

Meeting a Knead: Conference, Mill Revive Grains in Maine
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SKOWHEGAN, Maine — Several years ago, bakers, oven makers and community members in central Maine brainstormed about how to get grains back in Maine fields. The state had been the breadbasket for the Union Army during the Civil War, but wheat production didn't last in the Northeast.

Then opportunity came with the growing popularity of the locavore movement. Consumer demand for local grains led community members in Skowhegan to form The Kneading Conference, a two-day workshop on bread, ovens, wheat and other grains.

The two-day conference draws 250 people from around the world to learn skills from master bakers and oven makers. An Artisan Bread Fair follows the conference, bringing 3,000 people to sample Maine breads, flour and ovens.

The spirit of these events continues year-round in the former county jail, which is in the process of becoming the Somerset Grist Mill.

The sixth conference was held July 26-27, followed by the bread festival July 28. Volunteers from the community smiled as they directed traffic, set up chairs and otherwise helped with logistics.

The Kneading Conference and Somerset Grist Mill certainly lend energy to an economically struggling community. But how does this enthusiasm influence agriculture?

"I've been very impressed with their vision of a need to look at grains again," says John Harker, director of market development for the Maine Department of Agriculture, which helped sponsor the conference again this year. "I think that there's a lot of good potential for expanding grain production. I've been in development work for 25 years, and the point at which you go from idea to industry can be a long one, and it really depends upon processing and markets."

The mill is a little ahead of production, Harker says, but building processing capacity is necessary to encourage production. The example that the mill is offering, in terms of showing that small-scale grain businesses can be built, is critical.

Andrew Plant of Cooperative Extension in Aroostook County — often called "the county" — also sees the conference and mill as starting to open up the market. "I get some calls from people who heard of the Kneading Conference and have heard about the grist mill," Plant says, and they ask, "what sort of market is it, and what do they need to be doing to get into that market."

Growers in the county have acreage under contract with the Somerset Grist Mill this season — 50 acres of wheat and 100 acres of oats — but Plant sees a bigger impact in terms of generating farmer interest.

“People aren’t necessarily willing to move until they see somebody doing it that’s successful,” he says.

Early adopters lead the way, but people tend to sit back and observe until they see if other farmers do well.

One of these leaders is Tate McPherson, owner of the Maine Seed Co., a grains and oilseed marketing company in northern Maine.

“I’ve always been of the opinion that shipping all of our grain to Canada to be feed or flour” is not a good idea, McPherson says. “Most of our local businesses purchase it back. We should have the jobs here in Maine.”

With partner farms, he grows about 3,500 acres of cereal crops and soybeans. They’ve been producing wheat for a couple of flour mills in New Brunswick and Quebec.

“It was a very pleasant surprise to find out we have a flour mill starting up here in Maine,” he says.

McPherson brokered the contracts the Somerset Grist Mill has this year, and put in an additional 75 acres of wheat anticipating the mill’s growth. More land is being prepped and amended to get ready for fall and spring plantings.

“We’re taking a little bit of a risk,” he acknowledges. The extra wheat will be stored so that they won’t run out of product as the mill’s market expands. McPherson has great faith in the county’s capacity to grow grains, and is working to form a large grain cleaning, storage and separation facility so farms have the ability to use infrastructure, such as a color-sorting device, to maximize profitability. The county, he says, has more open land for grain production than all the rest of the counties in the state combined, and more than elsewhere in New England.

John Harker echoes that thought.

“What’s clear to me is there is a good 60,000 acres up in Aroostook County, some of it is already in grain, that could be put into grain production for breads and other things,” says Harker. “So we have really good potential, probably the best potential in the Northeast for acreage if we want to go in that direction.”

That potential has more room to be explored because of the model offered by the grist mill in Skowhegan and information presented at the conference. This year,

sessions on growing upland rice in the Northeast and reintroducing types of corn grown by Abenaki tribes in Maine broadened grain conversations beyond wheat.

The Maine Grain Alliance runs the conference and bread fair, and traces ripple effects in a number of enterprises: small baking operations in the state and elsewhere; a multi-farm cooperative that is based at the same building as the mill; and Pasta Fresca, a farmer-owned pasta company that will use the mill's flour.

Another farmer-owned business, Maine Organic Milling, is a cooperative livestock feed mill with connections to the conference, and to the nation's largest cooperative, Organic Valley. Maine Organic Milling shows that what's happening in Skowhegan is a collaborative endeavor.

Another key player in these ventures is Ellen Mallory and the University of Maine Extension. Mallory is on the board of the Maine Grain Alliance, and her Extension work focuses on wheat.

"The mill and the conference have brought up a lot of conversations on how can we get this done logistically, conversations about equipment, combines in particular," says Mallory. "Once you get wheat out of the field you have to clean it, and dry it. The infrastructure is not readily available for people to make the investment."

University of Maine Extension offers a lot of informational support on how to grow grains, site considerations for wheat, and understanding quality through variety trials.

In partnership with the University of Vermont Extension, University of Maine Extension is in the third year of a four-year USDA Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI) project to study organic wheat bread production. Each winter the Extension hosts workshops in Maine, bringing in grain producers from outside the state and tapping expertise in state to provide networking opportunities for farmers, bakers and millers.

All of this attention to grains in Maine seems to be a feedback system, fueled by and fueling its own power. Bakers like Barak Olin use Maine grains in their breads. Aurora Mills in Aroostook County grows and grinds Maine grains. The Maine Grain Alliance has developed a system to re-grant funds to for-profit grain-related enterprises.

"The goal of the conference is to inspire redevelopment of regional grain economies, not just in Maine. We're succeeding," says Amber Lambke, who is building the Somerset Grist Mill with her partner, Michael Scholz. "New mill projects are popping up. Farmer, baker, miller connections are forming. We now

have people growing grain. I didn't used to know grain growers in my community and now we're working with a dozen grain growers in my community."