

## EINKORN TALKING, APRIL



Hello again from your Einkorn.

It's April already!, and I'm not going to give you a trite how-the-time-flies because time doesn't. The sun arcs higher every day, or you can think of our planet's route around the sun, either way you have a cosmic pull that won't hurry, won't stop.

The field at Lentz Spelt Farms, look, it's reaching for the pull of light, the plants in the furrows at their lushest green, blades crowding as they're elongating.

In April the Columbia Plateau skies are the most tumultuous of the year, birds and their sounds on the winds. Over 25,000 cranes make stop-over now on their migration north after wintering in California, their calls – *grulla grulla* – haunting fields strewn with carbohydrate crop residue. They're Sandhills, *Grus canadensis*, one crane species not endangered; on the ground they move with long-leg grace that bestows poise onto their gray bodies, long neck, shapely red-accented head with straight beak. After feeding they return to their roosting sites by open water, always wary of predators. They stage in Eastern Washington for about six weeks in spring; occasionally you'll see some of them leap into the mating dance stance they're famous for, although, full-fledged dancing they won't engage in until they've arrived on their arctic breeding grounds. The most ancient bird species (together with the loon, an estimated 60 million years), cranes transpose to avian magnificence when they soar – after “kettling” on updrafts –, soar on airstreams as high as 20,000 feet.

Counterpoint to the dinosaur-evoking cranes, neotropical birds return for the summer with much chirping. They get busy right away with nest building, carrying in their little beaks all kinds of detritus that field and hedge offer, farm dog hair inclusive. And those strange curlews arrive; we say “strange” not because of their long bent beaks – though they do make you wonder –, but because biologists can't put their learned finger on why these west-side shorebirds come over to the Plateau for courtship and breeding.

Several species of goose and duck also join the height of spring when they migrate above the Plateau, northbound skeins in the blue above.

Manifestations of the the sun's cosmic pull contain the farmer in his fields: in April it's high time to plant the spring crops that weren't planted in March, seed in the ground, seed in the ground! is the order of the day.

Time was when the moon influenced farmers as well. Pre-agrarians had long recognized that the phases of the moon hold sway over animal behavior, fish in particular; small step then for early farmers to observe their crops according to moon cycles (simple rule: plant root crops at new moon). In this context our ancestors developed an intricate weather fore-telling, the most famous of which is Lichtmess February 2, on which day all manner of weather and crop predictions hinge. In America Lichtmess is called Groundhog Day. In German cultures, Lichtmess wasn't just predictive but also the day when the *Knechte*, the farm workers, received their yearly pay and found out if they'd be working for their farmer for another year. Conveniently, on Lichtmess the towns held a fair so the *Knechte* could buy clothes and other stuff with their money. Those fairs take place to this day; farm workers now of course are paid more often than yearly.

OK, so we just slipped into the world of the Farmers Almanac. Funny how that little publication still has a readership. As for all those weather mythologies, you know what, they go back too many thousands of years to fling them aside as old wives' tale, even though our age of satellite tracking may try to reach past moony, moonier, mooniest portends. But keep in mind that science has dished up numerous myths that didn't last but a fraction of the time the ancient auguries did.

Not that they matter in the industrialized farming system. Picture a football field. That's about one acre. Now consider that the average family grower in the low-rainfall portion of the Columbia Plateau farms 3000 acres, much of which is typically contiguous acreage of wheat. You can't possibly think the man has time to adjust his plantings to the moon's motion and the stars' notion. No, it's April and his spring crops need to be in the ground, he's busy day after day until the job's done. Not the warm moon but cold hard scheduling rules, interspersed by worry about potential mechanical problems that might push the job to the edge of the planting window.



Our hunch is that the Farmers Almanac does not often rest next to a farm office computer.

For a sense of the connectedness the ancient peoples felt with sky and mountain we approach one of the many *Castros* – Celtic hill town forts – unearthed in Asturias. The one we hike to is called Coaña. It dreams, so it seems to us, on a broad ridge rising above a green valley.

Slate and bulkier stones were stacked tightly, forming the walls of the round houses. A defensive wall surrounds

the *Castro*. The street through the middle of the *Castro* consists of vertically packed stone.

On the short grass that grows within the walls, dripping silence of rain where once earthen floor absorbed footfalls of a busy people – here lingers the quietude of visceral awe. Busy, yes, the layout of the 80 houses at Coaña constructs lives lived closely, protectively. But it's from a higher-up vantage point that the *Castro* appears less a maze than a reflection of starry constellations swirling.



