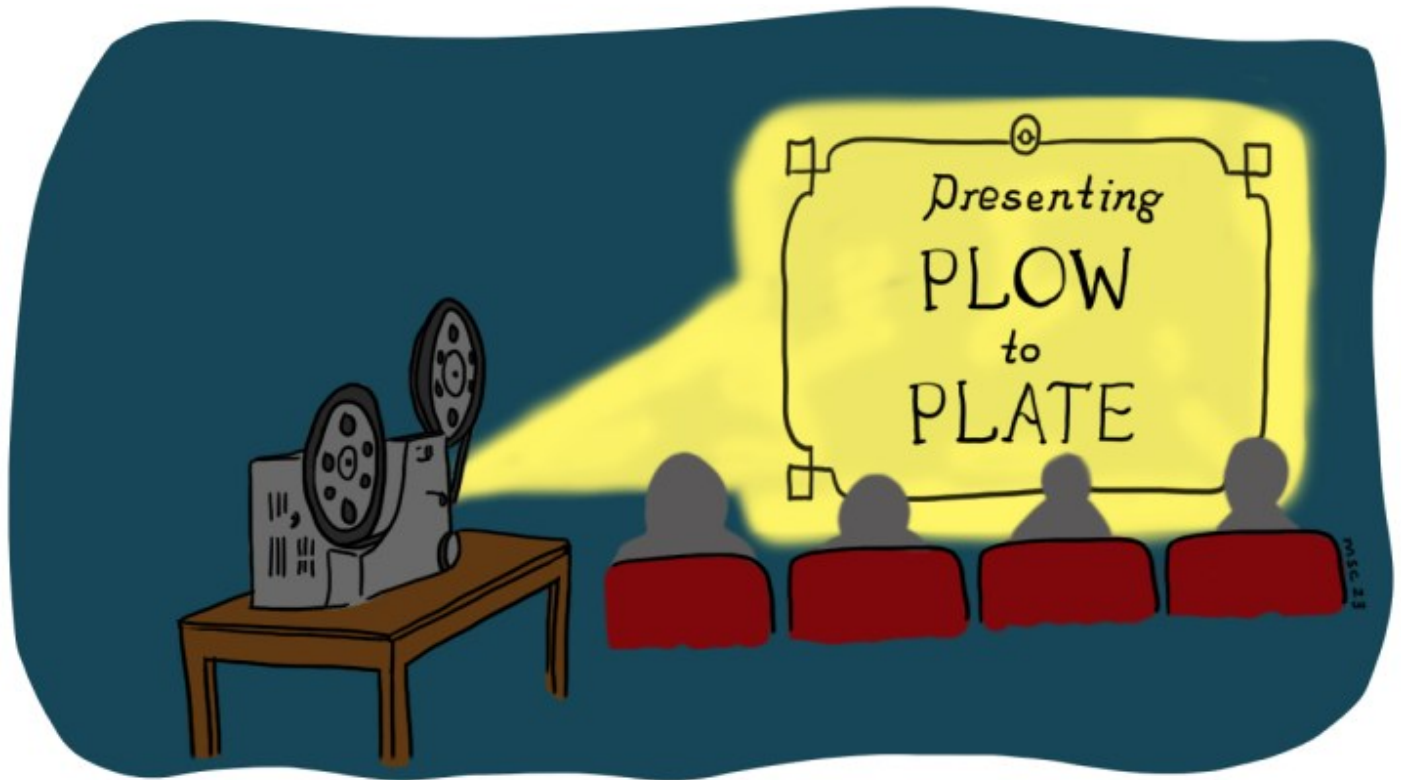


PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: FLOUR POWER

March 24, 2026



By Adam Rabiner

Our founding fathers proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” Can the same be said for all foods? Twin Cities Public Broadcasting System launched the *Minnesota Experience* series with an episode called “Flour Power,” which “explores how milling made Minnesota.” By the hour’s end, you realize it made a whole lot more through manufacturing innovation, advances in industrial agriculture, new forms of advertising, groundbreaking public relations, marketing and global shifts in diet and consumption.

