

The story, and
the man, behind
Bob's Red Mill

Grains of truth

BY MARK RAY

THE FIRST THING you should know about Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods is that there really is a Bob. He's 88-year-old Bob Moore, he started the company with his wife, Charlee, four decades ago, and he still oversees daily operations at the Milwaukie, Oregon, company.

The second thing you should know is that there really is—or rather was—a red mill. Back in 1978, when the Moores were enjoying semiretirement in Milwaukie, they stumbled across a shuttered feed mill. Already passionate about the value of whole-grain foods, they bought it and started milling nutritious whole-grain flours and meal with the sort of stone grinding wheels that had been in use since the days of the Roman Empire.

Within a decade, the mill was producing about 120 different products and closing in on \$2 million in annual sales. Then disaster struck: On June 15, 1988, an arsonist torched the building (which Moore had long ago painted red). Although fire insurance covered only a fraction of the loss, Bob was determined to rebuild, both to continue spreading his message of better health through whole grains and to take care of the 17 employees who relied on him. Less than six months later, the business had moved into a new space and resumed production. And it hasn't stopped grinding grain since.

Today, the company employs more than 500 people at its plant, its distribution center and the Bob's Red Mill Whole Grain Store, Restaurant and Bakery, which together have more than 12 acres under

Bob Moore, founder of Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods, above, loves to spread the word of better health through whole grains.

roof. The company churns out more than 400 different products, everything from flour to cereal to baking mixes (Moore claims to be the miller and purveyor of the widest assortment of whole-grain foods in the world). In keeping with the company's long-standing belief in healthy living, Bob's offers an extensive array of organic and non-genetically modified products, as well as nutritional boosters and paleo-friendly products. It now uses a separate, dedicated facility to handle gluten-free products—a product line it launched in 1985—which eliminates the risk of cross-contamination.

Don't let the company's massive production volume fool you, however. Cereal chemists test incoming grains, and all products undergo further testing during production. Even better—at least for those who work at the Milwaukie headquarters—chefs make test batches of bread, pancakes and cookies every day.

Last October, the company's oats got put to a special test when Bob entered the 23rd annual Golden Spurtle World Porridge Making Championship in Carrbridge, Scotland. (A spurtle is a traditional cooking implement used to stir porridge, as oatmeal is called in the UK.) Bob bested the competition, bringing the Golden Spurtle home to America. "I've dedicated my entire life to promoting the benefits of whole grains—and, in particular, oats," he said at the time. "So to capture this world championship really feels like a

COMPANY INFO

COMPANY Bob's Red Mill Natural Foods

FOUNDERS Bob and Charlee Moore

EMPLOYEES 525

HEADQUARTERS Milwaukie, Oregon

PHONE 1-800-349-2173

WEBSITE bobsredmill.com

ITEMS AT COSTCO

Organic Quick Cooking Steel Cut Oats, Organic Flaxseed, Gluten-Free All-Purpose Baking Flour, Gluten-Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour (selection varies by location)

QUOTE ABOUT COSTCO

"Bob's Red Mill shares many of the same business values as Costco. They pay their employees well, which I do (I keep them forever), and they treat their business partners with respect, which is something that [not] all of the buyers and retailers around the world ... do. I love working with them. They have an integrity in everything they do."

—Bob Moore, founder and CEO



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pinnacle moment."

Bob is quick to point out that he won the competition with the same Organic Quick Cooking Steel Cut Oats carried by Costco (Item #731962). "You folks truly carry the 'world's best oatmeal!'" he says.

Today, packages of the "world's best oatmeal" prominently feature the story of the Golden Spurtle competition. They also feature the words "an employee-owned company." To celebrate his 81st birthday in 2010, Bob surprised his workers by giving them the company (in the form of an employee stock ownership plan). Much like he had rebuilt his old mill in part to take care of his workers, he restructured his company to ensure that they, like his customers, could benefit for generations to come from what he calls "life insurance you eat." **C**

Mark Ray is a freelance writer (and Costco member) based in Louisville, Kentucky.