

From These Tiny Grains

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A copper mushroom cap with a tall smokestack on a flatbed: hobbit home? No, a beautiful wood-fired oven, more than six-feet in diameter.

Wood smoke laces the morning Maine air, and I keep looking for a campfire, forgetting the stunning Le Panyol ovens dotting this corner of the Skowhegan State Fairgrounds. Only one of the ovens is copper, but all of them are fired, getting ready for the day's baking workshops.



I fill a bowl with fruit salad, studded with lots of local blueberries, top it with homemade yogurt and Maine-made granola. I'm under the grandstand bleachers, and I pick a spot at a green picnic table. More than 200 of us have come for the Kneading Conference, two days dedicated to bread, but there's no bread to eat yet. I sit with people I know from other food conferences—a couple who malts in Hadley, Mass., a farmer/baker/miller trio from Ithaca—and try to get a bead on the people who have come from around the world to teach and learn about bread.

There is nothing distinct about this sample set of humans. We are mostly white, mostly over 30 or 35, but little about our exteriors reveals the invisible glue (gluten?) that sent us to inland Maine. I came because I love thinking about grains. How they show how we live at any minute in time. At home on the slopes of the Poestenkill Gorge, grist stones from the 1800s sit with rocks, recalling the Trojans who grew and milled their grains close to home. As soon as the Erie Canal was funded, speculators and farmers bought land in the Genesee Valley, and local production of wheat stalled.

Developments in transportation and technology marched wheat further west, but farmers are growing grains in New York State again. I love to watch the story unfold in their fields and in small mills popping up around the state. I got myopic about wheat in my yard last fall and planted winter wheat; at the end of June we harvested it, thanks to my friend and his sickle and scythe. We'll grind it as we need it on his bicycle-powered grain mill.

If my compass is grains, most people at the Kneading Conference follow the true north of bread. In June, I met a couple for coffee in Troy. They were headed here, and I learned about the man's sourdough and his quest for the perfect loaf. He was looking forward to the workshops and to meeting other like-minded people.

There are plenty of them. Amateur and professional bakers flock to the Kneading Conference—this is the sixth—year after year, ready to teach and learn about bread. People study baking ratios projected on a screen, take photos and copious notes. Gradually I learn that the teachers are sitting in on each other's classes. One presenter, due to teach a class on the French approach to sourdough, wanders serenely from one class to the next. Standing at the back without an air of the authority he quietly possesses, James Maguire answers instructors as they redirect audience questions. The level of respect and inquisition for the craft of baking and its mastery is very high.

During workshops, women and men hold up iPads, filming demonstrations for their own cooking instruction library. People stare intently as bakers mix and knead dough, look for tricks as they shape loaves. They ask some serious questions, as if this compelling hobby of bread is their job or calling.

"Seems to me like you're putting a weak spot up by putting up the seam side," an audience member comments after instructor Martin Philip from King Arthur Flour places a batard on a heavily floured cloth to rise. Philip says that the seam will go down on the hearth. Of course.

Teachers advocate for precision. Be a good scientist and take notes as you bake. Use scales to weigh ingredients, or measure accurately with cups (dip and scoop, not dunk and pat). Use a thermometer on water and in the dough. But no one suggests these tools will let you skip handling the dough. Rather, the tools should increase your intimacy with the process.

"Do this by hand first to get a feel for the dough," advises Michael Jubinsky of Stone Turtle Baking and Cooking School. The class is dubbed Artisan Bread 101. "Once you start using the mixer, stop the machine and feel the dough."

Jubinsky passes a basket of dough around for people to get a feel for heft and textures. This is not the only class where everyone touches the dough.

“These bread geeks are part artist, part scientist, and they want to teach you everything,” said Derek DeGeer, a baker who sells breads and bagels at farmers markets in Maine. He is taking a workshop on production baking with a wood fired oven led by Jonathan Stevens and Cheryl Maffei of Hungry Ghost Bread in Northampton, Mass.

DeGeer and other participants get a taste of how to handle a bunch of bread doughs for wood firing and commercial sales. Stevens’ approach is looser than many other workshop leaders.

“I’m not scientific about temperatures,” Stevens quips. “I’m scientific about the music. What I like the dough likes.”

Even the more technically minded instructors, however, address the more personal, metaphoric sides of bread.

“I love to talk to the dough because I am going to eat it. People talk to their plants and all they do is grow,” says Michael Jubinsky.

But this is just the baking. Nearby, people are making ovens from brick and mud. They’re listening to talks about backyard grain cultivation and scything, the history of brick ovens and the intricacies of malting. A couple talks about growing rice in Vermont. A man talks about antique corn, and varieties grown by Abenaki tribes that are now grown in Maine.

In town at the Somerset Grist Mill, farmer Thor Oechsner, baker Stefan Senders and miller Greg Mol talk about how their work lives dovetail and intersect at Farmer Ground Flour and Wide Awake Bread. The intersecting Ithaca area enterprises are a model for how grains can build relationships and professions that are personally satisfying and matter deeply to the community.

The Skowhegan mill, built in the former county jail, also houses a farmers market and serves as a pick-up site for a multi-farm CSA. This makes it a great setting to discuss relocalizing food production, a topic at the core of the Kneading Conference. The conference began when people in Skowhegan put their heads together to think of a way to rebuild the regional grain economy. The area had been the breadbasket for the Union Army during the Civil War, and in the middle of the last decade, an army of locavores from Boston and Portland sought local staples. What could the community do to address this lack? A two-day bread event seemed the cure.

The Somerset Grist Mill grew from the conference, pushing the desire to repatriate grains into everyday life. Locally grown wheat and oats will soon be milled in Skowhegan and marketed as Maine Grains.

Next year the pretty ovens will be parked at the fairgrounds again, and more conversations about grains, bread and ovens will make the unassuming site a cathedral to bread. Most likely, I'll return to listen.