At a pre-Roman exhibition, the reconstruction of a primitive plow. It's a long-shape stone that curves into a tip, onto the top of which attaches a wood slab, two hefty branches protruding, one reaching for the draft animal, the other, shorter one, for the plowman's grip. Other Celtic tools include stone mortar, and quern-and-hand stone for grist milling.

The rectangular foundations at Coaña stem from the later Romans who called the *Castro* builders in Asturias *Albiones*.

But wait. How did we get to Asturias?

We went there seeking *Escanda*, scion of the grain the Celts had farmed in Central Europe.

Asturias is a Principado of Spain yet shielded from Spain's Mediterranean culture by the mighty east-west buckle of the Cordillera Cantábrica – Asturias looks north into the face of the Atlantic. The verdant land by the sea rises to snow-capped peaks, rivers tumbling through forests to flow by pasture and field. In parts of the country, people say they're racially Celts to this day.

*Escanda*? We're told to seek it inland; along the coast the grain farming is mainly maize and some cereals for silage, and a lot of hay is raised, too, for the dairy cows: Asturias' fame are its cheeses, no other European country produces such a grand variety. Asturias is also known for its fava beans. Most pronounced is its pride of ciders that in the Sidrerias are poured by waiters who hold the bottle far aloft, arm outstretched above the head, the wide-mouthed glass tilted at the height of knee, the point of such acrobatic pouring an extravagant aroma release. Could there be a better way to worship Apple?

*Escanda*'s fame diverges from that of cider, beans, cheese. If it's quintessentially Asturian, it is ancient grain and people are quick to emphasize that it's not like *trigo* – wheat –, not like *trigo* at all; they speak of *Escanda* as oddity but also revered. In the small seaside towns *Escanda* is known but you can't buy it.

In the proud capital city of Oviedo, the tourist information ladies send us to the Administration of Rural and Fishery Matters. *Escanda*, yes, that's the Asturian term for the three hulled grains *Triticum monoccocum*, Einkorn, *T. diccicum*, Emmer, *T. spelta*, Spelt, so much the

administrators confirm. But more information cannot be extracted from their files, as they have to do with government grants and payments. We're directed to the Asociación de Productores de Escanda Asturiana; a company in the hills north of Oviedo is the most likely contact point of the association where someone might speak English.

We take the bus through the rain along the Rio Lena. The accoutrement of farmlands here are hedges that separate the fields, the rising hills a green-stitched quilt bordering the climbing forests. At La Pola de Lena we get off the autobus, and take a taxi from the town to a hamlet up yet another valley to a sign proclaiming SPELTASTUR: *Escanda* found.

In a land of gorges even the valleys plunge steeply, and this Speltastur facility is a claw into the hillside. A long metal stair leads down to the office; we ring the bell. The front room we enter basks in wood stove warmth that's visually reflected in the harvest-ochre *Escanda* sheaf arrangements on the three desks. Computers. Phones. Office workers busy. Fernando Farpón Jr is the English speaker of the company, he says he learned the language during a visit to Oregon and British Columbia. He beckons us into the inner sanctum he shares with his father, Fernando Farpón Sr.

Speltastur started business in 2000, Farpón Jr relates. "The first point was to learn by trial." He recalls much traveling to source Spelt seed. "We went around to a lot of places to find old farmers who still had some seed. We started with one bag of seed. It was traditional seed, not changed by humans."

Surprisingly, their family background is not in agriculture. Fernando Farpón Sr worked in a coal mine until health reasons forced him to find a different source of income; he also held a job in tourism, a sector tracking trends on the culinary front. "The market is complicated," Farpón Jr elaborates. On one hand, as Asturians favor their traditions they give more support lately to local food production: "Traditional markets help recover jobs." On the other hand, when it comes to Spelt some prodding is part of marketing: "You have to make people remember *Escanda*," Farpón puts it.

"We started to make flour, *Harina d'Escanda*, and we sell a lot of our crop as final product, bread and other baked goods."

Today, in addition to raising their own Spelt crops, the Farpóns work with a group of 10 growers who specialize in *Escanda*. "That's the only crop they grow. Depending on the year, the production is between 50 and 70 hectares" (130 to 180 acres).

