

Is Bread Sustainable? A reflection on the launch of the Sustainable Wheat Initiative Europe

By Wayne Visser

This is not something most of us think about, but last week I had the opportunity to speak at the launch of the **Sustainable Wheat Initiative Europe (SWIE)**, led by the Federation of Industrial Bakeries (AIBI). Here's what I learned (and some of what I shared).

According to consumer research by **Kantar** - presented by **Jonathan Hall** at the symposium - the baking industry already has a good reputation on sustainability. So why launch an ambitious sector-based initiative? I believe there are four reasons:

1. **Economy.** This is existential. It's not by accident that the SWIE's Manifesto states "sustainability is essential for the resilience of the sector". Sustainability isn't a "nice to have" for the food sector, it is an economic "must have" in an increasingly water-scarce, climate-damaged, chemically-overloaded world.
2. **Climate.** Agriculture is both affected by and affecting climate change. The entire European bakery sector consumes ~25 million tons of wheat, representing 12.5 million tons of CO₂e. That's why the Manifesto commits to cutting wheat & wheat flour emissions by 30% by 2030 from a 2022 baseline.
3. **Nature.** The sector most responsible for the catastrophic loss of biodiversity in the past 50 years is food and agriculture. But it can also be part of the solution. That's why it is encouraging to see the Manifesto referring to "sustainable agricultural practices, such as regenerative agriculture".
4. **Trust.** Business increasingly needs to earn a "social licence to operate". This is especially true for food and farming, which people rightly have strong feelings about. Unless it can gain and hold the trust of all its stakeholders, the sector will find itself cast as the villain, destroying rather than nourishing life.

The Sustainable Wheat Initiative is a great start. But how will they turn promises into performance? In my talk, I focused on the role of innovation and technology. Pivot Bio is using nitrogen-producing microbes to provide an alternative to chemical fertilisers, while Vestaron is using spider venom as a natural pesticide.

Novamont manufactures bio-based, biodegradable plastic sheets for the agricultural sector, while Bio-lutions turns wheat waste into bio-packaging and Toast Brewing creates beer from surplus bread. Novonesis uses enzymes to create biosolutions to improve food health and reduce environmental impacts.

Blue River Technology uses AI for precision agriculture, cutting chemical use on crops by more than 90%. Farmonaut uses satellite to monitor crop health, while KissanAI and

plantix use AI to help farmers diagnose crop diseases. Corteva, BASF and indigo are all working on engineering more resilient crops.

And what can you do? You could start by checking if your favourite food retailer, manufacturer, baker or agricultural company is signed up to the Sustainable Wheat Initiative Europe. Here are the Manifesto signatories so far: <https://www.sustainablewheatinitiative.eu/signatories/>.

My bestselling book Thriving is available as an ebook, audiobook and paperback

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