

Come & Get It!

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO SERVE FOOD ON YOUR FARM

2nd
EDITION

Case Studies

Dinner on the Farm

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Dinner on the Farm Provides Options, No Money or Time Required

Dinner on the Farm

Owner: Monica Walch

Location: Saint Paul, Minnesota

www.dinneronthefarm.com

Food: Chef Driven Menus

Beverages: Often includes beer & wine

Timing: varies — check website

Date opened for food service: 2010

The blossoming local food movement and the increasing interest in on-farm dining experiences add up to one key opportunity for everyone: More room at the entrepreneurial table to support a multitude of different, related start-up ventures. Dinner on the Farm represents the growing sector of independent companies that facilitate on-farm food events, taking care of all the logistics and event planning so the farmer can focus on what they do best: farm! Working with such a business also enables farmers to experience and experiment with on-farm dinners and see what they are like before investing any time or resources to do something themselves.

“Often at our events, the host farmer works in the field until mid-afternoon, then takes a shower and simply walks on over and attends and enjoys their own party,” explains Monica Walch, owner and brainchild behind Dinner on the Farm, based in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Having grown up on an organic dairy farm, Walch understands and appreciates the farmer’s perspective and the peak season workload they have to deal with. “Our specialty and niche is we handle all the logistics for the event, from ticketing to promotion to licenses, insurance and staffing. The host farm benefits both from the attention and related marketing this event brings to their operation, along with the unique

opportunity to actually relax and enjoy the event and meal featuring their farm-raised fare.” Walch does give farms a token “thank you” payment at the end of the event, but sees the marketing and networking opportunities as the primary appeal of host farms.

Today, Dinner on the Farm hosts events throughout the summer season, in Minnesota and throughout the country. A pioneer in the farm-to-table movement in the Midwest, Walch needed to overcome many barriers and hurdle regulatory obstacles to bring her vision for Dinner on the Farm to life.

“When I first started six years ago, this whole on-farm dining concept was so new to everyone, including agencies like the Minnesota Health Department. When my events grew to the point that I needed to engage these folks, I at first quickly received answers like, ‘you can’t do that,’” recalls Walch. “I then learned fast that I needed to be very open and transparent about what I was doing to develop a trusting relationship, but at the same time needed to be firm in my commitment that I wasn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer and that we could work something out and eventually we did, but it’s a constant process for me as I do new events in various parts of the state with different local zoning authorities and interpretations of the code.”

Given her seasoned experience working with agencies and regulations to bring farm-to-table dining events to life, Walch offers the following tips in working with such situations:

1. Communicate and Prioritize Food Safety

“I repeat continuously that I share the agency’s priority of serving safe food,” Walch recalls.

“That is the underlying bottom line priority for health inspectors and it helps tremendously to have a spirit of collaboration and trust.”

Walch recommends first thoroughly reading the regulations and understanding them yourself — then ask questions as needed — but take the time to review and absorb the key issues.

It helps, too, for agencies to understand why food safety is the key component of my business’ success,” adds Walch. “If anything happened to one of our guests, our entire operation and livelihood would be at stake.”

2. Remember “no” really means, “let’s look at this differently”

“I heard the word ‘no’ a lot in the beginning,” remembers Walch with a smile. “I quickly needed to redefine ‘no’ to really mean ‘we don’t have a category or check-box for what you want to do.’ That meant I needed to use their language and help connect the dots so together we could find ways to make this all work.”

3. Find an internal ally

Eventually, Walch found someone within the Minnesota Department of Health who truly understood the mission and vision of Dinner on the Farm and helped champion things internally. “For awhile this person came out to every dinner to check things and understand what was going on, but since trust has been built in our relationship, I don’t have as many inspections.”

A unique feature of Dinner on the Farm events is they are family-friendly and affordable, with ticket prices averaging around \$50 to \$60 per person including wine or beer and kids are free. “Sometimes folks still assume farm-to-table events are only formal, white tablecloth affairs with tickets over \$200 per person, but we’re proving that doesn’t have to be the case,” adds Walch. A key way she keeps the cost per person lower is to serve in a more informal “picnic style” where guests bring their own dishware and

blanket, just like you’d expect for a picnic. This keeps both rental costs and the workload down tremendously, as both dishware and dining table rentals are no longer needed.

This family-friendly atmosphere reflects Walch’s underlying vision for Dinner on the Farm: Connecting people with their food sources in a fun and celebratory environment. “I love working with a range of different farms as our core clientele are customers who return to events every year and like to experience something new,” Walch explains. “My only real ‘rule’ for a farm host is that they practice sustainable agriculture.” Most events take place on Sundays, which Walch finds the best fit for everyone involved. “Restaurants are often closed on Sunday nights, so it’s easier to find a local chef to partner with to prepare the food. Everyone’s schedule is so busy nowadays; Saturday night might be booked but folks are more likely to have Sunday free.”

When asked what her official ‘title’ is at Dinner on the Farm, Walch replies with a grin: curator. Just like a curator at an art gallery brings an artist’s work to life, Walch takes the same approach on the farm, bringing all the multitude of elements together for a farm-to-table experience to come to life.



