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Black Bear to Merin Skincare: Alumni founders adding value to Maine's lobster industry

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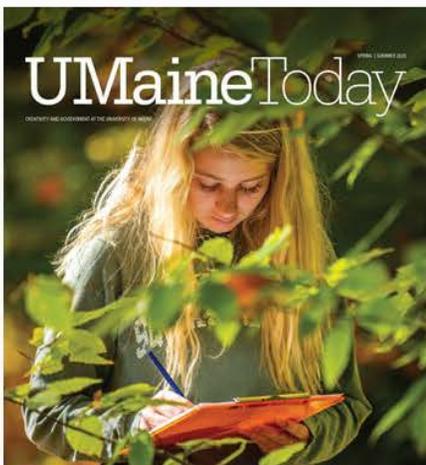
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Courtesy Patrick Breeding

Black Bear to Marin Skincare: Alumni founders adding value to Maine's lobster industry

March 11, 2021

Marin Skincare is a Maine story.

It started in 2013 when co-founders Amber Boutiette and Patrick Breeding met on the first day of their first year as biomedical engineering undergraduate students at the University of Maine. Nearly eight years later, the pair has relocated to Portland, launched a specialty skincare product made with lobster glycoprotein, and is now teaming with an established Maine brand, [Luke's Lobster](#), to scale their supply chain and meet strong demand for their first product.

Luke's Lobster, a seafood company founded by third-generation lobsterman Luke Holden, has been part of the [Marin](#) story from the beginning. The Luke's Lobster ethos is focused on sustainable, traceable seafood that supports the coastal communities essential to its harvest. Boutiette and Breeding ('17, '19G) were introduced to Holden by Robert Bayer, former director of the UMaine Lobster Institute. It was Bayer who discovered that lobster glycoprotein might have beneficial properties that could help treat Boutiette's stubborn and painful eczema — and it did.

"I had eczema for most of my adult life and it progressively got worse over the years," says Boutiette. "Having it on your face is debilitating because you can't really use products that have steroids in them, and I had it really bad around my eyelids and on my cheeks. I tried every type of eczema cream, oils, diet changes, lifestyle changes, everything. Nothing helped."

Nothing, that is, until Bayer, Boutiette and Breeding collaborated in 2017 on a prototype of the product that would later become Marin's Soothing Hydration Cream.

"Within a day or two, I noticed a difference," says Boutiette. "I first noticed my skin was not burning and itching as much. After about a week to two weeks, the spots had cleared, which was incredible after years of trying so many different products."

While they had solved Boutiette's pressing problem, this was not a eureka moment for the pair, who were gearing up for graduate school and preoccupied with another startup they had recently launched,



Zephyrus Simulation.

“Amber’s eczema was gone, and we kind of forgot about it,” says Breeding.

Instead, Boutiette and Breeding were immersed in something of a crash course on entrepreneurship as part of a team trying to commercialize a cost-efficient, realistic simulator to train medical professionals in diagnosing and responding to critical respiratory situations. The technology was the basis of their senior capstone project, which had won the undergraduate Innovation Award at UMaine’s 2017 Student Symposium.

It was through Zephyrus that Boutiette and Breeding first were exposed to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Maine. Recruited out of the Student Symposium and guided by the team at the Foster Center for Innovation, the two dove headfirst into the startup life and coursework in Innovation Engineering. Though Zephyrus eventually wound down, Breeding and Boutiette were hooked on the entrepreneurial mindset and increasingly focused on developing a product that they felt could change people’s lives.

“As we thought about life after grad school, we came back to this product that had helped Amber relieve her eczema,” says Breeding. “What better thing could we work on than this new solution to a really irritating and painful problem that affects over 10 percent of the population?”

When Boutiette and Breeding began building Marin and developing their first product, they went back to Holden to source their key ingredient. Lobster glycoprotein is a component of lobster circulatory fluid, a previously wasted byproduct of processing.

This past summer, Boutiette and Breeding spent hundreds of hours at Luke’s Lobster Seafood Co.’s processing facility in Saco collecting the glycoprotein in the quantities needed to manufacture Marin’s first batch of cream.

“In the beginning, it was a small thing. We would be super excited to get an amount that would fill a small coffee cup,” says Breeding. “I just kept showing up to collect it and built relationships with Luke and his employees and eventually systematized this whole collection process. We had some help over the summer, but it was really me doing a lot of the grunt work to gather enough to manufacture our first few thousand tubes.”

After launching in early October 2020, Marin sold out of their initial inventory inside of two months. Customers were clamoring for more of the cream, and the co-founders had to come up with a plan to scale — and fast.

Breeding and Boutiette took a step back and focused on systems, a familiar principle from their Innovation Engineering studies at UMaine.

“Everything works by a system or process,” says Breeding. “And, knowing that, there’s a system or a process for everything. So, if you don’t know how to do something, don’t know how to solve something, you only need to think about it from the fundamental principles of the steps in the process by which it works.”

There was no blueprint for how to scale up the collection of lobster glycoprotein, but Breeding had plenty of experience doing it himself, and a willing collaborator in Holden. Going forward, Luke’s Lobster employees will collect the glycoprotein as part of their processing operation, and Marin will purchase the raw material.

“Luke’s Lobster is consistently looking for innovative ways to find win-win solutions within the lobstering industry, from the moment lobsters are harvested to the finished products being created and marketed,” says Holden. “On the fishermen side, for example, we return bonuses to co-ops we work with when lobsters are handled exceptionally well so there is no waste in the supply chain. On the product side, we seek to use everything we can; whether that’s creating a plant fertilizer with lobster shells or a skin care product that truly helps people. Partnering with innovative companies like Marin is part of the overall equation that makes the lobster industry more robust and dynamic through a diversification of products. On a personal level, I enjoy working with entrepreneurs in Maine and helping them wherever I can.”

Breeding, a Connecticut native, and Boutiette, who grew up in Skowhegan, are both quick to credit Maine’s supportive and tight-knit entrepreneurial community, not to mention their crucial link to the lobster industry and enduring ties to their alma mater.

"In Maine, there's this community of people that want you to succeed and will go out of their way to help you," says Breeding. "It started at the Foster Center where we were gently pushed — pushed in the right direction, pushed to the right resource, pushed to the right thing we needed to learn. The support mechanisms in Maine for startups are unique and the focus on economic development makes it very nurturing."

Initial funding for Marin came through the Maine Technology Institute and the Libra Future Fund, and the company recently won a \$14,000 grant as part of Maine Sea Grant's [Buoy Maine](#) pitch competition, which is focused on strengthening coastal/marine seafood and tourism related industries.

"I feel that we really will help Maine's economy," says Breeding. "In the beginning, it was theoretical, but now we're actually paying Luke's for raw material. We're paying a processor for this protein before the lobster is even sold. That adds value to the lobster industry — it helps buoy the processors, which helps buoy the fisherman. As we've progressed, we've become more connected to that story because the impact has become real."

For Boutiette and Breeding, gratitude has defined their journey to this point. Now fully restocked with a solid plan for the future, they are grateful for the support they've received from all corners of the state, grateful to be selling a product that can be a game changer for people with troubled skin, and grateful for an opportunity to add value to Maine's most iconic fishery.

"It is the most incredible thing to be able to develop something that can help people with the same problem I had," says Boutiette. "I feel so lucky to have been able to try it in the first place, to help myself, but I feel a million times luckier to be able to help others and bring relief from that heavy of a problem."

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