

# Grain Mill Opens Market for Local Grain Production

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SKOWHEGAN, Maine — The Somerset Grist Mill held tours during The Kneading Conference and Artisan Bread Fair July 25-26, here.

The flour mill opened last September and grew out of interest developed through the conference, which promotes artisan bread baking, wood-fired ovens and regional grain production.

Built in the former Somerset County Jail, the mill project began soon after the first Kneading Conference was held in 2007. Organizers initially courted other mills to come to the area, but Amber Lambke and Michael Scholz soon realized that if they wanted a local mill, they needed to make it happen.

When the county jail came up for sale, the 3-story-high, granite, brick and reinforced concrete building seemed perfect for a mill.

"We couldn't have asked for a better building in town," Scholz told a tour of 20 people.

Height is essential for mills, which use gravity to move grain through the system. The solid structure provides insulation against the noise and vibrations of the mill, allowing it to operate in the midst of downtown Skowhegan. Coincidentally, the old mill was located across the street from the jail, so the new

mill's location made sense.

The building is called the Somerset Grist Mill and houses a number of enterprises — small food businesses and arts ventures — in addition to the flourmill, which is called Maine Grains. Outside the building, bins stand on one side and the tanks of a comprehensive vacuum system are painted mustard yellow.

A dust collection system inside keeps particulates to a minimum, reducing accumulation that can lead to an explosive environment. Smaller bins are installed in the attic and feed down through various equipment.

All grains that come to the mill are cleaned in a 1938 Clipper cleaner. Some grains need more cleaning than others and might pass through the air-screen cleaner more than once, or through a gravity table to remove weeds or other material.

The gravity table is also used to sort incoming oats by size, pulling off smaller grains for feed and directing premium oats to the dehuller for processing. Oats are sold cracked and rolled.

The mill produces two types of wheat flour: whole wheat and a partially sifted white flour. Since opening last September, the mill has processed about 50 tons of wheat and 30 tons of oats, along with some buckwheat. Rye will be coming in

for milling this year, something that excites Scholz, who is a baker.

The certified-organic facility has faced limited supply during this first year of operation.

"Most of what we have was grown without pesticides, but the land has been in conventional production," Scholz said during the tour of the building.

Matt Williams, an experienced miller and farmer from Aroostook County, was also on the tour. Williams has been running Aurora Mills since 1999, and he answered questions about testing for vomatoxin and baking qualities, and the issue of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in small grains.

The mill itself is an Austrian mill, with 4-foot composite stones housed in pine planks and linked to a sifter. This type was chosen because the stones will last 30 years without dressing. The size of the stone keeps grains and flour at low

temperature, which can help preserve nutrients, especially in whole grain flours, where oils in the germ of a grain can spoil rapidly.

The mill produces between 150 and 175 pounds of flour an hour, and Scholz and Lambke are considering buying another type of mill to increase capacity.

The mill functions as evidence to farmers that there is a market for local grains.

"It's inspiring people with fallow land to think about growing grains," Lambke said, standing by bags of flour at the Artisan Bread Fair, an event which drew 3,000 people to the Skowhegan State Fairgrounds.

It's also led to the creation of several other small businesses that have little to do with the mill. For instance, someone is growing oats for an herbalist, and miller Julie Savage has started a grain and bean CSA (community supported agri-

culture) with farmers Adam Nordell and Johanna Davis.

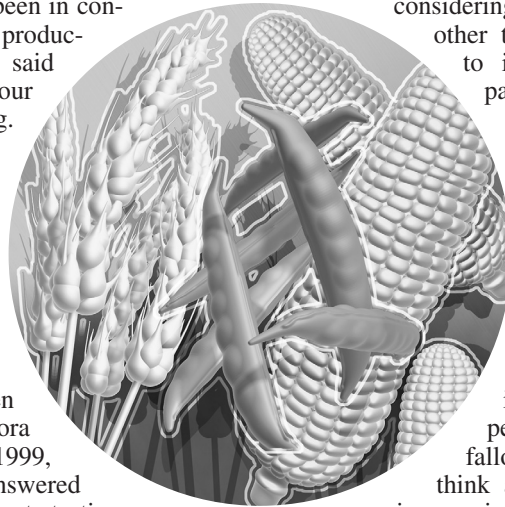
The primary wheat supplier for Maine Grains, Tate McPherson, is getting financing for a grain depot in Aroostook County. The facility will have tank storage and cleaning equipment to allow for separation of food- and feed-grade crops.

Whole Foods has made a commitment to buy 30 tons of organic flour from Maine Grains for use in its baking facility in Medford, Mass. The flour is geared for a Maine loaf that might include other local ingredients, and the baking facility itself supplies 70 of the grocery store's bakeries in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic region.

The Maine Grains Alliance is the nonprofit that steers the Kneading Conference as well as other year-round activities at the mill such as baking classes and other outreach and educational efforts to promote baking and regional grain growing.

Ellen Mallory, an agronomist with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, sits on the Maine Grain Alliance's board and sees the mill's importance in building infrastructure and trust within the farming community.

"The mill is providing a stable market and assurance that people have a place to sell their grain," Mallory said.



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