Pizza Adds Diversification to Farm Income Menu

Please note:

The following case study on Stony Acres Farm was written for the original version of this manual in 2015. With permission of Kat Becker and Tony Schultz, this case study appears as this original 2015 version as the start-up advice and information is still accurate and relevant to readers. Note that Becker and Schultz no longer co-own the operation. Becker now runs Cattail Organics (cattailorganics.com), a vegetable operation in the area, and Schultz continues at Stony Acres Farm, including the pizza farm operation (stoneyacresfarm.net). Renewing the Countryside thanks Kat Becker and Tony Schultz for their permission to run this 2015 piece. Please see their websites for current updates on their farm businesses.

Stoney Acres Farm

Owner: Tony Schultz

Location: Athens, WI

www.stoneyacresfarm.net

Food: Pizza

Beverages: On site brewery, organic wine, sodas, root beers seltzer's

Timing: Friday & Saturday nights

Date farm established: 2006

Date opened for food service: 2012

"Diversification proves to be a win-win as it inspires us to continually be creatively challenging ourselves, thinking proactively about the future and always asking 'what if,'" explains Kat Becker, co-owner with her husband, Tony Schultz, of Stony Acres Farm. Their certified organic operation is located about thirty miles west of Wausau in north central Wisconsin. "Doing a weekly, on-farm pizza night proved to be one of our most lucrative and fun ventures yet and brings together the ultimate combination for us: sharing what we grow and raise directly with our community right on our land."

Now in their eighth season of farm production, Becker and Schultz run a highly diversified operation and serve as the third generation of farmers on Schultz's

family land. The core of Stony Acres Farm includes a twenty week CSA vegetable operation (Community Supported Agriculture), along with herb, fruit and flower production; raising grass fed beef, pastured pork and chicken; organic grains; maple syrup; and their newest venture, which officially opened in 2012: farm to table pizzas served on Friday nights from May through November.

"Diversifying into pizza made strategic sense on multiple levels as we already raised or grew most of the key ingredients, from pigs for the sausage to vegetables for toppings," explains Becker. Their key pizza cost is cheese, which adds up to \$2,000 annually and is purchased direct from regional cheesemakers. "We saw the growing interest in pizza farms in other parts of Wisconsin and Minnesota and knew we could take advantage of being the first such venture in our north-central part of the state."

For those starting on the pizza farm business journey, Stony Acres Farm offers five core pieces of advice:

1. Take Time for Research and Planning

Stoney Acres' pizza operation showcases the importance of researching and planning strategically when a diversification idea requires an investment. "Installing a commercial kitchen isn't as intimidating as you think, but we did need to research and understand the requirements so as to use our money wisely," adds Becker.

The commercial kitchen was part of a granary remodel and included \$2,000 for the kitchen equipment, purchased at auction, and installing washable walls. Their total cost was around \$5,000, doing much of the labor themselves.

"Take the time to visit other operations and learn how others are doing things," Becker continues. "We gained much insight from visiting other operations and seeing how others do things."

2. Collaborate and Ask Questions

"Remember that state inspectors and agency folks are on your side and truly want your business to succeed, but they have their rulebooks so that proper and safe procedures are carried out and you need to fit into their boxes," advises Becker. "Keeping dialogue open and transparent from the start really helped us develop strong working relationships with our local inspectors. We started talking way before we broke ground or

spent anything, so we'd all be on the same page."

However, if specific rules and requirements don't make sense to you and your situation, don't be intimidated to ask questions. "Remember the inspectors are just following their checklists and are not really empowered to change things. If you want something different, you'll need to go higher up the agency channel, ask for an exemption and get it in writing," Becker offers.

Such was the case for Stoney Acres and cooking sausage. Per code, they needed an exhaust vent over the stove when cooking meat, which would have cost over \$10,000. Given the fact that they are only operating one night a week during the summer season and spending just a few hours actually cooking the meat, Stoney Acres contacted the head state inspector and asked for an exemption, which he granted. "Once we showed that official state piece of paper authorizing the exemption to our local inspector, they then had all they needed and the whole thing went away, but we had to initiate the exemption process and ask," Becker adds. In Minnesota, this is called a variance process and is an option that you as the farmer-entrepreneur need to be aware of and initiate. Your inspector probably isn't going to offer it to you; you will need to ask for it yourself.

3. Keep Evolving

The pizza business keeps growing for Becker and Schultz: In 2013, Stoney Acres sold over \$30,000 in pizzas at \$18 to \$20 a pizza and are looking to double that in 2014. "We realized after some super high volume nights during which we had to refund money because folks were waiting over an hour for their pizza, that we needed a second oven to keep up with demand, which we added mid-season this year. That made a huge difference immediately," Schultz explains. "We're still trying to figure out the best work flow and how much staff we need to best handle peak season nights where we'll be pumping out way over 100 pizzas."

To further diversify income, Stoney Acres sets up a small farmers' market stand right next to the spot where attendees order and pay for pizza, which adds up to a couple hundred dollars in sales per event. "We sell at the Wausau Farmers Market the next day on Saturday morning, so our produce is already harvested and it's easy to set up a small market table at pizza night," shares Schultz. "The market stand also helps us visually explain a certain topping item that folks may be unfamiliar with, like a garlic scape." Stoney Acres blends unusual items like scapes into different weekly specials posted on their Facebook page, such as "Scape Goat Returns," with local goat cheese, diced garlic scapes, thinly sliced ham and mixed summer squash.



