

Charles Matthaei

While whole grains long have been a cause celebre in the nutritionist community, the mainstream baking industry historically has viewed whole wheat bread as a niche product. Though the industry more recently has begun to embrace whole grains as the segment gained

popularity with consumers, one prominent baking executive is no Johnny-come-lately to whole grains.

Charles Matthaei, chairman of the Roman Meal Co., Tacoma, Wash., has been an outspoken advocate for whole grains for longer than half a century. With a baking heritage dating back more than 300 years to 1686 in Marsburg, Germany, Mr. Matthaei came to the industry naturally. His father, William, acquired Roman Meal Co. in 1927.

The business had been established 15 years earlier by Robert Jackson, a physician who was fascinated by accounts of the legions of ancient Rome. He discovered that Roman foot soldiers had the strength and stamina to conquer the world on a daily ration of 2 lbs of wheat or rye.

Dr. Jackson's first Roman Meal product was a hot cereal that proved quite popular, but Roman Meal bread was not introduced until William Matthaei acquired the company.

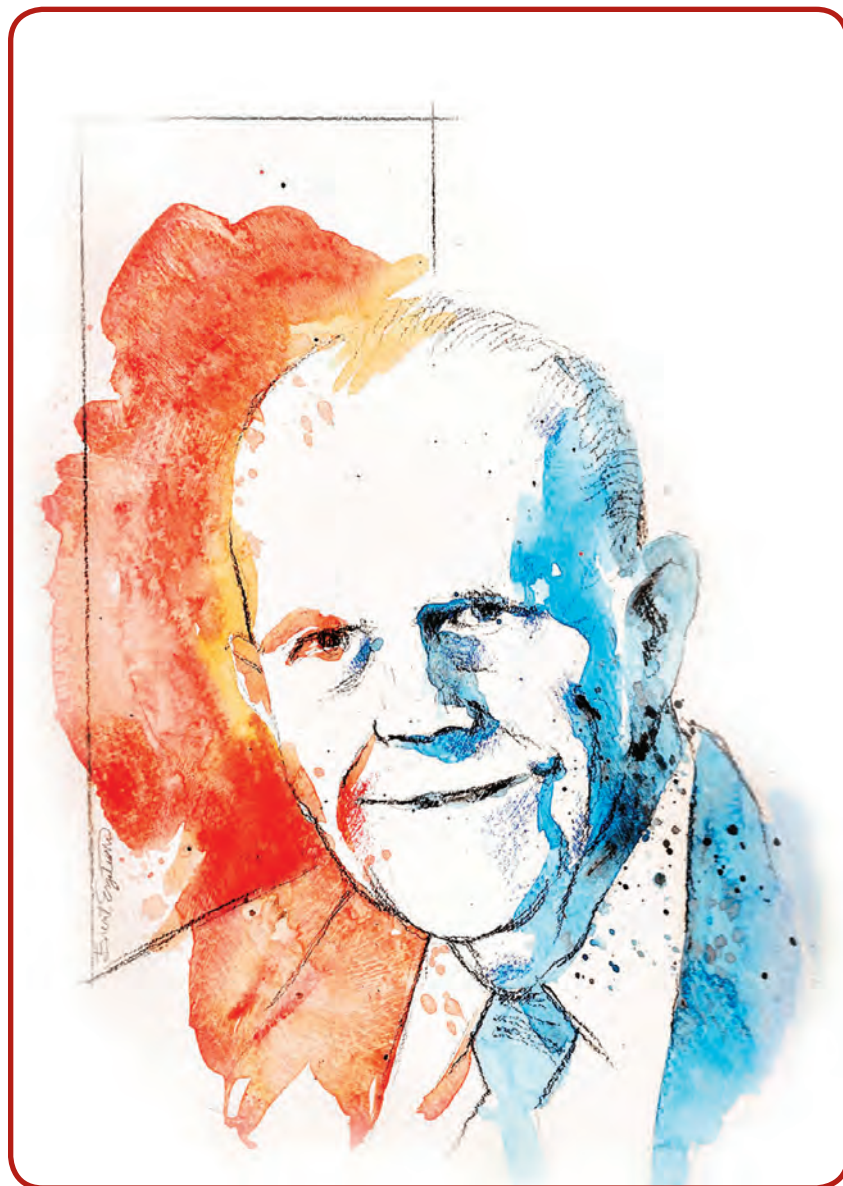
In accepting the Hall of Fame award, Charles Matthaei, who studied cereal chemistry in graduate school, described his own long-standing belief in the value of whole grains.

"I was amazed to learn how closely the kernel of whole wheat came to meeting the total requirements for human nutrition," he said. "It has carbohydrates, fat, protein, B vitamins, essential minerals and dietary fiber. It is quite understandable that bread made from wheat came to be called the 'staff of life.'"

Rather than issues of physiology, Mr. Matthaei viewed as a principal challenge to the bread industry generally matters related to perception and marketing.

"I went to work at my father's company and found bakers were very concerned because bread had an image of being very fattening," he said. "Physicians had been advising patients to avoid bread in order to lose weight."

To promote Roman Meal bread, the





Charles Matthaei by his Hall of Fame plaque.

company engaged a Los Angeles advertising agency. A program describing Roman Meal as the “diet of stars” was developed and featured several movie stars of the era, including Claudette Colbert and Ginger Rogers. Television commercials were a prominent vehicle for promoting Roman Meal in the 1960s and 1970s.

Beyond working to bolster the image of Roman Meal

and grain-based foods, Mr. Matthaei also partnered with George Christaki, a noted cardiologist, to develop a series of consumer education programs based on the benefits of whole grains. The company registered the trademark, “Natural Whole Grain Goodness.” He introduced Roman Meal and the whole grain diet in Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia.

Still, he said the work in improving nutrition in the United States is far from complete.

“Today, for the first time in our history, school children are predicted to have a shorter life span than

those of their parents because of obesity and a lack of exercise,” Mr. Matthaei said. “If bakers will promote the use of sandwiches made with whole grain bread and buns for school lunches in order to get children accustomed to eating whole grain food and also provide schools with nutritional information for the children and more importantly for the children to take home for their parents, I believe bakers can do a great deal for improving the life expectancy of today’s children.”

Today, the Roman Meal brand encompasses dozens of stock-keeping units, with varieties that include 100% whole grain, honey oat bran, split top butter wheat, multi-grain hamburger and hot dog buns and English muffins.

Echoing back to the company’s origins, the family-owned company recently launched a line of Roman Meal hot cereals. Tapping into more recent trends, the company is offering four varieties of snack bars, including oatmeal raisin, dark chocolate and peanut butter, cranberry walnut and apple cinnamon.

A licensed brand, Roman Meal is baked by several of the nation’s largest baking companies together with prominent regional bakers — Holsum Bakery of Arizona; Love’s Bakery of Hawaii; H&S Bakery, Inc.; Lewis Brothers Bakeries, Inc.; Bimbo Bakeries USA; Flowers Foods, Inc.; and Interstate Bakeries Corp.

Mr. Matthaei’s son William L. Matthaei currently is president and chief executive officer while Gary L. Jensen is executive vice-president and chief operating officer. ■