The Farpóns farm organically. For fertility they raise nitrogen-fixing beans as a green manure crop in the years when the fields rest. On a very small scale they're also growing Emmer and Einkorn.

Working with agronomists at three research stations, they're now in the process of putting together a seed program of several Asturian Spelts, Farpón Jr says.

*Escanda* research we find by Villaviciosa northeast of Oviedo, at the Servicio Regional de Investigación y Desarrollo Agroalimentario, SERIDA for short. We walk up the paved entrance road, choosing the big doors under Spanish, Asturian and European flags to ask for directions. Inside the stately building, the scientists wear white coats just like in the movies. After a small flurry – *who speaks English?, which Guillermo?, ah!, the one who works with Escanda* – we're taken outside and pointed to a white house at the edge of the acreage. The gravel road there

leads by a *hórreo* left from the days when the facility was still a *finca*, a farm. A *hórreo* is a square building with a squat roof, erected on top of four pillars; serving as raised granaries, *hórreos* are a distinct aspect of rural landscape in Asturias, in many places left to stand for tradition despite the fact that the property surrounding is obviously no longer a farm. And even if it is a farm, grain drying and storage in today's Asturias happens in modern grain dryers and grain bins.



At the white house, agronomist Guillermo García shares an office in an upstairs room. No white coats here. He explains that SERIDA operates under the auspices of the Principado, independently of universities. Dairy beeves and cattle for meat are the primary research at this station; out the window we see many rows of fruit trees, they're trials of cider apple varieties, García notes. And of course the station works with those famous beans, and some vegetables as well.

As for *Escanda*, the Asturian species are genetically different from those elsewhere in Europe, he says. Archeological evidence points to the first cereal grain arriving in Asturias at least as far back as the 8th century B.C., when Germanic tribes perhaps of Celtic culture brought *Escanda povia* – Emmer.

*Escanda fisga* – Spelt – was brought by the Romans, García says.

And *Escanda menor*, Einkorn? No evidence of Asturian Einkorn has turned up, although archeologists have found Einkorn in other parts of Spain, particularly around Córdoba where it's still farmed for livestock feed, García notes. "But there it's not called *Escanda*."

More recent *Escanda* traditions in Asturias, peaking in the late 19th century, convey a brisk trade of grain, in that *Escanda* was commonly used for payment of

taxes and rents. An estimated 10 percent of agricultural land was planted to *Escanda* before industrialization began to depress production.

In the years after the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, *Escanda* experienced a rebound, García says. "There was actually an increase in *Escanda*. In 1941 *Escanda* was produced here on over 1000 hectares" (2600 acres).

Then came the severe decline; as industrialization intensified after World War Two, cereal farming shifted south to Castilla where production efficiencies are greater due to more contiguous farmlands. And García also blames the consumer for *Escanda*'s near-demise: "*Pan de Escanda* is dark bread, but people in those years preferred the white bread of wheat. By 1992 there were only 8 hectares of *Escanda* in Asturias."

Whereas *Escanda* had always been raised in the mountains of Asturias, along the coast the farming diversity also suffered from the drive to efficiency-at-all-costs during the second half of the 20th century, García remarks: “Almost everything there is grown for the cows now.” Is the profit on milk that high? “At one point it was,” he answers with a shrug.

Speltastur isn't the only player trying to turn back to a decentralized agriculture, García notes: in 2000 the town of Grado held an *Escanda* Festival.

It won't be the last one, he predicts in view of current food trends toward a more health-conscious cuisine. “*Escanda* the healthier cereal, it has many characteristics better than *trigo*,” he comments. The SERIDA has published a dossier which states that Spelt contains 15 to 25 percent more protein than wheat, and tests higher than wheat in iron, potassium and B vitamins. Spelt bran helps lower cholesterol. And since Spelt is more soluble in water, Spelt is easier digested and its nutrients more easily absorbed than those of wheat.

But García worries about *Escanda* prices: “When there is more demand than there is *Escanda*, prices go crazy. The prices have been as high as €6 a kilogram (about \$3.90 a pound). I think the market grows better when the prices are reasonable.”

He concedes, however, that *Escanda* prices have to be more dear than common wheat price. Castilian wheat yields around 6000 to 7000 kilograms per hectare under irrigation (about 85 to 100 bushels per acre), compared to 2000 to 2500 kilograms per hectare of in-hull Spelt that hulls out at 1100 to 1700 kilos per hectare in naturally-wet Asturias (about 16 to 25 bushels an acre). The dehulling of course adds further to *Escanda* production cost above that of wheat.

