

A SCHÉIWESCH

GUARDIAN OF THE WHEAT

François Kieffer doesn't bake ordinary bread. He sows, harvests and mills his own grain to create loaves that revive ancient cereal varieties for contemporary enjoyment. A Schéiwesch in Moutfort is his small-scale antidote to the overregulated food industry.

TEXT CHAREL HEINEN
PHOTOS MARC DOSTERT

‘A Schéiwesch’ – meaning ‘shepherd’s house’ in old Luxembourgish – is the name of François Kieffer’s farmhouse in Moutfort. Step inside this beautiful building and you are instantly transported into another world, where jars of grain line the entrance hall – from needle-thin to bean-sized, pale to dark – all personally collected, selected and propagated by Kieffer.

The former heating and plumbing business owner now spends his retirement practising a craft that effectively no longer exists in Luxembourg: ‘paysan-boulangier’ – a self-sufficient grain-to-bread artisan. It’s been a long journey to get here. *“I’ve always been interested in plants and soil,”* he says. As a young installation technician, Kieffer fitted a steam system in a bakery and witnessed something that stayed with him: health and safety inspectors would regularly turn up in protective suits and spray the entire installation with chemicals. *“The smell was quite strong. It turned out to be lindane, which has since been banned because it’s carcinogenic. But people had been ingesting it in their bread for years.”*

ANCIENT GRAINS,
MODERN BREAD

After many years of working with wheat, Kieffer came to realise that modern and ancestral wheat varieties are fundamentally different. *“Around fifteen years ago, I started growing a few old varieties in the garden, just to see what they were like – because nobody seemed to know anything about them anymore,”*



recalls Kieffer. Over time, his collection grew through exchanges with like-minded growers and networks such as France’s Réseau Semences Paysannes.

The varieties Kieffer works with tell a story spanning millennia. Einkorn, for example, is the oldest cultivated species of wheat, with very little genetic change since its domestication. Around 17,000 years ago, einkorn crossed naturally with a wild grass and became emmer. Through further natural hybridisation, emmer gave rise to durum wheat, used today for pasta, and finally modern bread wheat, which now grows in almost every field.

Modern wheat has been optimised over decades for a single purpose: yield. *“An old wheat contains about half as much gluten and a third of the tenacity of today’s wheat,”* explains Kieffer. Gluten is the protein in wheat that gives dough its structure. The more tenacious and sticky it is, the harder it is for the body to digest. At the same time, water-soluble proteins – which contain all essential amino acids and are easily absorbed by the body – have been reduced in modern wheat from eight percent to just one or two percent. Added to this are enzyme inhibitors that protect the plant from pests but can slow digestion in the gut. *“For thirty or forty years, breeding has focused on making wheat less susceptible to fungal disease. I suspect that’s had its impact on modern wheat,”* he adds.

THE CRAFT OF
ARTISAN BREAD

For Kieffer, good bread comes down to three things: *“First, the grain: a wheat that hasn’t been over-bred. Second, the milling: wholemeal, freshly milled, with the germ and oils still intact. And third, the baking: not two hours with yeast, but at least six hours with real sourdough.”*

Kieffer mills his own flour fresh, twice a week. Industrial flour is often made with the germ removed, because the oils in it can go rancid – great for shelf life, but at the expense of vitamins and flavour. At A Schéiwesch, everything stays in.



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When it comes to sourdough, Kieffer is uncompromising. Sourdough is a natural culture of lactic acid bacteria and wild yeasts that slowly and gently ferment the dough. Industrial yeast works faster, but more aggressively. *“Industrial yeast behaves very differently to sourdough. If I use even a little of it, the aggressive yeast takes over. That’s not the idea,”* he stresses.

Kieffer sees the natural resilience of his plants as further proof of the soundness of his approach. Old wheat varieties tend to have deep roots, sometimes reaching depths of up to one and a half metres, drawing on water and minerals. Soil fungi also help the plant grow and thrive. *“The fungi provide the plant with minerals, and in return the plant feeds the fungi,”* explains Kieffer. Modern wheat, adapted to shallow rooting conditions and reliant on external fertilisers, is now far less dependent on soil fungi.

BREAD MADE TO ORDER
Kieffer’s shop is now open four times a week: Tuesday to Friday, 3 pm to 6 pm. Orders must be placed by 12 noon the day before baking. Workshops are held around three times a year, offering insights into sourdough, baking techniques and wheat varieties. For Kieffer, education is key: *“Many people are aware of the problems with modern food. But whether they’re prepared to pay more for better food is another story. Food is what people cut back on the most – not on cars or holidays, but on what they eat every day.”*

Kieffer doesn’t see his business as a business in the usual sense. *“I felt called to champion the cause. I don’t see anyone else in the country doing it.”* There is also a practical consideration: if old varieties aren’t actively grown and propagated, they’ll be lost – and with them the possibility of using them at all. *“If we don’t preserve seeds, we’ll lose the ability to produce food when it matters most,”* warns Kieffer.



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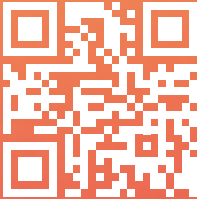
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