



THIS MONTH

- ▶ What you think about the co-op
- ▶ Ribollita (Tuscan soup)

Rice in crisis

GROCERIES

The rice mill at Deniliquin in the Riverina is the largest rice mill in the Southern Hemisphere. It once processed enough grain to satisfy the daily needs of 20 million people. But six long years of drought have taken a toll, reducing Australia's rice crop by 98 percent and leading to the mothballing of the mill last December. In fact, the last time any organic or biodynamic rice was planted in Australia was 2005; we've been eating away at the stockpile ever since. But like all stockpiles that aren't regularly topped up they eventually run low, which is why supplies of organic brown rice are sporadic at the moment.



The collapse of Australia's rice production is one of several factors contributing to a doubling of rice prices in the last three months — increases that have led the world's largest exporters to ban or restrict exports severely, spurred panicked hoarding in Hong Kong and the Philippines, and set off angry protests in countries including Cameroon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Indonesia, Italy, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, the Philippines, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

The drought is one factor contributing to skyrocketing prices, and many scientists believe it's among the earliest signs

that a warming planet is starting to affect food production. While a link between short-term changes in weather and long-term climate change is not certain, the unusually severe drought is consistent with what climatologists predict will be a growing problem.

And indeed, some farmers are abandoning rice, which requires large amounts of water, to plant less water-intensive crops like wheat or, especially in southeastern Australia, wine grapes. Other rice farmers have sold their fields or their water rights, usually to grape growers.

Scientists and economists worry that the reallocation of scarce water resources — away from rice and other grains toward more lucrative crops and livestock — threatens poor countries that import rice as a staple. The crisis also threatens to pit the developed against the developing over the need for cleaner transport fuels versus the need for affordable food. Many poorer nations worry that subsidies from rich countries to support biofuels, which turn foods such as corn into fuel, are pushing up the price of staples.

With rice, which is not used to make biofuel, the problem is availability. Even in normal times, little of the (GO TO PAGE 2)

F+V

what's good in fruit+veg
with Renata Field

Hi, I'm Renata, the new fruit and veg coordinator. I'm loving working at Alfalfa House already. If you have any questions or would like anything specifically, please feel free to contact me (produce@alfalfahouse.org). Thanks to everyone for making me feel so welcome.

NEW ARRIVALS

- ▶ Lots of citrus. NAVEL ORANGES, RUBY RED GRAPEFRUIT, CUMQUATS, three varieties of LEMONS — Eureka, the native Bush Lemon and Lemonades

- ▶ TAHITIAN and MAKRUT LIMES
- ▶ BRUSSEL SPROUTS and soon CABBAGE
- ▶ ROOT VEGETABLES. We're getting into winter, and it's all about root vegetables. PURPLE and GOLD KUMERA, SWEDES, TURNIPS, PARSNIPS, five varieties of POTATOES, BEETROOT. Ideal for baking.
- ▶ SUNROOT (aka Jerusalem Artichoke) is delicious baked, steamed or in soup.

WHAT'S GOOD NOW

- ▶ PEARS. William bon Chretien and Buerre Bosc
- ▶ COCONUT. Wild harvested, both young and mature, from Queensland.
- ▶ TABLE QUEEN and PIMPLY SQUASH are very close to the end of their season. Great in soup or roasted.
- ▶ BROCCOLI and CAULIFLOWER. This is their season to be jolly.
- ▶ PUMPKIN. Try the farmer direct

GRAMMA, JARRADALE or TROMBONE for a flavour sensation. Shop staff can always cut you a piece if a whole pumpkin is too much.

SUMMER PRODUCE ON ITS WAY OUT

- ▶ BANANAS. NSW Cavendish and Bonanza.
- ▶ LEBANESE CUCUMBERS
- ▶ GREEN CAPSICUM
- ▶ PASSIONFRUIT
- ▶ TOMATOES. Roma and Gourmet are both still remarkably good. But don't expect to have them the whole winter.
- ▶ ZUCCHINI is about to finish.

NEW ON THE WEBSITE

Also check out the new Guide to Apples at www.alfalfahouse.org/html/PRODUCTS/fruit+veg.htm. And while you're there, the Guide to Potatoes as well as the full availability list.