Agronomically, the Asturian Spelts have a long cycle, they're not harvested until late August or September, García elaborates. “Some growers plant in October and November, I think that's best. December is not good, some traditional growers call it the ‘dead month.’ But the Spelt can be planted in February, even in March, although the oldest growth always grows more tillers.” (Tillers are stalks off the same root; more tillers, more grain heads, better yields.)

At the research station the best Spelt yields were achieved when seeding at a density of 160 to 250 plants per square meter, at a 10 to 20 centimeter spacing. Soils rich in calcium appear to produce the highest yields; Asturian Spelts do well in acidic soils, at a pH of 6.

“The traditional rotation was to alternate Spelt with potatoes. In the *Escanda* fields they let cows graze for a short period at the end of winter,” García says. “Now most of the growers raise Spelt two years in a row; in the third year some grow clover that can be cut for hay two or three times.” Some Spelt-Emmer mixed stands still produce, although the farmers have begun rotating the Emmer.

García's main task in bringing back *Escanda* farming is to separate out Spelt varieties, and he has his job cut out: “We received about 100 samples of Spelta. I project those will be about 10 to 15 lines for our gene bank here.” Some of the differences are quite obvious; he shows us Spelt spikelets with husks of a whitish color, others bluish, still others reddish brown

He feels good about saving Asturias' traditional grain, García sums up. “*Escanda* is an opportunity.”

In Oviedo we decide to taste this opportunity. *Pan de Escanda* – Spelt bread – we find in the large market hall where vegetables and meats and fruits and breads and herbs attract shoppers in a cacophony copiously colorful. One baker stall has placed three stacks of large hard-crust breads most prominently – in America they’d be called “artisan breads.” The loaves all weigh about one kilogram; the wheat bread sells for €1.90, as does the rye bread. The *Pan de Escanda* in the middle sells for €5. “But it’s the only bread from grain grown here in Asturias,” the salesgirl tells us.

Next we wander into a downtown district with a distinctly bohemian flair. We enter Ca Beleño, a Celtic pub if ever there was one. Frankie Delgado greets us with the gusto of a raconteur: “Frankie, no, that’s not an Asturian name,” he chuckles. “I was born in Britain. But my parents are Asturians. My family went to Britain when times were dangerous for them after the Civil War.”

A traveling fiddler, Delgado’s been around the block a few times; notably he spent some time in Slovakia to learn the art of brewing from friends he met on the road. In the old building adjacent to Ca Beleño he established a *Fabrica de Cerveza Artesanal*, where he brews two 1000-liter tanks of beer, one a lager, the other *Cerveza de Escanda*. He sells those beers exclusively on tap, *ascerveza de caña*; *caña* means “half-pint,” he explains.

Was it difficult to adjust wheat beer brewing technique to *Escanda*? “You learn by practice,” he answers.

Is *Escanda* beer traditional? Not that he’s heard, Delgado answers. “But I have my own theory – in the old times I think it was a common dream to make *Cerveza de Escanda*.”

The response to the beer unique in Asturias has been great, he emphasizes. “People are enthusiastic about *Cerveza de Escanda*, just as they are about the bread from the Asturian cereal.”



Quaffing Spelt beer in old town Oviedo, we get the gist of the Asturians’ inspiration, namely a tradition of setting themselves apart through tradition, small as their country may be, less than three percent of Spain. In Asturias one rarely sees Americanization; after traveling elsewhere in Europe where store fronts spout a hodgepodge of American and native language, where McDonalds et al supply global obesity, where even the *Schlager* are often sung in English, well, Asturias is refreshingly Asturian.

The Asturians’ tradition-oriented outlook is going to assure that the *Escanda* resurgence will grow – that’s what we think after the second *caña*.

West of Oviedo we’re invited to tour a traditional flour mill near Tapia de Casariego.

(This seaside town is famous for Europe's first maize, of which some of the kernels can be viewed in a wooden box brought from the New World by a Spaniard who'd served as governor in Florida; the town is also famous for its Celtic festivals with scores of bagpipes piping). Esaú Garcia Castañeira first shows us where the creek powered the mill, next to a *Hórreo* of rectangular built, the predominant granary style in western Asturias. Castañeira doesn't know how old the mill is, it came into his family when a relative returned after having made his fortune in Argentina, he explains. His grandfather was the last to operate the mill.