Borner Farm Project: Pizza farm success through serendipity

Borner Farm Project

Owners: Diane & Baard Webster

Location: Prescott, Wisconsin

bornerfarmproject.com

Food: Pizza, seasonal appetizers & desserts

Beverages: Includes beer & wine

Timing: Every other Friday night

Date farm established: 2008

Date opened for food service: 2016

“We never intended to start a pizza farm,” shares Diane Webster with a grin when asked about the start-up story behind the Borner Farm Project, now in operation for over a decade. “This journey really began with our desire to take care of this very unique property and do it in a way that helps support a local food system and builds community.”

Diane and her husband, Baard, are long-time residents of Prescott, a town of just over 4,000 located near the banks of the Mississippi. For fifteen years, while they were raising their family, they ran a nursery business based out of their home. “It was successful but we were ready for a change. We loved our house and where we lived so we sold the nursery business and kept our home property.”

A passionate gardener and community builder, Webster first started growing vegetables on her three-acre home property and found great joy and satisfaction in the conversations that percolated over tomato plants. “One neighbor who I hadn’t seen in years came out of her house, sat down and weeded with me for forty-five minutes, recalling stories



of past gardens and her family's farming history. Community was happening in my own front yard." This was a watershed moment for Webster and prompted her to start dreaming about the positive possibilities a garden could play in cultivating community connections.

Around the same time, she grew curious about a property located in the center of her small town of just over 4,000: the Borner family farm. This land, originally 200 acres was first homesteaded in the mid-1800s; one of the earliest European settlements in Pierce County. It eventually sold off as the town grew, but still retained twenty-two acres in the residentially zoned open space in the middle of the town. "One afternoon while walking my dog I saw this property in a whole new light and realized what a unique situation this is with all this open land right in the middle of town. What an opportunity," Webster reminisces.

One of the original descendants of the Borner family, Virginia Klecker, still lived on the property. Through Webster's leadership, she grew to be an ally in the vision of a start-up of a community-based entity that brings together an intergenerational group to raise awareness of our agricultural history and our responsibility to the future. Klecker first leased land to the Websters in 2008 for \$1 a season and eventually sold the property to them in 2013.

The farm, aptly now titled the "The Borner Farm Project," raises vegetables on a little over two acres for both a small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and an on-site farmer stand with payments via the honor system.

How did pizza fit into the Borner Farm Project story? Add again a dash of serendipity. "Someone forwarded me an e-mail about a local opportunity through the Allina Health Clinic for small grants of \$2,000 for repeatable events that would create community," explains Webster. That's when the vision of a pizza night first emerged and, with the encouragement of long-time farm staff member Emily Betzler, they quickly applied as the grant application was due that day.

"We did get the grant which covered some of the costs of the actual oven, which we ended up buying used. It cost us \$900 to move; not sure I'd recommend that route," adds Webster. The first pizza night as a community event took place in 2012. "When the first 25 pizzas were ordered in the first 15 minutes, we know something good would come out of all this."

Webster then went through the city permitting process for a conditional use permit to officially open for thirteen nights in 2015 including licensing the farm house kitchen as a commercial entity. Pizza nights now run every other Friday night from May through October, and include some other options such as seasonal appetizers and dips, salads and desserts. Wine and beer are also sold. One hundred to two hundred pizzas are served on busy nights, with attendees split about half from the local area and half regionally, as the farm is conveniently about a half hour from the Twin Cities.

"With the growth of pizza farms overall, media attention has really helped our business grow," Betzler adds. "CNN included us in their travel section and an article in the Minneapolis Star Tribune really put us on the map." Facebook serves as the primary communications and marketing outlet for pizza nights. With the commercial kitchen, the farm also sells frozen products such as frozen pizza, pies, and soups via their on-farm market stand. They also partner with various local organizations like nature centers and schools to secure grant funding to bring kids to the farm for various experiences.

Campo di Bella: The road from Farm to Restaurant

Campo di Bella

Owners: Mary Ann & Marc Bellazzini

Location: Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin

campodibella.org

Food: Varying menu of seasonal items

Beverages: On-site winery

Timing: Friday nights Cenetta dinners and winebar with small plates. Saturday nights: Farm to Table dinners, special & private events

Date farm established: 2008

Date opened for food service: 2015

The dynamic duo behind Campo di Bella, Marc and Mary Ann Bellazzini, share a trifecta of passions that drive their business: a love for farm fresh food, the farmers that raised it and their Italian family roots which are all about sharing slow and memorable dining experiences and, of course, wine. The story behind their start-up exemplifies how to successfully blend one's food and farm passions with savvy business strategy and how to embrace the fact that being a food entrepreneur means continually, creatively adapting and evolving.

Today, the Bellazzinis run Campo di Bella, a farm-to-table restaurant with a fully licensed kitchen and on-site winery on their home farm property in Mt. Horeb, about a half hour west of Madison, Wisconsin. In addition to hosting private events, the restaurant is open year-round. On Friday nights they serve a la cart appetizers and small plates and wine tastings as well as a three course pre-paid Cenetta dinner. Special prix fixe Farm to Table five course dinners are held every Saturday evening.

"Opening the restaurant and winery in 2015 has been a dream of Marc and mine for years, but it is something that came together slowly and strategically," advises Mary Ann Bellazzini "We still

keep creatively experimenting with ideas, always asking ourselves does this fit our values, especially prioritizing our family and spending time with our two teen sons."

The Bellazzinis started their organic vegetable farm in 2008 and grew to a 27-member CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). In 2009, they planted 265 cold hardy grape varieties with the hope of one day making commercial wine and, in 2010, started raising sheep, heritage breed Black mulefooted hogs and pasture raised dairy cows.

