

THE SOMERSET GRIST MILL: SKOWHEGAN, MAINE



PROJECT GOAL

To revive value-added agricultural production in Maine's food sector by developing appropriate infrastructure for a growing grain industry; to rehabilitate an important abandoned building to accommodate new businesses, including a grist mill.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Approximately three years ago Amber Lambke and her business partner, Michael Scholz, redeveloped the old Somerset County Jail facility which had been lying dormant in the very heart of the downtown district of Skowhegan, Maine, the shire town of Somerset County. Taking over three years of what Lambke describes as a "Hodge Podge" of funding sources –traditional bank loans, several interest-free loans from foundations, 10 different private investors, and grants made through the Somerset County Economic Development Corporation – the old jail was redeveloped and equipped for the grist mill that supports the developing grain industry in central Maine and beyond. Prior to its establishment Maine grain farmers had to ship their produce out-of-state for processing into flour and other products. The production and processing of grain is an important element in stabilizing agriculture in Maine, growing soil quality and is crucial to the ongoing growth of the organic milk and egg industry in the state. A once significant grain producing state, Maine is witnessing something of a grain revival aided, in large part, by developments such as the Somerset Grist Mill.

Maine Grains, the flour brand marketed by the grist mill, has witnessed a substantial increase in its production each year of its operation and in 2014 it produced 250 tons of product for bakers across the state, including Portland's nationally renowned Standard Bakery, among others. The project cost nearly \$1.5 million and includes the grist mill, Maine Grains, as well as a small yarn store, a small youth-run technology hub,, and the Pick-Up Café. The facility also serves as the retail and wholesale site for the local CSA and, during the summer months, serves as the base for the Skowhegan Farmers Market. Local institutions, such as the hospital, schools and camps, source food from the facility. In terms of employment, especially important in an area with a substantial poverty rate, the grist mill and the other businesses located in the old jail facility have

created approximately 20 jobs, many of which have gone to local people without traditionally strong employment records. Together with the Bangor Savings Bank, the Mill delivers programs developed to provide employees with financial and management skills to create a more capable local workforce. Aided by the infrastructure investment from the Town of Skowhegan and Main Street Skowhegan, and additional support from the Fair Foods Network, Coastal Enterprises, Slow Money Maine, and the Skowhegan Savings Bank, Maine Grains and the downtown of which it is a part is being revived. Pedestrian walkways, new pavement and other improvement have been made. Additionally, several other businesses in the community, such as a brewery and a bakery now feature products using grains milled in Skowhegan.

LESSONS LEARNED

Northern New England is witnessing something of a renaissance in its food system, most especially in terms of agriculture. In Maine the number of farms has actually increased and new farmers are entering the profession. But over the years the food processing infrastructure of Maine, like much of the region, has eroded and this has meant that much that Maine fisherman and farmers produced was sent out-of-state where the value-added was produced. Maine faces significant deficits in its food-related value-added infrastructure. Maine Grains, centered in the Somerset Grist Mill once the abandoned county jail building, is making a significant difference in the state's organic grains industry. Beyond its immediate impact for grain producers, the facility has acted as a catalyst for the renewal of downtown Skowhegan, Maine, and also serves as the site of other food-related businesses that draw people to the community's downtown. Further, as a consequence of the redevelopment project, each year Skowhegan hosts The Kneading Conference at the county fairgrounds. The conference attracts people from all over the nation and even internationally to share and learn about the latest innovations in grain production, baking and related fields. This acts as a magnet for tourism and has established Skowhegan, once again, as a major venue in Maine's evolving food system.

The establishment of the grist mill has, then, been a catalyst for other investments in the downtown, especially in terms of modernized infrastructure, and it serves to buttress and support neighboring farms that have made high quality fresh foods more available to a traditionally under-served community. Further, local jobs have been created in an area with high rates of unemployment, and skills training has been introduced to enhance the quality and integrity of the local workforce. Many community organizations have come together to support these new ventures. While the ramp-up time for the grist mill and related businesses has been substantial, numerous interdependent relationships have developed that have helped to revive the community in many ways.

For More Information: <https://www.facebook.com/Somerset-Grist-Mill-home-of-Maine-Grains-176855939089926/>