3 NEW FACES

Please make welcome three new faces around Alfalfa House. Stephen Honey took over from Lisa Durante as Groceries Coordinator in late March; Renata Field stepped in to fill Dominika Grossy's big shoes as Fruit and Veg Coordinator at the end of April and, last but not least Julia Gray is our new Bookkeeper.



*Renata
fruit&veg*



*Stephen
groceries*



*Julia
bookkeeping*

Rice in crisis (FROM PAGE 1)

world's rice is exported — more than 90 percent is consumed in the countries where it's grown. In the last quarter-century, rice consumption has outpaced production, with global reserves plunging by half since 2000. Current economic uncertainty has led producers to hoard rice, with speculators and investors seeing it as a lucrative, or at least safe, investment. All of this has made countries that buy rice on the global market vulnerable to extreme price swings.

For Australian rice farmers, conventional and organic alike, the effects of the current drought are already significant. Those who do not give up and sell their land or water rights are experimenting with varieties or techniques that require less water. Australia now has some of the world's highest rice yields for a given quantity of water.

Be that as it may, our total rice capacity has declined by about a third because many farmers have permanently sold their water rights. As well, production last year was far lower because of a severe shortage of water; rice farmers received just one-eighth of the water they are usually promised by the government.

SEEKING HARDIER RICE

Researchers are looking for solutions to the shortage — for example, rice that blooms earlier in the day, when it is cooler, to counter global warming. Rice plants that bloom on hot days are less likely to produce grains of rice, a difficulty that's already starting to emerge in inland areas of China and other Asian countries as temperatures begin to climb.

"There will be problems very soon unless we have new varieties of rice in place," says Reiner Wassmann, climate change coordinator at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, a leader in developing higher-yielding strains of rice for nearly half a century.

The recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change carried an important caveat that could make the news even worse: the panel said that existing models for the effects of climate change on agriculture did not yet include newer findings that global warming could

reduce rainfall and make it more variable.

Many agronomists contend that changes in the timing and amount of rain are more important for crops than temperature changes. The panel's chair, Rajendra Pachauri, says long-range climate forecasts for precipitation would require another five to 20 years of research, depending on the region.

In addition to drought, climate change could also produce more extreme weather, more outbreaks of pests and weeds, and changes in sea level as polar ice melts. Most of the world's increase in rice production over the last quarter-century has occurred close to sea level, in the deltas of rivers like the Mekong in Vietnam, Chao Phraya in Thailand and Ganges-Brahmaputra in Bangladesh.

Yet the effects of climate change are not uniformly bad for rice. Rising levels of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, can help rice plants and other crops — although the effect dwindles or disappears if the plants face excessive heat, inadequate water, severe pollution or other stresses. And that's one of the big unknowns.

Still, the flexibility of farmers has persuaded some climate experts that, particularly in developed countries, the effects of climate change may be mitigated, if not completely avoided. "I'm not as pessimistic as most people," says Will Steffen, the director of the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University in Canberra. "Farmers are learning how to do things differently."

Meanwhile, changes such as using water to grow wine grapes instead of rice carry their own costs, as the developing world is discovering. "Rice is a staple food," notes Graeme Haley, Deniliquin's general manager. "Chardonnay is not."

So, for now supplies of brown rice will be very limited or non-existent. Alfalfa House will keep trying to source supplies wherever we can but, in the meantime, you might want to try alternatives such as quinoa and amaranth instead.

SOURCE International Herald Tribune April 17, 2008

FURTHER READING www.abc.net.au/landline/content/2006/s2234794.htm

VACANCY ON THE BOARD

There's a vacancy on the co-op's board. If you'd like to help shape the future of the co-op, feel free to come along to the next Management Committee meeting on Wednesday May 28 at 7.30pm at Black Rose, 22 Enmore Road Newtown.

Recipe of the moment

WITH GENEVIEVE DERWENT

Ribollita

Ribollita is a Tuscan soup based on beans, bread and cabbage. This version, my adaptation of a Jamie Oliver recipe, uses the wonderful Cavolo Nero (Tuscan Black Kale) we have right now. Cavolo Nero is a great addition to winter stews and soups as it holds its colour and flavour in the face of heat. Perfect for a cold day.