"Marc and I have been cooking alongside of our moms and grandmas since we were little kids and, as adults, we loved to cook together for our family and friends," shares Bellazzini. "When people would come over to eat, they would always comment that 'we should open up a restaurant.'"

However, rather than just jump into the commitment a restaurant entails, including taking on debt, the Bellazzinis creatively experimented for two years by holding ticketed seasonal dinners of approximately twenty-five guests off the farm and renting various commercial kitchens, including their family's parish church and a local restaurant. "I highly recommend any farmer thinking about hosting food events to test the waters by doing something like we did before investing in your own kitchen. Just because you like cooking for your family at home over the holiday doesn't necessarily transfer to enjoying cooking regularly for a group of, at times, demanding strangers."

For the Bellazzinis, these events using off-site kitchens reaffirmed to them that this was what they wanted to do on the farm and plans for the restaurant and winery began, breaking ground in 2014. Bellazzini needed to learn and navigate a long list of regulations, for both a full-scale restaurant as well as a winery and creating the right structures and equipment from the ground up. "I recommend working with an architect with experience in restaurants and commercial kitchen spaces as that really helped us out a lot."

A challenge and also a creative opportunity with Campo de Bella has been figuring out ways to be successful in the restaurant space and adhere to those commercial regulations and requirements while embracing the fact that they are most definitely not a mainstream restaurant on multiple fronts. "Educating our customers has been key for us as we are not open

all the time and we have what I call a ‘triple threat’ of challenges for our guests to get here: a rural country road, surroundings that get very dark at night and weather impacts.”

The Bellazzinis manage their unique situation by continually experimenting with new ideas, particularly during that first year. “We found having Friday nights be the time when folks can stop by without a reservation and order small items off our menu over wine and having ticketed dinners every other Saturday night works for us,” adds Bellazzini. “Ticketed dinners work as we don’t have the luxury of a restaurant in food savings as we need to just prepare the right amount of food for that night and can’t use leftovers the following week.”

Guests pre-purchase tickets for the prix fixe dinners online and sit at communal tables with the maximum being 30 people. “That’s how many chairs I have,” laughs Bellazzini. Each dinner has a different menu and theme based on the season and often spotlights different farmers and food artisans in the area, with those growers attending as part of the meal appeal. This food service schedule also fits with the Bellazzinis’ other priorities, as Sundays are dedicated to family time and Marc also balances an off farm job in Madison in health care.

“We’ve learned to adapt and evolve based on a combination of both what our customers are looking for, what we need as a family and how we can ultimately create a healthy bottom line,” shares Bellazzini. For example, they currently raise much of the meat and vegetables they use but needed to let go of the CSA and prioritize the restaurant. “Because we were already part of our local farm community, we knew a lot of producers and could readily purchase ingredients we needed and support our friends in the process, a real win-win.” Their latest venture is offering overnight lodging in the rooms above the winery as their customers kept asking about spending the night after enjoying the Campo di Bella dining experience.

While Campo di Bella may be a full-scale restaurant from a regulation perspective, the Bellazzinis often find they need to creatively find alternative solutions when their needs don’t fit into a traditional food service box. For example, tipping proved to be a challenge they needed to innovatively work through. “We are all about community and collaboration here and we all shift between jobs and roles to get things done and want to reflect that in paying both our front and back staff equally, so at first we divided tips equally among everyone.” She later simplified to establish a no tipping policy, instead adding a service charge of 18% to ticket prices for events and increased all staff pay to above both national and state hourly pay requirements.



Ultimately, the Bellazzinis’ inspiration and vision roots back to modeling a farm and food experience that exemplifies their Italian family heritage and multiple trips to Italy. “It’s all about slowing down, savoring fresh food and enjoying the moment and the people you are with in Italy, and our goal is to recreate that experience here at Campo di Bella.”



Dream Acres Farm: Off-grid powered pizza

Dream Acres Farm

Owners: Eva Barr & Todd Juzwiak

Location: Wykoff, Minnesota

Dreamacresfarm.org

Food: Pizza (vegetarian), some bakery dessert items

Beverages: BYOB

Timing: Friday evenings

Date farm established: 1997

Date opened for food service: 2010

At Dream Acres Farm in Wykoff, Minnesota, you'll experience a lot more than just pizza. Run by the husband-and-wife team of Eva Barr and Todd Juzwiak, this place reflects their passions for the arts, theater, renewable energy and all things related to sustainable living. The takeaway from Dream Acres Farm is it is indeed possible to create a business that reflects your values and that having multiple interests can blend and add up to a viable farm livelihood.

Barr and Juzwiak met while Peace Corps volunteers in the early 1990s and both came back from world travels disillusioned by much of what our capitalistic American system has caused. They were inspired to create their own community and lifestyle that prioritized caring for the land and self-reliance. On 60 acres in southeastern Minnesota they started Dream Acres Farm in 1997, building their own timber frame house and outbuildings by hand and living completely off grid, using oil lamps at night and heating with wood. In addition to raising food for their own needs, they ran a small CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) of 25 families.

Barr's other passion is theater, both performing herself and serving as one of the founding members of Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company. With a strong desire to help foster the arts both in rural areas and amongst children, she founded and runs the nonprofit, Dreamery Rural Arts Institute from the farm, offering a variety of arts-related workshops and events including an annual summer camp for kids.