Minnesota experienced the King Wheat Era, also known as the “grain rush,” from the 1860s to the 1880s, when grain and flour mills were ubiquitous. Myriad wheat ports and river cities sprang up to transport flour before railroads took this over in the 1870s. Fortunes were made in warehousing, storing, shipping and selling. Minnesota’s natural advantages included fertile farmland and the Mississippi River that powered the mills. Turkey Red wheat inspired the lyrics “For amber waves of grain” in the an-

them “America the Beautiful.”

“Flour Power” traces this industry primarily through two corporate giants: the Washburn-Crosby Company, headquartered on the west side of the Mississippi River, and the C. A. Pillsbury Company, founded on the east side. These two giants competed against one another for 120 years. When Washburn-Crosby raised a sign bearing its new advertising slogan, “Eventually, Why Not Now?,” Pillsbury responded with its own, “Because Pillsbury’s Best.”

During this long rivalry, the companies learned to more effectively separate the wheat from the chaff, creating a more desirable, pure white flour with a longer shelf life, which allowed for shipping without spoilage and was also easier for homemakers to bake with. Other innovations included installing an exhaust system to vacuum flour dust from the air. On May 2, 1878, this dust caused the Great Mill Explosion, which killed 18 people and leveled several city blocks. Steel rollers were introduced in the 1870s, ending the use of millstones after 2,000 years of human history.

Flour became a staple in grocery stores because bread could be baked for breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. It was the first industrially produced and widespread carbohydrate in world history—the original convenience food. Despite these successes, flour, like other products, was still subject to consumer tastes and preferences. Sylvester Graham, the father of the Graham cracker, believed that whole wheat flour, which contained more fiber, the germ and bran (or middlings) was healthier and more nutritious.

“Flour Power” does not gloss over the less savory aspects of this industry’s growth and dominance in Minnesota and elsewhere. The founding fathers of the Twin Cities were philanthropists who built their park systems and arts and cultural institutions. But at the same time, as capitalists, they also cut down pine forests, polluted rivers and damaged the plains. They had a negative impact on the environment, flooding burial grounds and displacing native people. The documentary also covers the economic and political struggles between ordinary rural farmers and these urban robber

barons. One historian observed that it was high ideals and greedy intentions combined and wrapped together as part of the same story.

The final third of the film shows how innovations in salesmanship and product development are just as important to company growth as breakthroughs in industrial production. In 1901, the invention of puffed rice and other grains opened new markets, primarily breakfast cereals. A backlash against food allergies led to the development of Wheaties, Cheerios and other popular, supposedly healthy breakfast cereals. Betty Crocker was introduced in 1921 and quickly became the second-most-recognized woman after Eleanor Roosevelt. She even received countless marriage proposals. Washburn-Crosby bought radio station WCCO in 1924 to advertise its brands. The company promoted Wheaties with the world's first commercial radio jingle, sung live by a barbershop quartet. In 1928, Washburn-Crosby became General Mills and gained a national, then global, footprint. In 1932, General Mills developed *Betty and Bob*, a radio soap opera sponsored by Bisquick, and, in 1933, introduced *The Lone Ranger*. The Pillsbury Bake-off competition was founded in 1949, a forerunner of all that has followed. Both companies moved beyond flour to other foods (e.g., Bacos bacon bits) and then, as holding companies, to other nonfood products and industries. It's the American story, writ large. So are all foods created equal? The humble wheat germ would have a hard time making its case.

"Flour Power" will screen on Tuesday, April 14, 2026

Please join the Plow to Plate mailing list by emailing plowtoplate@gmail.com to receive a screening link.

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WAR IN EUROPE DEEPENS SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES

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By Hayley Gorenberg

Russia's attack on Ukraine has disrupted farming and exports of grain and sunflower oil around the planet, complicating already tenuous supply chain issues in ways the Coop may feel—even if Brooklyn is almost 5,000 miles away from the current armed conflict.



