

“Varieties that can stand on their own two feet, thanks to their good agronomics, are the ones which will be favoured on farm.”

## Fit for the Future

As growers seek to cultivate sustainable rotations for the future, wheat is likely to be a mainstay of many cropping plans. But how can growers get the most bang for their buck? *CPM* speaks to the experts.

By Charlotte Cunningham

**While wheat is the backbone of most arable businesses, how exactly it's incorporated into the rotation has endless options.**

From high spec Group 1 milling types to barn-filling Group 4s, they all have their pros and cons. But selecting the best option for the individual farm based on soil type, historic performance and market opportunities, is fundamental when it comes to growing a profitable wheat crop, explains James Webster, senior agribusiness analyst at The Andersons Centre. “Wheat consistently has one of the highest gross margins across all crops which is why it's the most largely grown crop, and fundamental to that is the high demand in the UK — particularly for milling varieties.”

As such, varieties which have high yield potential and keep input costs low are key

# Sowing profitability

to getting the most out of what can be a very profitable crop, says James. “This is as well as having good access to markets and adapting the cropping strategy based on market demands where possible.

“For example, thinking about this year's harvest, we know a lot of farmers will have had issues with establishment and therefore profitability is likely to be significantly down — winter wheat plantings for this year's harvest are estimated to be down by about 310,000ha. So looking beyond 2024, there's likely to be an even greater focus on variety choice and minimising the risk that comes with growing crops as much as possible.”

## Milling wheat premiums

Looking more closely at market demand, James points out there have been strong premiums for milling wheat during the past few years due to some of the cropping challenges growers have faced, which is something to also factor in when making future decisions. “Coming out of Harvest 2023 we had poorer quality wheat, and coming into Harvest 2024 there are understandably concerns about availability — and also getting nitrogen onto crops — which will again most likely lead to a strong milling premium this year.”

Taking this into account, James says when it comes to selecting a wheat variety, having versatility to grow something which could access milling markets may prove to be beneficial. “Obviously there's a risk associated with growing for higher spec, so if you're not so comfortable with growing milling wheats, high yielding

wheats with less risk is another way of maximising returns. This could come via growing a variety with a strong untreated yield characteristic, for example. It's all about just opening options up as we look ahead.”

James notes that high yielding Group 4s are likely to be one of the most consistently profitable options as they're less exposed to volatility of input prices or commodity fluctuations, but to make the most of this, growers should select something with strong all-round performance.

There are also ample opportunities in growing Group 2s too, adds James. “Group 2s are seen as the second tier of the milling wheat market — there are some good yielders in there and the opportunity



*Having good access to markets, a consistent yielding crop and minimising unnecessary input costs are key factors in ensuring wheat profitability, says James Webster.*



*With extreme weather events having a greater impact on growers in recent years, new varieties need to be robust and consistent, says Mark Dodds.*

to look at multiple markets. But we're also seeing some really good contracts for Group 2s now in terms of milling premiums with millers who recognise and understand the performance of Group 2s and their potential."

Among the Group 2 options that could offer growers flexibility is KWS Extase which boasts a combination of high yields and good agronomics which, when treated with the best chemistry, can help deliver excellent gross margin opportunities on-farm, explains the firm's Kirsty Richards. "When Extase was launched, it set a new benchmark for Group 2 wheat in the UK with its versatility, and breaking the mould delivering the very best combination of high untreated yields with excellent grain quality gaining it a huge following. Its continually proven track record since then has earned it a place amongst the UK's most successful milling wheats ever," she believes. "Even now, it's still an exciting variety, trumping all others for profitability when grown in the right conditions."

Looking closer at its characteristics, with a specific weight of 79.4 kg/hl and a Hagberg Falling Number (HFN) of 294, Extase has among the highest scores of any recommended breadmaking wheat, points out Kirsty. "Plus, Extase is a well-established Group 2 variety which is supported by a buy-back contract for full milling specification through to lower protein flours by many national millers."

However, the beauty with Extase is that selecting it offers growers flexibility — serving as a good feed wheat option too if milling specification is unachievable or local milling opportunities simply don't exist.

This is something John Pape, seeds manager for Quantils Seed Services, believes is a particular strength of the variety for his customers. "We're based in Lancashire and the local milling opportunities are limited, meaning most farmers in the region are targeting feed markets. That said, since it hit the list, Extase has continually been one of our top three varieties — despite its classification as a Group 2."

## Easy management

The key thing growers seem to like about Extase is its cleanliness and ease of management, notes John. "We're not in a hugely arable region here in the North West — cereals tend to be predominantly grown as a break crop to grass and vegetables which are the main cash crops.

"What that means, in practical terms, is a lot of growers don't want high input varieties — they don't want something that they're forever going to have to keep an eye on and applying a lot of costly chemistry or inputs to. What they tend to like is tried and trusted varieties and this is essentially what has kept Extase at the top of the list."

John adds that Extase's septoria resistance score — 7.4 — is something that makes it a particularly attractive variety. "Where we are, septoria is a key disease for a lot of growers, again making Extase an obvious choice. But it's also pretty solid on its other agronomics which makes it stand out as a lower input type."