"It's the summer camp, actually, that first prompted the idea of the pizza night as we were needing to add a commercial kitchen facility for prepping meals for the kids," reflects Barr. "We started thinking if we need to go through the investment of adding a kitchen, what else could we use it for?" The kitchen was built in 2007 and pizza nights started in 2010, with pizzas served on Friday evenings. Dream Acres Farm's kitchen goes down in the commercial kitchen history books as it is the first completely off-grid, solar-powered facility of its kind.

"Being off-grid, the kitchen took a lot of time to research and explain to the health department as it was so out of their box," Barr explains. With running off grid via solar power and the fact that they are only serving food once a week seasonally plus a few summer camps, Barr needed to convince the health department regulators that a unique yet safe aspect of this kitchen is no on-going, permanent refrigeration. "We just need to run the refrigerator when we need it for the event and it isn't necessary nor frankly possible with the energy we produce to run the unit all the time." But convince she did, and Dream Acres Farm became the first certified, off-grid commercial kitchen in the state of Minnesota. "We've learned to be extremely upfront about what we're doing in talking to regulators and to simply keep at it. Eventually you will find someone receptive to what you're doing and willing to work with you."

Another unique aspect of Dream Acres Farm is their pizzas are all vegetarian, showcasing vegetables grown on the farm. A vegetarian alternative is used on a "meatless meat" pizza to attempt to satisfy customers expecting sausage. Barr and Juzwiak are vegetarian and this decision also supports their vision of sustainability and living lighter on the planet, though they may lose customers who can't imagine a pizza without meat. That said, Dream Acres is a business prioritizing manageability and keeping it fun and does not have a goal of expanding and growing. "The most pizzas we want to do on one night is around seventy-

five, which we've learned is something we can manage and still enjoy," adds Barr.

The pizza farm and the arts non-profit naturally blend to create an engaging and unique dining experience. Colorful banners and art hang on the outbuildings and guests can explore the "Dream Theater" inside the barn. Pizzas are often delivered on stilts by Barr and Juzwiak's teen sons and their friends volunteering.

Word of mouth from satisfied customers continues to be Dream Acres Farm's best marketing, strategy, along with some local media articles that in particular draw in visitors from Rochester, only 30 minutes away. "We have a strong contingency of local folks who make up our core loyal customers," shares Barr. "And then we regularly have people who drive crazy, wild distances to get here like coming up from Chicago."

Barr's advice to potential pizza farm start-ups? Take it slowly to make sure you have the skill set and preparation needed to do things right as well as ensuring your business reflects your priorities. "We took a year to practice making the pizza and getting the dough and system just right and did a lot of 'sample tests' with friends. The pizza farm aspect is now an important piece of our farm puzzle and overall livelihood."

Barr may have moved to a remote farm location over twenty years ago to disconnect from aspects of modern society she didn't agree with, but she did not do so with the intent to completely disconnect from the world. "We want Dream Acres Farm to be a place that brings people together and draws them closer to each other. Relaxing and sharing pizza together definitely sparks that."

Squash Blossom Farm: Mid-life career detours to farms and pizzas

Squash Blossom Farm

Owners: Susan Waughtal & Roger Nelson

Location: Oronoco, Minnesota

squashblossomfarm.org

Food: Pizza, bakery items

Beverages: BYOB

Date farm established: 2009

Date opened for food service: 2016

Some people buy a fancy car to avert a mid-life crisis. Others, like Susan Waughtal and Roger Nelson, buy a farm, add their artistic backgrounds, open it up to the public for pizza and special events and create a next life chapter fulfilling their farm dreams that sure beats something parked in the driveway.

“As I was approaching my fiftieth birthday, I fully realized that if I was to ever realize this dream I’ve always had of starting a farm, I needed to do it now or it would never happen,” reminisces Susan Waughtal, who has worked in community organizing and as an artist. Her husband, Roger Nelson, shared the vision and brought his architect background to the project. Together they purchased the ten acre farm on a 1910 homestead in southeast Minnesota in 2009. From the beginning, they did a little bit of everything including a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture); raising chickens, pigs, and beef steers and a family milk cow; and selling their breads and pastries at the Rochester Downtown Farmers Market.



“Before we became farmers we had often visited pizza farms and loved the experience,” Waughtal shares. “When we found this farm we immediately thought it would be a perfect location, just ten minutes north of Rochester.” As with any of these “out of the standard restaurant box” food service ideas, Waughtal spent over a year connecting with her health department and convincing them of their plan. “I found it really helps to stay pleasant; I kept calling with ideas like if a food truck would work.” She persisted and eventually, thanks in part to her architect husband’s understanding of commercial kitchen design rules, plans were approved. However, they did need to put in a new well and septic.

The couple took a creative approach to generate the funds to build the kitchen: a successful Kickstarter campaign that raised over \$25,000. The Kickstarter process proved helpful on multiple levels as it helped get the word out about their venture and brought people and entities in as vested partners in the project. Supporters received thank you gifts from the farm (such as honey, jam, a “pizza garden” kit, or a promised private pizza party when the kitchen was complete.) The food co-op in Rochester made a Kickstarter contribution equal to a year’s worth of wood-fired sourdough bread orders, which they began receiving upon completion of the kitchen.”

With a little help from friends and interns, Waughtal and Nelson did most of the construction of their kitchen and restroom themselves, using salvaged construction materials as much as possible to keep within budget.

“We learned the hard way that the best laid plans don’t always work according to your schedule,” Waughtal offers. They originally intended to open in June of 2016 for pizza; however, the electrical and plumbing contractors didn’t complete their work until September. “We were basically a small beans project to them and other bigger clients came first.”

