

Host Farm Dinners

AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES SERIES

From farm-to-fork to dinner-in-the-field, no matter what you call it, an on-farm dinner can be an exciting way to showcase farm products and teach the public about your farm. Dinners are complicated events to pull off, and their profitability relative to the amount of work that goes into them is always a delicate balance. This chapter will introduce several considerations when planning an on-farm dinner and will guide you toward a successful outcome.

Assessing and Planning

ARE YOU ZONED TO HOST EVENTS?

Always check with your town's zoning officials about your intent to have a farm dinner.

Learning about zoning regulations early and acting in compliance with them will protect you down the road.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR THE DINNER?

These could include raising money for farm infrastructure, a cause you are aligned with, CSA shares for low-income families, or simply increasing farm revenue. Additional goals might include showing customer appreciation, showcasing a new piece of the farm, celebrating the farm crew, or offering a fun evening in the field.

DO YOU HAVE THE SUPPORT OF FAMILY MEMBERS AND EMPLOYEES?

If yes, identify skills and how each can contribute to making a successful event. Consider how much time you have to put into organizing the dinner. If you don't have the time or expertise, consider hiring someone who does. Additionally, contact your town health officer and town clerk to confirm that no other permits are needed before hosting the event.

Managing Liability

Liability exposure will always be present when there are employees or guests on the farm. There are many types of liability exposure:

Premises Liability

Property owner fails to protect people from potentially hazardous conditions. Customer is injured on property or "premises."

EXAMPLES: slip and fall, equipment usage, contact with animals

Product Liability

Customer is injured by a product that was prepared and/or served to them.

EXAMPLES: foreign object in food, becoming ill after consuming food

Property Damage

Customer's property is damaged by business/employee.

EXAMPLE: employee hits a customer's car in parking lot.

Department of Health

Contact your department of health to find out what permits or licenses you need when hosting a dinner on your farm.

Personal Liability

Customer suffers inadvertent personal harm from a service provided by a business.

EXAMPLE: *employee spills hot beverage on a customer and it causes a burn.*

Employees

- Employer is responsible for employee's actions ("vicarious liability").
- Know employment status — employee vs. independent contractors. Provide proper employee training to recognize, mitigate, and report risks and hazards.
- Vicarious liability: landowner responsible for his/her own actions and for those of people acting on the landowner's behalf (employees and independent contractors).

Alcohol Liability

Contact your insurance company for information and details on endorsements they may require when food and alcohol are being served or if your event is a BYOB event.

There is no single strategy for effectively reducing your exposure to risk. Approach liability management holistically, as a program or series of activities. Add "layers" of protection that demonstrate a proactive, responsible, and comprehensive approach to farm safety.

Liability Checklist

- Keep your farm safe for visitors and employees!
 - Conduct routine safety inspections.
 - Create a farm safety plan detailing hazard mitigation strategies/plans of operation.
 - Hold employee trainings.
 - Have appropriate communication with farm visitors.
 - Develop a response plan for emergencies.
 - Use hazard/incident report forms for anyone that gets injured on the property. (See [sample form](#) from Rutgers Extension.)
- Have visitors sign a liability waiver before entering the farm or engaging in an agritourism activity. A waiver is a document whereby a farm guest "agrees to indemnify and hold harmless the landowner from any claims made by the user or third parties arising from the use of the land or activities." Waivers do not remove landowner responsibility for the safety of farm visitors but they are legal documents in the eyes of the court system.
- Consult with your insurance provider before changing the type(s) or extent of activities offered. (Avoid the risk of having a claim denied because an activity is not specifically included in the farm's insurance policy.)
- Consult with an insurance provider if visitation levels change.
- Understand strategies to transfer risk to other parties (For example, if a third party offers a service or activity on the farm (a food vendor or pony ride operator), be sure they demonstrate proof of appropriate insurance and name the farm/operator as an additional insured.



- Have a written agreement detailing each party’s responsibilities.
- Review insurance policies regularly (at least annually) with an attorney and insurance provider.
- Ask guests about food allergies ahead of time, and describe clearly if and how you are able to accommodate them. Check in with them again upon their arrival at your farm, and if your insurance provider advises, document that you checked in with them.

