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5 lessons from visiting the Bread Lab

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7-8 minutes

Once a year, I take my leadership team offsite to engage in a shared learning experience to both further our knowledge in some area and to build relationships across the team. The inspiration for the offsite this year came from the book [The Third Plate](#) by Dan Barber. The book explores food and farming and ultimately gets to the intersection of good food and good farming. The author takes readers through an examination of soil, land, sea, and seed. It's in the last section on *seed* that we're introduced to [Dr. Stephen Jones](#) and the [Washington State University Bread Lab](#).

Stephen Jones is a wheat breeding innovator who started the Bread Lab as a way to build a de-centralized food system. The Bread Lab brings together a community of people across the wheat ecosystem, from bakers to brewers, to experiment with flavor, nutrition, and functionality of wheat.

It was an inspiring experience with many lessons that resonated for me both personally and professionally.

1. Ecosystems are powerful

Upon arriving, we had a welcome reception where Matthew Hoffman from [Westland Distillery](#) and Keith Kisler from [Finnriver](#)

[Farm & Cidery](#) shared samples of their beverages and told stories of their connection to the Bread Lab. We then moved to the back of the building and sat at freshly built picnic tables for a cozy dinner, hosted by another Bread Lab partner, [Canlis](#) restaurant. As we listened and engaged in conversations with several Bread Lab community members, it became clear that evening that this was a special sort of community: one of support, admiration of craft, and desire for innovation and sharing.



This community-based approach grew from the hub of the Bread Lab and a desire to bring people together across the ecosystem in a new way. By having everyone come together, from the scientist to the farmer to the baker, real experimentation is possible. If the outcome of the grain doesn't work for everyone, then they adjust and keep experimenting. This desire to innovate across the ecosystem is what makes this community-based food model unique and has people coming in from all over the world to be a part of the

experimentation.

As Steve Sakuma, a farmer who spent the day with us, said "community is people giving and not expecting anything in return." But with the power of this diverse and innovative ecosystem, everyone gets something in return.

2. Trust accelerates momentum

We spent the next morning at the [Skagit Valley Malting](#) company. We heard about the niche market they've created for innovative and specialty malts. We weren't surprised to hear that the concept started with an over the fence conversation Stephen Jones had with his neighbor. We talked with several other partners of the Bread Lab including Matthew Dillon from [Clif Bar](#), who readily admitted that they don't use any of the Bread Lab grains in their bars but are strong partners because they deeply believe in the mission of the Bread Lab.

Later that day, Patsy Martin, Executive Director of the Port of Skagit, joined us to share her vision for the Skagit Valley. We learned about Patsy's penchant for saying "Yes, we'll figure it out" when Stephen Jones or one of his other partners comes to her with a new idea. This approach of "yes" first has enabled the Bread Lab vision to thrive and progress to happen. Community, trust, and shared vision are all behind this yes-first approach.

3. Progress requires focus

An important part of Stephen's vision is how value is created and where value lies across the ecosystem. Keeping value with the farmers is of utmost importance to him. Stephen talked about creating value where there is no value. He emphasized that "if you're different and out of place, you can have a place and have

value." It's through embracing being out of place that you can find your community.



As we discussed bringing value to the community, many of us had ideas for how the Bread Lab could extend beyond the community to reach more people. As we tossed out ideas for scale, Stephen was clear that reach and scale isn't his focus. Scale would mean fighting against the industrialized food system in place, which isn't of interest to him. He thinks there's plenty that can be done by just doing it.

4. Time is an ingredient

Throughout our day, we experience baked goods that were both delicious and nutritious. Now some might think that these two words don't go together very well, but baker [Jeff Yankellow](#) from King Arthur Flour, proved otherwise. While largely in the background throughout the experience, Jeff was the behind the scenes hero of the day as beautiful and delicious baked goods from croissants to cookies to all kinds of bread kept surfacing. Whole grains in every bite!





We were sold on the possibilities of eating whole grains. And while we were sent home later that day with bags of baked goods, recipes, and freshly ground wheat, I did start to wonder what this would mean when we got home. How would we find such delicious whole grain baked goods in our neighborhoods? Would we change the way we eat? Ultimately, I realized that as consumers, it was up to us to track down fresh ingredients, to know where our grains are coming from, and to get into the kitchen to cook and bake.

During the day we heard this message from Stephen in a less direct way. He told us that "time is an ingredient." And he shared that "we've lost the culture of food." We were fortunate that day though and got a glimpse of the beauty of the food culture cultivated at the Bread Lab.

5. Meet people where they are

The day ended with an impassioned discussion on the future of food and in the style of the Bread Lab, we did it in a communal fashion, right in the baking lab.





Stephen surprised us all with his response to the question *what's the future of food?* He said it's bread that's sliced and in a plastic bag. This is what people think of when they think of bread. To have an impact, you need to meet people where they are. Now, of course, his sliced and bagged bread is whole grain with just a few ingredients.

Steve also said that the future of food needs to include the whole grain. Instead of stripping out the goodness of the whole grain, we need to start eating the whole thing. This alone, would create 30% less waste and 30% higher yield. And while not everyone may be there yet, it's something to work toward.





On the ride back to Redmond that evening, I was struck by the conversation amongst the team. People were appreciative of the learning opportunity. Some were moved, others were inspired, but it was clear that different parts of the experience impacted each of us in different ways. And the most rewarding part for me is that we can have a shared learning experience and grow as a team while at the same time grow as individuals.