WHEAT-FREE, VEGAN. SERVES 4-6

- 300g borlotti beans, soaked 8 hours or overnight
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 tomato, squashed
- 1 small potato
- 2 red onions, finely chopped
- 2 carrots, finely chopped
- 3 sticks celery, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- olive oil, generous splash
- pinch ground fennel seeds
- 400g tomatoes, fresh or tinned
- 300g cavolo nero, finely sliced
- 2 large handfuls stale bread, torn into chunks
- sea salt and ground pepper
- 6 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- Add beans to a pan of water with bay leaf, tomato and potato (helps to flavour beans and soften their skins). Cook until tender (may take more than an hour). Drain beans, reserving a glass of the cooking water. Discard bay leaf, tomato and potato.
- Heat saucepan with 2 tbsp olive oil and add onions, carrots, celery, garlic and fennel seeds. Sweat slowly on low heat for 20 mins till soft but not brown. Add tomatoes, bring to gentle simmer for 5 mins.
- Add drained beans with the extra water, bring to boil. Stir in the cavolo nero (will reduce). Moisten bread with a little water and stir in. Soup should be very thick but not dry, so add more water if needed. Cook 30 mins till thick and silky.
- Season with salt and pepper and stir in 4 tbsps olive oil before serving to give the soup a delightful gloss.

MEMBERS' SURVEY 2007

What you think of the place

Remember last September's Member Survey? Well, we finally have the results.

The survey grew out of a co-op subcommittee formed at the end of 2006 to look at how best to serve members and included pricing and mark-ups, the quality of service, product range, the size of the shop and the possibility of moving.

After consultation between staff and the Management Committee, the survey questions were finalised and the survey emailed to members and available for pick up from the shop.

The response was beyond what we expected. We received 140 completed surveys, which were collated by a number of volunteers. It took longer because we wanted to collate all the comments as well. And there were a lot of them.

Here are some of the key findings.

SHOPPING AT THE CO-OP

Most respondents (77%) said they shopped at Alfalfa House fortnightly or more frequently, 18% shopped monthly and only 4% shopped rarely.

The main reasons for shopping were:

- 94% the products are organic
- 88% environmental factors
- 87% ethical reasons
- 82% minimal packaging
- 72% health benefits of good nutritional foods

PRICING

Nineteen percent thought Alfalfa House offered excellent value, 53% said it was good value, 17% average value and 10% said we were a little overpriced. No one said we were very overpriced.

Almost all the respondents (99%) felt the 10% discount was a good ongoing saving for the \$20 lifetime membership.

At the same time, 70% of respondents said that price did affect how much they bought at Alfalfa House.

Most (83%) would accept a higher



mark-up for imported goods so that local and Australian produce could have a lower mark-up.

STANDARD OF SERVICE

Half the respondents said the overall standard of service at Alfalfa House was wonderful,

42% said it was good, 2% said average and 6% said it was hit and miss. No one said the service was poor.

SIZE OF THE SHOP AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MOVING

Some 70% of respondents said they liked the current size of the store. At the same time, 64% said they'd like the co-op to move to bigger premises and 70% of those supporting such a move would accept a move to a nearby suburb.

THE E-NEWS

Most respondents (84%) read the e-newsletter and almost all of those (96%) found it informative and interesting.

VOLUNTEERING

Only 12% of respondents volunteered at Alfalfa House at the time of the survey. Of those, almost all (98%) found it to be a worthwhile and valuable experience.

You'll eventually be able to view a full report on our website. It'll be announced in the eNews and on the website's News page.

A big thanks to all those who put the survey together and collated the results, especially Elmarie and Oliver, and, of course, all those members who took the time to tick the boxes as well as offer their suggestions.

The Management Committee is in the process of setting up a subcommittee to make recommendations about what to do in response to the survey. If you're interested in being part of this committee, please email info@alfalfahouse.org.

We'll keep you updated on how we plan to respond to the survey.

– Nassim Arrage

FEED THE NEWSLETTER

This newsletter is your voice and a great way to communicate with other members.

Please feel free to send in your hints, tips, ideas, suggestions and recipes to feedback@alfalfahouse.org

E-News is edited and designed by Stevie Bee for Alfalfa House Community Food Cooperative Ltd