For more on managing your liability, visit the [Rutgers Extension Training for Agritourism Development webpage](#).

Building a Budget

Once you know the costs of insurance and any additional permits, start assembling a budget that accounts for the cost of food, labor (including yours), rentals, marketing/ advertising expenses, and supplies. You could also factor in the wear and tear the event will cause on your buildings, driveways and other infrastructure.

If you decide to offer multiple on-farm dinners there will be adjustments to your budget, including an appropriate insurance plan, advertising, investment in supplies such as a tent, cutlery, plates and glassware, and linens.

There will always be discrepancies between your projected and actual budgets. The important thing is to remember to log everything – from the hours you spend responding to registration inquiries and prepping table centerpieces to the wages paid to your staff. Sound record keeping will help you know if you’re losing or earning money and how you can adjust spending to make an event profitable.

HIRING AN EVENT ORGANIZER

You may decide that your dinner will be most successful if you outsource some of the planning to a professional event organizer. Hiring someone will affect your budget, but it will also allow you to focus on doing what you love, if that’s something other than event organizing. If you are daunted by the whole idea and want to have little to do

Sample Budget: 45-Seat Dinner in the Field, \$65 per plate

FOOD	Cost of Food Produced on Farm	\$350
	Cost of Purchased Food	\$250
STAFF	Chef, Event Staff Payment	\$600
	Organizer Time (20 hours x \$30/hour)	\$600
RENTALS	Napkins (\$.70 each)	\$31.50
	Chairs (\$4 each)	\$180
	Portalet (\$100/month)	\$100
SUPPLIES	2 Cases of 50 10” Compostable Plates (\$8.46 each)	\$17
	2 Cases of 50 6” Compostable Plates (\$6.46 each)	\$13
	250 Pieces Compostable Cutlery	\$63
	Private Event Insurance	\$150
Total Expenses		\$2,354.50
Gross Income		\$2,925
Net Income		\$570.50

with organizing any part of the dinner, consider opting out of the dinner and focus on holding an event more aligned with your interests.

HIRING A CATERER

One way to simplify the planning of your dinner is to hire a commercial caterer or guest chef who holds a catering license already. Find someone whose style is aligned with your event goals. Remember, not all caterers have liquor licenses, so be sure to find out if you need to hire a separate bar service, if alcohol is to be served.



Marketing

There are two layers to marketing farm dinners: marketing the event, and then marketing your farm and all that you have to offer during the event. Bringing people to your farm is a powerful way to build customer relations and cultivate customer loyalty. Before the dinner, your efforts will naturally focus on selling tickets to the event. It's important not to lose sight of the marketing opportunity you are creating at the dinner.

BEFORE THE EVENT

- Identify your clientele and what visitors will be willing to pay. Research what similar farm-dining experiences cost. Decide on a cost that is comfortable and fits your budget.
- Explore both paid and free marketing options. Reserve ample time for marketing, and be open to unlikely partnerships (the hotel in town, the ski resort nearby, the restaurant to whom you wholesale produce).

- If you don't have a captive audience, such as your CSA membership or guests at a hotel/resort down the road, make room in your budget for marketing and advertising expenditures. A standard budget allows for 30% of the operating cost to be spent on advertising!
- Who else within your network can help market the event? Local businesses? Nearby farms? CSA members? A chef with a wide following?
- Decide how formal or casual the event will be, and be sure your marketing materials reflect that feel.

AT THE EVENT

- Communicate your message.
- Have materials ready for people to take home: your maple syrup order forms, a schedule of future events, CSA sign-up brochure, or a schedule of farmers' markets you attend. Always have a mailing list sign-up sheet available. If people are enjoying their experience, they will be eager to receive information on future opportunities.

