer wishes.

"We pump out the bread. On Friday, we did 75 loaves of bread," she said, adding that the bread is fresh with no preservatives.

"We pride ourselves on it," she said.