Squash Blossom Farm now serves pizzas on Sunday afternoons from 3:30 to 6:30 pm and encourages advance orders and payments through an online platform. Guests are notified that only a limited number of pizzas are available for ordering onsite. Waughtal estimates about ninety percent of customers now pre-order, which greatly helps manage prep and production. Live musical entertainment rounds out the afternoon.

The pizza events are now an important part of Squash Blossom’s business mix, which also still includes a small CSA of six members, an on-site antique shop, hosting various classes, a few weddings, dinners, theatrical productions and special events. The season closes with the annual “Farm Fair and Cow Puja,” featuring a Hindu cow puja blessing ceremony, live music, food and artisan vendors.

“As there are a growing number of both pizza farms and other venues like vineyards and churches selling pizza, it’s important to create something different and uniquely your own,” advises Waughtal. For Squash Blossom, they focus on how everything is made from scratch, from the sourdough crust to their own sauce to the various toppings and herbs. “I like to experiment with other items to see what both sells and we can make a profit at,” adds Waughtal. Homemade ice cream sandwiches sell very well on hot days, and they are experimenting with appetizers. Waughtal also blogs regularly about happenings on the farm keeps Squash Blossom connected to its loyal customer base.

Above all, Squash Blossom Farm is the new palette from which Waughtal and Nelson now create. In 2017 she received a Minnesota arts grant to create a sculpture garden on the farm for guests to wander and often take pictures with. “Our motto is ‘Local Food, Local Art, Local Music. It’s about taking our past careers and experiences and applying it all creatively in a way that brings people together.”

The season closes with the annual “Farm Fair and Cow Puja,” featuring a Hindu cow puja blessing ceremony, live music, food and artisan vendors.

Squash Blossom has recently expanded special events with food served in the greenhouse - some with music or theater - and serving pizzas or soups and even homemade ramen. These are often for various organizations like a We just did a festive business holiday party for 42 people with appetizers, salad, pizzas, and dessert followed by an Improv troupe performance. They have also been serving hot soups and breadsticks at the winter Farmers Market to enthusiastic response.

Suncrest Gardens Farm: Evolving slowly toward solid success

Suncrest Gardens Farm

Owner: Heather Secrist

Location: Cochrane, Wisconsin

Suncrestgardensfarm.com

Food: Pizza, seasonal appetizers & salads

Beverages: Includes beer, wine, and a variety of non alcoholic beverages

Timing: Friday & Saturday nights

Date farm established: 2003

Date opened for food service: 2006

“Eat well. Smile Often.” These are the words that you’ll see on the Suncrest Gardens Farm website and they describe much more than a marketing slogan. It’s the core philosophy that drives farmer Heather Secrist in how she runs her pizza farm: Keep it fun and true to her values of bringing people together over quality, healthy, sustainably raised food.

“We’re about six miles off the Great River Road; remote but not too remote,” explains Secrist. She brings both agricultural and personal roots to her venture as she grew up in a hard-working dairy farm in the area. “I was always helping my dad on the farm growing up but like a lot young people felt the need to leave. As an adult this area drew me back to start my own farm in 2003.”

Originally a vegetable CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), Secrist started small with six shares and grew to seventy, servicing families within a twenty-five mile radius. She manages the farm with some seasonal staff and her husband runs his own dairy a few miles away. “Rather than growing the number of CSA members further, I focused on ways we could provide

them more food for longer periods and added things like spring and winter shares.”

Pizza nights first started twelve years ago, way before pizza farms became the popular gathering they are today, again following Secrist’s start small and grow slowly and smartly approach. “I saw the farm as a blank canvas to create something out of and had room to put a lot of my creativity into it. “

“We started small and I remember how some of those first nights doing thirty pizzas was a big accomplishment,” Secrist reminisces with a grin. Word of mouth proved to be her best form of advertising and now she hosts pizza nights from May through September on Friday and Saturday nights. Secrist does the baking and can pump out over 400 total on a busy week.

“We do the classic cheese and sausage pizzas but I really love the fun ways to incorporate seasonal veggies like corn, tomatoes or carrots,” Secrist shares. She raises all the vegetables for the pizzas and uses her meats as well, including her lamb for a unique and popular “gyro pizza.” Organic pastry flour and corn meal come from Great River Organic Milling conveniently located next door. “I just load up my wagon with flour and roll to the farm.”

In 2017, Secrist stopped the CSA side of the business as the pizza nights and other value-added items were significantly driving the farm business. “It was a very hard decision for me to make as we had been providing food to many of our members for years and I watched – and fed – their kids as they grew up.” Secrist saw an opportunity in utilizing the kitchen for other prepared food products and started doing frozen items like soups and pizzas at the Winona Farmers Market. “Our CSA customers still were really interested in these convenience foods that were healthy and local.”

As the pizza nights grew in size, Secrist worked through different issues such as managing crowds and waste. “We need to constantly help train our customers on how to manage their waste and recycling,” she shares. “For example, when someone sticks their pizza box in the trash can, there’s no room for anything else so we need to keep explaining how to stack the empty boxes in the container for cardboard recycling.” Hauling trash and recycling to the local dump was a stressor with the facility’s

limited operating hours so last year Secrist contracted with the waste management company to pick up her bins. “It’s totally worth that cost,” she adds. Seeking ways to be more efficient and do more with less is a driving mantra for Secrist, such as using a service called Single Platform to keep current on all her different listings for the farm, such as Google and Trip Advisor.

the standard operating box and therefore the health department very likely might not have an answer for you. Do your research, keep health and safety a priority and be confident in your decisions.” Secrist’s open communications and collaboration with the health department also helped open their eyes to these new various forms of agritourism and on-farm food service.