Preparing for Your Dinner

- Will your event be rain or shine?
- Will your dinner be a buffet, family style or plated?
- Will you offer farm related activities for kids, families or adults?
- Email group day before with time to arrive, what to wear, what to expect.
- Pick up donations from other farms, or purchase other farm products.
- Harvest all dinner food.
- Organize staff and allocate jobs: bussers, servers, back-end help, dishwashers, photographers, greeters to check people in and chat with early arrivals. Make sure all staff are on board with their job and the mission of the event. Having to-do lists and checklists for your staff can help. Do not give yourself a job other than host.
- Complete seating chart; write name cards (these change up to the day of the diner as cancellations happen).
- Inventory linens, cutlery, dishes, platters, serving utensils, gravy boats.
- Prep for coffee, tea, mint water, and lemonade.
- Set tables and decorate.
- Cut flowers; make bouquets.
- Set up event tent with tables and chairs.
- Mow and weed whack.
- Set up lights in tent and elsewhere; illuminate path leading to portable toilet.
- Plant tiki torches and fill with fluid.
- Clean candle votives (remove wax from previous use).
- Format and print menus (do this last minute, as the menu can change during the day).
- Make signs for parking, farm products, ingredient lists, etc.
- Make sure there is enough ice.
- Get firewood ready to be lit on time.
- Put out guest book and other information (business cards, etc.).
- Check pathways and yard for dog poop.
- If there will be music or a movie, make sure sound/projector is set to go.
- After the dinner, write thank yous to anyone who made donations. Wash all linens, or send to cleaning service.



- If your event is raising money for a specific cause — new fencing, expanding beehives, remodeling the farm stand, supporting CSA shares for low-income families — share this information and make sure your family and staff tell a consistent message about the investment.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Documenting your event is critical. Don't overlook this important element for your website and future marketing. Hire a professional photographer to ensure you don't miss the opportunity to showcase your location looking its best. The photographs should focus on the quality of the food, the chefs, the setting, signage, guests interacting with each other, and the details that make your event unique. The images should be high quality and capture the look and feel of the event so that when a prospective client sees what you have to offer, they will want to sign up for the next dinner! Even if you can only afford to hire a professional for a short amount of time, do not miss this all important step. This is a great way to attract more business!

After tackling elements such as safety, signage, liability, permitting, and zoning, many farmers are finding that dinners are a fruitful way to engage farm visitors. Dinners can be an opportunity for you to showcase your finest products, your community connections, and the land you steward every day, while tapping into a new market of culinary-minded tourists and neighbors.

Your farm, family, and market are always changing, so make a plan for evaluating your dinners regularly and adjust as needed. This flexibility will bring resilience to your business, and is critical for helping your farm reach its overall goals.

Also in this series:

How To...

- Host Summer Camp on Your Farm
- Host Weddings on Your Farm
- Develop a Farm Stand
- Develop a Farm Stay
- Develop a Farm Tour
- Develop a Pick-Your-Own Business

A Guide to Successful Agritourism Enterprises

Download at uvm.edu/vtagritourism



REFERENCES: "Managing Liability" from Rutgers Cooperative Extension, "Agritourism Liability." "Before Dinner Checklist" from Sara Schlosser, Sandiwood Farm, Wolcott, VT.

The information contained in this publication is deemed correct and accurate and is based on research at the time of writing. This publication is for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or an interpretation of the law. It is recommended that you consult an attorney about specific legal concerns.

The original 2014 edition of this publication was made possible by support from the U.S. Small Business Administration and The Canaday Family Charitable Trust. It is also the result of tax-supported funding from USDA, Rural Development, and as such cannot be copyrighted. It may be reprinted with the customary crediting of the source. Each chapter was published as a result of a project of the Rutland Regional Planning Commission, Farm-Based Education Network and Vermont Farms! Association, coordinated by Vera Simon-Nobes. Reviewed by Lisa Chase, University of Vermont Extension; Olga Moriarty, Pollination Event Company; Sara Schlosser, Sandiwood Farm; Natalie Stultz, Natalie Stultz Photography; Elisabeth Wirsing, Vermont Department of Health. Design by Holly Brough, Shelburne Farms.

2019 funding provided by the Agriculture Marketing Resource Center (AgMRC), located at Iowa State University, www.agmrc.org. AgMRC is a national website dedicated to providing information to producers and service providers on value-added agriculture businesses.

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