It's also become evident that it's suitable for later drilling, adds John. "While I wouldn't say we're in a necessarily late drilling region, if farmers haven't been able



*John Pape says Group 2 Extase is a variety he can confidently put on farm and know it's going to perform well.*



*When Extase was launched, it set a new benchmark for Group 2 wheat in the UK, believes Kirsty Richards.*

to get other crops off until later, Extase offers that extra flexibility and confidence that you can plant it late but it'll still get going quickly and perform well. With the weather the way it is lately, having that second bite at the cherry with something like Extase is really beneficial.

"As a merchant, Extase is a variety I can confidently put on farm and know it's going to perform well."

Thinking about what growers — and merchants alike — are going to require when it comes to wheats of the future, John says while yield will always be king, there's now more focus on selecting a good all-rounder which minimises risk as much as possible throughout the growing cycle.

"Although everyone wants to achieve the highest yield they can, there's definitely more of a consideration from our growers about factors like cleanliness. As we go forward, it's clear there'll be more key actives leaving the chemical market, so varieties that can stand on their own two feet thanks to their good agronomics are going to be the ones which are favoured on farm.

"Certainly when I'm looking at new varieties, if it has one major flaw in its disease resistance profile then I switch off as I know it's not what our growers are looking for out of their future wheats."

Breeding wheats tailored to the future demands of farming is something KWS has been focused on for quite some time, says the firm's Mark Dodds. "When we think about the next generation winter wheats, they're being developed and created for an environment where growers have reduced chemistry at their disposal, ▶



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► hugely varied growing seasons due to the impact of climate change, and huge external pressure on crop inputs, protecting soil health and adhering to political and market volatility”.

KWS has a number of new candidate varieties going through testing at the moment, these include:

#### Potential Group 1

- KWS Vibe (KWS W443)
- KWS Beste (KW 2226-19)

#### Potential Group 2

- KWS Arnie (KWS W441)
- KWS Newbie (KWS W442)
- KWS Equipe (KM 21110)

#### Potential Group 3

- KWS Solitaire (KWS W440)
- KWS Flute (KWS W447)

#### Potential Group 4 soft

- KWS Vicarage (KWS W436)

#### Potential Group 4 hard

- KWS Scope (KWS W432)
- KWS Mongoose (KWS W450)

Looking closer at some of the detail, based on its pre-market trials, KWS Vibe looks set to be a robust new offering for Group 1 growers, says Mark. “From KWS milling trials over a number of contrasting seasons, KWS Vibe has higher protein than the today’s Group 1 controls with gluten quality and loaf volume being good. More importantly on-farm, potential milling wheats of the future have to routinely produce 13% protein to serve the end market and, in our trials, KWS Vibe regularly delivered high proteins with good grain characteristics — giving it excellent promise for the future.”

KWS has also carried out a large-scale lab evaluation comparing KWS Vibe with KWS Zyatt, using samples taken from KWS co-located plots and grown to milling protocol. Mark Charlton, head of cereals milling and baking services at Allied



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*KWS has 10 new candidate varieties up for recommendation this harvest.*

Technical Centre said in baking, Vibe performed very well in all products and was of better quality than the KWS control. He also echoed the views from the NL trials, stating the variety has good gluten strength, and said it has good potential across a wide range of recipe types used in the UK.

### Appealing traits

Looking at the wider characteristics of the variety, figures to date suggest a very high untreated yield, supported by excellent scores for mildew, yellow rust, eyespot, septoria and brown rust.

Turning focus to other potential new options, KWS Arnie is a new potential UKFM Group 2, offering UK yields 3% above those of KWS Extase. “It’s a medium strawed, but very stiff, variety backed by an excellent set of disease scores including a 7.1 for septoria and 8 for eyespot,” says Kirsty.

Fans of KWS Extase will also probably find themselves drawn to new KWS Equipe, too, she adds. “It’s another French-bred variety with a high yield, performing especially well in the west thanks to its excellent disease package including a 7.1 for septoria.

“Finally for those in the north, KWS Newbie is potential Group 2 wheat with superb grain characteristics and impressive all round potential.”

Growers looking for a new Group 4 alternative for the future will likely be attracted to KWS Mongoose, adds Kirsty. “It’s a super short, very stiff type that is very early to mature, offering growers real harvest security even when the weather is subject to change. Like KWS Dawsum, Mongoose can be sown early in September through to the end of January and delivers yields of 106% of controls seen in trial putting it ahead of many hard feed favourites.”

Kirsty concludes: “When we think about the types of varieties that are going to take arable growers into the future, it’s ones like KWS Vibe with good agronomics that can achieve a premium which are going to help that all important bottom line across the supply chain.

“With 10 candidates up for recommendation this harvest it looks to be an exciting year for us as breeders, but also for farmers who’ll hopefully benefit from a host of new options right across the growing groups, allowing them to make better choices as they plan for a sustainable future.” ■

## Fit for the Future

In this series of articles, *CPM* has teamed up for the seventh year with KWS to explore how the cereals market may evolve, and profile growers set to deliver ongoing profitability. The aim is to focus on the unique factors affecting variety performance, to optimise this and maximise return on investment.

It highlights the value plant genetics can now play in variety selection as many factors are heavily influenced and even fixed by variety choice.

KWS is a leading breeder of cereals, oilseeds, sugar beet and maize. As a family-owned business, it’s truly independent and entirely focussed on promoting success through the continual improvement of varieties with higher yields, strong disease and pest resistance, and excellent grain quality. KWS is as committed to your future just as much as you are.