RENOWNED AS THE “BREADBASKET OF EUROPE,” UKRAINE IS AMONG THE TOP PRODUCERS OF GRAIN

PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

Renowned as the “breadbasket of Europe,” Ukraine is among the top producers of grain and is the top exporter of sunflower oil in the world, producing almost 46% of all sunflower oil. As farming—and indeed, farmers themselves—are endangered by the weeks-old war, and ports cease to operate normally, markets and then consumers feel the impact. Multiple news sources noted that in March the price for wheat per bushel had risen to the highest level in 14 years, surging nearly 80% over the previous year. Some days recorded consecutive days “at ‘limit up,’ meaning [wheat] reached the highest amount the price of a commodity is allowed to increase in a single day.” As one Coop supplier stated, “This is nearly \$400 or 40% higher than any pricing in the 21st century,” they emailed, anticipating that “all markets will see a price increase in the coming weeks.”



While the impact may be most severe on countries closer to the conflict—those countries that have depended directly upon Ukraine’s production—the entry of additional buyers looking for grain in a more global market will be felt in the United States. By some estimates, Ukraine and Russia “each provide about six percent of the globally traded supply of food energy in kilo calories.” David Beasley, Executive Director of the United Nation’s World Food Program, underscored the harm to this pivotal agricultural region, saying, “the food security impact of the conflict will likely be felt beyond Ukraine’s border, especially on the poorest of the poor.”

Wheat is notably affected, but U.S. production may provide a price buffer for American consumers. With regard to wheat specifically, even as Russia is the world’s largest wheat exporter (accounting for about one-quarter of all exports), the United States is also a net exporter of wheat, according to material received by the Coop’s purchasing department from a vendor—which aligns with information in news sources. The Coop vendor noted that nonetheless, “with nearly one-third of the

world's wheat exports offline or limited, there is severe constraint on the global market, causing prices to increase." Entering into the mix, many countries have sanctioned Russian wheat exports, and Ukraine, previously the fifth-largest wheat exporter (accounting for nine percent of all wheat exports), has halted all exports.

With food prices on the rise, some political analysts are tying the pressures to increased risk for civil unrest, particularly in areas dependent on wheat from Russia and Ukraine, such as swaths of the Middle East and North Africa. Price increases exacerbate pressures exerted by COVID, as well as climate disasters like floods and droughts. In an article in CNN Business on Egypt's recent cap on the price for bread, Nadeen Ebrahim wrote: "For Egypt and other Middle Eastern nations grappling with the ripple effects of the war, [prices are] a cause for concern. Just ten years ago, revolutions across the region toppled longtime dictators partly because of a rise in the price of commodities. 'Bread, freedom, social justice!' was among the most popular chants on the streets of Egypt during Arab Spring protests."

Meanwhile, a Coop vendor wrote that fuel costs are "contributing to everything," ticking off trucking delays, import delays, European logistics in turmoil due to the conflict and soaring oil prices "further increasing finished flour pricing."



General Coordinator Joe Szladek, who manages the Coop's buying departments, first cracked wise when asked about the war's impact, quipping, "We stopped carrying everything from Russia, and we can't get Ukrainian garlic!" but quickly got serious about a melange of pricing impacts. He pointed to the challenge of disaggregating war impacts from higher gas prices and transit issues. "It's a big stew," he said, remarking that prices for food and fuel may not have climbed as high if a "tenuous supply chain" had not already been a significant issue.

"Vendors tell us that the increases in fuel charges are really affecting them," said Szladek. Some of them are weighing overall increases to their product prices, or a fuel surcharge keyed to energy costs. "Distributors are trying to figure out how to make it most palatable," he said. He mentioned "some rumblings from vendors that things are a bit chaotic." Fuel costs also impact the cost of fertilizer, because natural gas is used to produce nitrogen fertilizers.

Szladek pointed out that the intersecting challenges have mounted over time. "These

things take a little while to reverberate through the system,” he said, noting that staffing issues in January and February meant that on occasion, “we weren’t getting entire trucks from distributors, because they couldn’t staff their warehouses.” The problems persist, he said. “We still have distributors occasionally canceling orders. It’s just across the board. It’s kind of whack-a-mole.”

Hayley Gorenberg is a journalist-turned-civil-rights-lawyer and Floridian-turned-Brooklynite.