Of course it's a stone building; you enter small living quarters before reaching the mill room. Big wooden hoppers loom over the silent grind stones, large shafts and gears beneath the two mills rest in fustiness. Castañeira points to the loft off to the side: "They used to sleep up there while the mill was running," he explains. "There was a mechanism by the hopper bottom that rang a bell when it ran empty, that would wake them up so they could put more grain in the hopper."

Even in his grandfather's time, milling was not a cash endeavor. "Everything was trade, he was milling flour for fish, for vegetables, for chickens, you name it."

Berry vines that worked their way through wall cracks grow tentacles that appear curious about yesteryear's millstone rumble and flour puff. Castañeira remarks that he's of a mind to restore the mill. "People are interested in traditional things." The living quarters up front could be turned into a bucolic bed-and-breakfast. "But it would cost a lot of money to fix it up." Meanwhile the family operates a hotel and cafe on the main street in Tapia.

Eventually we get back to Speltastur at Lena. Farpón Sr shows us the production facility. Outside stands a grain bin that looks to hold about 5000 bushels. Inside the tall shed, a line for the dehulling and conditioning of the grain takes up a quarter of the space.



The *Escanda* enters the line through a small vertical dehuller that operates on the grinding principle; beneath it a round deck separates stones and chaff. From there the grain travels over a series of screens where shaking mechanism and forced air sort out the cracked grain – "that goes for livestock feed." At the far end of the line the naked whole-grain is left, ready to travel by augur up into huge hoppers.

On the opposite side of the shed the quiet reverberations a modern stone mill. In the adjacent room the bakery smells of delicious breads fresh out of the oven.

It's an operation altogether neat; the harder to imagine that this building once housed a small lumber business. "The sides were open, we changed a lot," Farpón Jr says. He'd gone to



mechanical engineering school, which background came in handy when setting up the grain conditioning line.

Their first *Escanda* harvests were with a 1970-vintage John Deere – “no cab, that was something,” he recalls. Now they harvest with a newer model Case, says his uncle, Amando Farpón.

The Farpóns may be past the initial trials and travails of starting a business, but market development remains their priority. Farpón Jr says that they have a relationship with the Slow Food organization which is increasingly active in Spain. “Slow Food included our *Escanda* in their Ark program.”

Recently the Farpóns traveled to the Biofach Food Show in Nürnberg, Germany. Those Germans sure know how to put on a *Messe*, as they call it, it was overwhelming, Farpón Jr



relates. “So many people there!” And so many Spelt products! But, he points out, not one of those numerous Spelt products claims terroir.

“Our *Spelta* has Denominación de Origen Protegida and Indicación Geográfica Protegida. Both of them are quality labels given by

the European Union, they certify the origin of products, that they have been produced in a defined area where they have contributed to its culture, where they have transformed that place.”

The terroir insignia on their label go to show that Speltastur is more than a business. “The mountains isolated us, in our climate the grain was at home,” Farpón Jr says of *Escanda*. “When we started Speltastur we recovered the last amount of the traditional grain.”

How did they harvest *Escanda* before combines? As is noted in the SERIDA dossier, in wet conditions two people would walk the field parallel to one another, a stretched rope between them that shook some of the raindrops from the grain heads. When the heads were reasonably dry, *mesorias* were used by the harvesters, Farpón Jr says and reaches for the Asturian implement behind his desk. *Mesorias* are two wooden sticks about 2 1/2 feet long, honed to a square shape; a string connects them by their handles. The handles’ artistic carving makes it obvious that this particular implement hails from an era when even the most mundane tools expressed an aesthetic beyond functionality alone.

“You put your foot down on the bottom of the plant, so you don’t pull it out by the roots,” Farpón Jr demonstrates. Using the *mesorias* like a bird’s beak, the harvester gathered a handful of *Escanda* stalks between the beak of wooden sticks, closed the beak and pulled upward, with the result that the grain heads detached from the straw, to be collected in sacks. Harvesting thus must have been a labor intensive chore, most certainly, but also a rhythm that carries into our 21st century the echo of a time when food and farmer were held in high respect.



“Asturians used to call *Escanda* ‘*pan*’,” Farpón Jr reflects. *Pan* means “bread,” but in old Asturias the word also transported a deeper symbolism: “When they said ‘the *pan* is good’ they meant that it looked like a good harvest of *Escanda* that year.”

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