

## **Ardent Mills Is Major Business For Alton and Riverbend**

by Jeremy Ramirez-Garcia November 10 2022 4:56 PM





ALTON - Some say it is the backbone of Alton. It welcomes you when you make the left turn from Clark Bridge into the city. It welcomes you when you enter Alton from the Great River Road. It towers at the bottom of State Street. The giant wheat silo emblazoned with the American flag bids one and all a hearty welcome to a hard-working river town.

When asked where he works, plant manager Andrew Powell says, "Oh, the building with the big American flag."

The mill, now operated by Ardent Mills in Alton, has been a major feature to the Riverbend community. A lot of the flour that Ardent produces gets distributed locally around the Alton and greater St. Louis area. Dominos, Panera, Shearers, and Fazio's are just some of the customers that Ardent Mills supplies.

The wheat that is milled in Alton comes from all around the Midwest and Plains states. It is transported to Alton from across Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, and the Dakotas, to name a few of the states.

There are different types of wheat that are milled at the plant. Hard wheat is used more for bread and pizzas, while soft wheat is used for cakes, muffins, and baked goods.

A bushel of wheat price varies depending on what is wanted. A bushel of soft wheat can average around \$10. While a bushel of hard wheat can go from \$13 upwards. On the property there are four mills. Two main mills that can produce 10,000 hunderweights a day each. (1.12 million pounds) Then there is C-Mill which produces all the ultra white whole wheat flour. Then lastly D-Mill is the specialty mill. That mill produces specialty flour like garbanzo, rye. In total the Alton mill can produce an average of 2.2 million pounds of flour a day.

The journey from beginning to end for wheat is an interesting process. It starts off first with the grain buyers looking for wheat that would best meet the demands at the time. The buyers are looking for different protein levels if the wheat is organic, and so forth. The wheat is then transported to the mill. Hard wheat is all transported by rail and comes in onto the track right next to the plant. Soft wheat can be transported both via train and truck.

Sometimes, Ardent Mills can use barges to transport but, plant manager Powell said "we don't like to, as water and grain don't mix well together". Once the wheat reaches the plant it goes through a specific progress until it is ready to be shipped out. First, when the wheat comes it is received and then graded. This is where the wheat can get separated from any big anomalies that might have been included in the shipment.

After the grade, the wheat then travels on the elevator belts and goes into the cleaning process. In the cleaning process, the wheat is separated, aspirated, and then tempered. Finally, the milling can now happen. In the milling process, the wheat is ground, sifted, and purified. It is repeated multiple times until it is up to Ardent's standards and agricultural standards. From there, the wheat is now flour, it's blended, added with enrichments and then stored until transport.

On average the flour can stay for about a week in storage. But it also depends on how full the mill is. Powell said that there have been times when the mill has been low on wheat that they dump a railcar and immediately it gets pulled up to the mill to process. A lot of the production that comes out of Alton Mill is 25- and 50-pound bags of flour. As far as numbers go, Powell explained that they can fill 25 to 28 50,000 trucks, and do about 15 to 18 loads of bags a day on semi-trucks. In some cases, Alton Mill is the only mill that produces sustagrain which is then shipped away to Germany. The white flour produced can also go as far from Alton to Columbia.

The action never stops at West Broadway and Piasa streets. Ardent Mills is a 24/7 operation always working around the clock every day. Like any factory, the holidays and leading up to Christmas is the busiest season for the mill. Plant manager Powell

stated that production slows down slightly from January through March, as "fall bake season" comes to a close. But flour is always in demand and the mill continues to run consistently for the rest of the year.

In this case Ardent can be kind of sustainable. Through the milling process, "nothing on the wheat kernel is wasted", said Powell. They call it "midds" which is part of the wheat grain that is produced during milling that cannot be used for flour production. Ardent can create pellets and ship the "midds" for local feed. In some cases there has been a shipment of mids requested for Puerto Rico which is then shipped via barge.

Being near the river has had its challenges for the mill. "I've never thought that I would have to be a weatherman working here" stated Powell. As the plant manager Powell is responsible for the operation of the mill. When nearing the winter Powell regularly checks forecasts in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and northern Illinois. The reason to check for weather up north has to do with the snow runoff. The more snow the bigger the runoff is from the snow melt. The melt eventually makes it into the Mississippi river causing river levels to rise. 2019 was the last year where the river really flooded and impacted the mill's operation. The flood of 2019 caused havoc for the mill as rail tracks got wiped, Broadway Street was flooded, and the mill's basement and first floor flooded. During this time Powell explained that the mill had to shut down all operations causing a supply chain issue for local customers. When the floods come there is a plan that the wheat can get diverted to other mills but it's hard because the other mills are doing just as much production as Alton Mill.

As for flood prep Powell explained that he and his team have become experts at reading the graphs for the river levels and know if they need to act just in case the water comes into the plant. Flood prep includes boarding up doors, and essentially getting stuff out, finished flour and pallets for example. The mill is constantly making improvements in order to be prepared. The first story was recently redesigned and a concrete wall was built into the ground. The flood wall is also being expanded around the property.

Jeremy Ramirez-Garcia is a Principia College intern for Riverbender.com.