Secrist experimented separately with an additional, new “Garden Café” event the second Saturday of the month. Secrist found adding this second event confusing to communicate, as folks were still showing up for pizza. She decided to go back to focusing just on pizza nights, but expanded the menu to also include side and appetizer items like salads, fried egg rolls, and wontons; utilizing even more farm raised goods. This format works well. “With a public business like a pizza farm, you need to simply accept that people will show up at any time of day thinking this is just like a regular restaurant.”

“I’ve learned you need to be comfortable walking the grey line sometimes, especially when it comes to navigating regulations and state agencies,” Secrist advises. “So much of what we do here is outside of

Secrist exemplifies the collaborative spirit among both farmers in the sustainable agriculture community and the now growing pizza farm scene: We all do better when we all succeed. She doesn’t see the fact that there are many more pizza farms around than when she started 12 years ago as competition (there are now five within an hour radius of her), but rather a benefit. “I look at this growth of pizza farms now as wine country in California, where people see that whole region as known for something special and want to travel there and experience all the different flavors it offers.”

Together Farms: Cooking up burgers with a side of education

Together Farms

Owners: Stephanie & Andy Schneider

Location: Mondovi, Wisconsin

Togetherfarms.com

Food specialties: Burgers/sandwiches, various sides including fries, desserts

Beverages: Includes beer & wine

Timing: Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings plus special events

Date opened for food service: 2017

“My mission, what drives me, goes way beyond burgers,” shares Stephanie Schneider, co-owner of Together Farms in Mondovi, Wisconsin, with her husband, Andy Schneider. “It’s all about connecting folks with the land and their farmer and understanding where our food comes from. A great-tasting burger helps get the conversation going, for sure.”

Another side dish the Schneiders’ serve up via this food service operation they now run on their grass-fed, organic beef, pork and lamb farm: entrepreneurial optimism. “I always have a million different ideas I want to try,” admits Schneider with a grin. This adds up to a viable diversified business strategy that, in addition to the meats which they sell both direct and local wholesale, includes meal kits, personal skin care products using excess lard and e-cookbooks with grass-fed meat tips and recipes.

First step in all of Schneider’s ventures: research and tapping into any available resources that can help her most efficiently approach a new idea. When first contemplating adding on-farm food service, the Schneiders took advantage of this Renewing

the Countryside resource when it first launched: *Come & Get It: What you need to know to serve food on your farm*. That resource, along with Schneider visiting the various pizza farms popping up, led her to start thinking about what could be the “next pizza farm,” what could Together Farms do that would differentiate them? “Burgers were a natural fit as, like pizza, we were making one main item that could have various toppings and flavors and it also was something folks are familiar with and could be an easy sell,” Schneider explains.

But Schneider quickly learned a good tasting burger goes farther than just filling someone up. “That first season, when people told me they just ate the best burger in their whole life, it opened the opportunity to talk to them about why our meat is different and the importance of pasture and organics,” adds Schneider.

For their first season and pilot run on the burger idea, Together Farms created a food stand under a temporary restaurant permit to open for three periods in 2017. Working closely with the health department, Schneider created an enclosed kitchen space on a new screened-in porch. “It was similar to a 4H food stand at the County Fair and a bit cobbled together, but it was an efficient means for us to test the burger idea out before investing in something more permanent.”

And come they did, especially locals. Schneider was pleasantly surprised at the number of folks from nearby who came primarily because of a great-tasting burger. The lack of quality restaurants and overabundance of heat-and-serve bar food in rural areas gives new on-farm food service ventures like Together Farms opportunity to create a community niche by serving a high-quality product.

Schneider quickly grew seasoned in creatively navigating and working within a set of regulations that often didn’t fit her unique business. “My advice is to think about what equipment you have and what you can legally do within those boundaries,” advises Schneider. For example, during the first year, the temporary kitchen space did not have the right equipment for frying so a burger topped with Together Farms bacon wasn’t going to happen, so Schneider made a bacon onion jam as a burger spread. “That went over so well I’m selling the jam.”

In 2018, Together Farms expanded to invest in a food truck as a mobile kitchen. Additionally, Schneider determined they would be better off with a food trailer instead of truck with a motor. That way they could pull it with the truck they already owned, for cost savings both as well as the ability the ability to park the trailer at an event and use the truck to go pick up extra supplies if needed.

“Anytime I do something it seems like I’m the first to do it and have to talk to everyone in state government,” Schneider laughs as she recalls the process of getting this trailer approved for her on-farm food events. “There were things we needed to work out because the trailer is not a permanent structure. There is no hard plumbing so we need to hire someone to come and pump out the grey water.” The trailer, which ended up costing \$60k, includes a porch to expand space and potentially hold a smoker in the future. Two other custom key components were a refrigerated salad bar and a fryer, which enables Together Farms to tap into the paleo and good fats movement, now topping burgers with fried eggs and avocados. “We also did structural things to potentially save money in the future, like making the vent hood bigger in case we need to expand in the future.”

