

Amber Lambke

Personal Brand Manifesto

More than a century ago, central Maine was part of New England's breadbasket, and the town of Skowhegan was one of the hubs. Today, Skowhegan is experiencing an agricultural renaissance, with a new generation of thought leaders, farmers and food producers leading the charge. Many people are playing instrumental roles in this movement, including Amber Lambke.

She says, "Revitalizing Maine's grain economy has provided a good focus for economic and community development at the grassroots level in Skowhegan, at this time in history. We are improving an economic cluster and creating new opportunities, from milling and baking, to grain farming, malting, and distilling."

A native of Brunswick, Maine, Amber met her husband-to-be, Dr. Michael Lambke, at a North Whitefield Grange contradance. According to Amber, North Whitefield was one of the most "happening" spots for contradancing at the time, and the place was packed — Amber and Michael each came with their own friends but formed a connection that night.

After marrying, the two moved to Skowhegan where Michael had joined the Skowhegan Family Medicine practice. If, at that time, someone had told Amber, who has a master's degree in speech and language pathology, she was soon to become the owner/operator of a gristmill, she would have thought them crazy.

The Skowhegan community embraced Amber and her husband. As the young couple got to know their neighbors, they began sharing the locals' deep concern for Skowhegan's future. Jobs were being lost and poverty was on the rise. They resolved to roll up their sleeves and get involved.

Some of the Lambkes' newfound friends were bread bakers and masons. They began to discuss the possibility of bringing grain cultivation and processing back to the area as a means of spurring new economic development and restoring self-reliance with a staple food — grains. Though there were no longer any flour mills in operation, the Skowhegan area was once home to 13 mills, and Somerset County was producing enough wheat to feed more than 100,000 people.

The farmland was still there, and the local food movement had the potential to generate a strong demand for high-quality grains. Amber began to see the possibilities. The wheels were set into motion with the first Kneading Conference, which Amber cofounded in 2007 as a volunteer. Focused on traditional grains and methods of milling, baking, and oven building it drew farmers and millers from throughout Maine and eastern Canada. To Amber, the potential and excitement was there for Skowhegan's grain industry to be reborn. To further the movement, she helped Kneading Conference founders to establish the Maine Grain Alliance, a nonprofit organization geared toward preserving grain traditions from earth to hearth. She was elected to become the Alliance's executive director.

As Amber began to visualize the revitalization of Maine's grain economy as a 'cluster' of interrelated trades, goods, and services, she realized Skowhegan would need a place where local grain growers could sell their crops to be processed, packaged and sold. In 2009, Amber and her friend Michael Scholz, an artisan brick-oven baker who was milling his grains on a stone mill, purchased the old county jail, a Victorian-style structure built in 1897, with the intent of transforming it into a gristmill with space for

other entrepreneurial tenants. Despite early skepticism and hurdles that had to be overcome, the town came together around the project, with Somerset County's economic development corporation, the Slow Money Maine network and other local supporters helping to finance the building's refurbishment.

While renovations were under way, Amber and Michael set about learning how to process grain in the traditional way. They visited mills in Canada, Vermont, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and North Carolina. Amber also completed a week-long course on flour milling at Kansas State University's International Grains Program, one of only two places in the world that provides formal milling instruction. There, she met a faculty member who would later be hired to help design the layout of their mill. Amber also travelled to Denmark and Germany to learn about stone milling and artisan baking from expert millers and bakers and build a network of support for stone milling in Maine.

The Somerset Grist Mill, LLC, the largest mill in Maine using the traditional stone milling process, began operations in 2012. Working with local farmers, the mill processes all-natural and certified organic whole grain and sifted flours, oats, wheat berries, rye, cornmeal, buckwheat and more on its Austrian stone mill and sells them under the Maine Grains label. Maine Grains products are carried at natural food stores, groceries and bakeries in the northeast region.

Maine Grains' bold idea to repurpose a jailhouse into a gristmill has created a national following. Standard Baking Co. of Portland and Scratch Baking Co. of South Portland, Maine, Gotham Bar and Grill and Gramercy Tavern of New York City and Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, New York are just a few of the award-winning establishments that use Maine Grains' superior products.

Skowhegan has successfully established itself as one of the country's emerging rural 'food hubs.' Amber says, "By collaborating and leading by example, the gristmill project has helped to mobilize ideas into action. We set out to repurpose a significant historic building and create jobs and, in so doing, have realized the great potential of a project to build strong collaborations and community wide benefit."

"The gristmill now hosts a 21-member farmer's market year-round, and three start-up enterprises: a multi-farm CSA and local foods café, a knit shop, and a youth-run technology center. We have also leveraged our investments to secure grants for improvements to the adjacent town parking lot and for a number of other food businesses that supply our food hub to scale up their operations."

The Maine Grain Alliance, with its home base in the Somerset Grist Mill, has expanded its reach with additional initiatives geared toward promoting the local grain movement. People from across the country now attend the Kneading Conference to hear presentations from the industry's top national experts. One of the alliance's most successful initiatives, the Maine Artisan Bread Fair, attracts thousands of people annually. Children and community groups learn about handmade bread with the help of a mobile wood fired oven and the Maine Grain Alliance hosts smaller more intimate baking workshops out of a renovated commercial kitchen at the gristmill. Newer projects include a heritage seed restoration project and a technical assistance grant program to help strengthen grain-based businesses in Maine.

With the rising interest in grains, the University of Maine has undertaken long term study of wheat production in the state and has enhanced its support of local farmers producing grain.

Downtown Skowhegan has a new air of vitality, excitement and promise. Vibrant community events and public spaces, annual celebrations, and the day-to-day successes that link people and projects are making Skowhegan a bright spot.

The outlook for local farmers and farmland preservation is also brighter, and area residents are becoming more knowledgeable about the benefits of buying local and eating healthier. Amber has worked with Skowhegan Farmer's Market manager, Sarah Smith, also located at the gristmill, and together with the hard work of many farmers, they have quadrupled the number of vendors and increased sales by more than 400 percent. Through support from the Wholesome Wave Foundation, qualifying low income families are offered "double dollars" on items they purchase at the market, and area physicians are writing "fruit and veggie prescriptions" for their patients to encourage them to shop at the farmer's market and make better food choices. Frequent demonstrations at the market of how to prepare and cook various fruits and vegetables help home cooks of all ages and backgrounds to feel more comfortable trying out new foods to serve their families. Amber and Sarah organized a local team of stakeholders to launch "The Pickup" at the gristmill, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program and local foods café with shares sold to individuals, families, and institutions, and a café open on weekends. Amber is currently writing grants to fund nutrition and local agriculture efforts in Skowhegan as part of a long-term commitment to community health.

Amber's next endeavor, through a partnership with the local contractor that helped her transform the grist mill, is to reclaim the town's historic grange hall. She and Michael Scholz again teamed up and purchased the building for \$15,000, saving it from being demolished. They are now laying plans to refurbish the upstairs assembly hall as a community gathering place and to host a business downstairs.

In addition to serving as president of the Somerset Grist Mill, LLC and executive director of the Maine Grain Alliance, Amber is active with Main Street Skowhegan, she is on the board of the Skowhegan Farmer's Market, chairs the Western Mountains Committee of the Maine Community Foundation, and is advisor to the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences.

Amber enjoys cooking, gardening, pottery and cross-country skiing. She and her husband have two children, Miles and Zoe. She attributes her ability to work in synchronicity with others to her four-year rowing career at Ithaca College where she learned that ultimately the success of a team is about focusing on a point in the distance, pulling together and holding the course.