

# RESTAURANT

## HOSPITALITY



**NEW CROP:** Farmers Travis (l.) and Kyle (r.) Nielsen, shown with their dad Mark (c.), now own restaurants.

## Straight from the Source

**H**ow rapidly is the vertically integrated business model gaining hold in the restaurant industry? No sooner did we wrap up one story about a new farmer-owned restaurant—Washington, DC's white tablecloth Agraria, owned by the North Dakota Farmers' Union (see story at [www.restaurant-hospitality.com/newsletters/20060630](http://www.restaurant-hospitality.com/newsletters/20060630))—than we find an even-bigger one. It's Grains of Montana Café and Bakery,

a fast-casual operation based in Billings, MT. And this one's already selling franchises.

Grains of Montana features gourmet sandwiches, breads, bagels and bakery items made exclusively with Hard Red Spring Wheat Flour sourced directly from the farm of its owners, the Nielsen family of Nashua, MT. The 80-seat operation is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, sells beer and wine and has rung up about a \$9 check average during its first year.

Owners Travis and Kyle Nielsen aren't exactly hardscrabble farmers. Their 15,000-acre farm ranks in the top one percent in gross revenues for family farms, according to the latest USDA figures. For Grains of Montana, the brothers have struck a 50/50 deal with restaurant con-

sulting group Cromwell Corp. The plan is to first open units in other Montana cities such as Kalispell, Bozeman and Missoula, then roll the concept into bigger cities like Denver. Grains of Montana backers think they could build the chain out to 400 units nationwide some day.

At least they have an interesting point of differentiation. The Niensens claim they grow the highest quality Hard Red Spring Wheat in the country, and their proprietary milling specifications ensure that exceptionally high levels of protein and nutrients stay in their flour. The resulting bread and bakery products are tasty when pulled from each unit's stone hearth oven.

But does having the best flour necessarily translate into success in

the fast casual part of the market? Restaurant vets Gary McGill and Tom Wilscam, the experienced operational duo who make up Cromwell Corp., think it's a key point of differentiation. Another is their strategy of using it to add an evening meal component to this fast casual concept. The idea is to turn the high-grade flour into a pizza dough so tasty it enables pizza to become the menu focus for after-five eating. Sounds like they could become a tough competitor some day.



**COMFY:** The dining area at the Grains of Montana unit in Billings.