With this new kitchen facility, Together Farms hit the ground running in 2018, serving Burger Night weekly on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. She also

regularly experiments with other special events like brunch and a monthly wine dinner partnering with area chefs for a full-course, plated, ticketed meal.

“A unique aspect and on-going challenge of our business is the need for staff, particularly an on-site chef and line cook as that is not a role Andy and I can play,” shares Schneider, whose strength is in the marketing, customer interaction, and hosting side. “Weather adds another staffing variable as it’s hard to predict how many helpers we’ll need.” Schneider also navigates the challenges of balancing this growing farm food service with other aspects of their lives, including raising two young kids and her state government job which provides benefits and necessary cash flow for the farm. “It’s better now that the kids are older and can help with Burger Nights and be a part of things.”

Schneider’s own role as a parent led to a very family-friendly and educational immersive experience at Burger Night . Maps and signage point out conservation features alongside activities like a sandbox, carpetball and Gaga ball. “Happy kids equals happy parents! And that’s my big secret to success.” she sums up with a grin.



Moonstone Farm: Building Community through Food

Moonstone Farm

Owners: Audrey Arner & Richard Handeen

Location: Montevideo, Minnesota

Moonstonefarm.net

Food: Hot dog food stand; special events

Beverages: BYOB

Timing: Varies

Date farm established: 1972

Date opened for food service: 2004

Adding a food service component to your farm business plan can add multiple benefits beyond just income generation. At Moonstone Farm in Montevideo, Minnesota, owners Audrey Arner and Richard Handeen champion the community building

aspect of their operation, growing their business over the past 45 years into one that plays a strong role in their community.

“The income we generate via selling food is not the primary reason we do this,” explains Audrey Arner. “It fortifies the other enterprises we already have going on here on the farm.” The core business component at Moonstone Farm, which this husband-and-wife duo launched in the early 1990s on Handeen family farmland, is grass-fed, pasture raised beef which they sell both direct to customers and area retail outlets. In the early 1990s they also started one of the first farmstays in the area, repurposing a former chicken coop to a guest house, known as the “Broodio,” a one-room cottage. A continental breakfast is delivered on a tray to guests with items such as home baked goods and coffee.

“We also sell our beef direct from the farm as well as fruit preserves made from farm-grown fruits such as currants, elderberries, and apples; honey, and pottery, and barn art my husband and I make,” adds Arner. “I make these large barnstar mandalas intended to be hung outdoors as a blessing on the buildings themselves, the fields they face and the animals therein.”

The artistic component plays a strong role in Arner’s vision for Moonstone Farm as a creative place that



inspires and fuels its visitors. It also has driven Arner to serve as a leader in her Montevideo community to grow the area over the last twenty years into a rural tourism destination with a particular focus on the creative arts. Art galleries and funky eateries have popped up in town and the area is known for the Arts Meander weekend, a three-day self-guided art tour the first weekend in October.

“The Meander Art Crawl is our main food service event of the year focusing on a key special event where there are already thousands of people coming to the area. It works well all around,” Arner shares. “With this event, we really want visitors to wander the rural backroads and visit farms like ours; however, there are really no restaurants out in the country so this fills a need as folks are bound to get hungry along the way.” For this event which brings approximately 300 people to the farm, Moonstone Farm’s summer kitchen becomes a food stand, serving beverages, and hot dogs made with their beef.

Additionally, Moonstone Farm runs a couple other smaller special events on the farm annually, including a “Grasp the Nettle” wild food foraging event in May and some on-farm dinners partnering with an area chef.

“These events bolster our farm store sales as we find people arrive with money in their pockets and are ready to buy and the Broodio is usually booked,” Arner adds. Her farmstay is a licensed lodging facility, which requires elements like an annual water test and fire detectors.

Arner works with directly with her local health inspector to make sure they are aware of the type of food related events Moonstone is hosting and any needed licensing and procedures are in place. As in some areas of the state, the county contracts with a regional entity, in this case Countryside Public Health, which operates with authority from the Minnesota Department of Health. “I’ve learned it’s important to develop a strong working relationship

with our local health inspector to help us navigate the correct way to do things and that they are aware of what we are doing.”

With a core component of community building, Moonstone Farm also hosts a number of informal potlucks over the course of the summer season, gatherings where people gather voluntarily to share food and therefore do not require licensing but need to adhere to the state definition of a potluck. Arner and Handeen’s multiple trips to Europe strongly influenced and shaped this vision for Moonstone Farm to bolster agritourism and be, as she describes it, a “guest-based farm.”

“I learned a lot in particular during my travels to Italy with a group from the U.S there to look at sustainable agriculture, back when it was still in its infancy here in the United States,” Arner explains. “This vision of creating a welcoming place where people feel at home on a farm really stuck with me.”

To create such a “guest-based farm” takes time, Arner reminds. “If you are a farm that people visit regularly, it automatically boosts the required aesthetic.” Per Arner, everything needs to sparkle, which can be a challenge amidst a working farm with mud and dust. “You really need to like to clean or at least learn to like it,” laughs Arner. “We paint more often and are always clearing out and storing things like buckets and tools to give the farm a clean look, particularly for guests and events.”

As a Minnesota pioneer in this area of rural agritourism and on-farm hospitality, Arner credits the power of local farms networking and working together as a vital element in both Moonstone Farm’s and her region’s success in becoming a tourism destination. “Knowing and supporting each other is what enables each farm to showcase their strengths in a non-competitive way and each offer a diversity of experiences. It’s radical hospitality at its finest.”

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