



## AGRITOURISM BEST PRACTICES

### HOW TO

# Host Dinners on Your Farm

*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.*

## What's Inside?

- Assessing and Planning
- Managing Liability
- Building a Budget
- Marketing
- Day-Before-Dinner Checklist

## 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. You can also refer to the "Best Practices in Land Use and Zoning for Agritourism" chapter in this series.

Learning about zoning regulations early and acting in compliance with them will protect you down the road. Look for the following elements of zoning bylaws to help determine what you can and cannot do:

- Zoning map
- District regulations
- Allowed uses
- Dimensional requirements
- Overlay districts
- Definitions
- Accessory uses
- Home occupations
- Cottage industries
- Site plan reviews
- Language prohibiting uses not specifically authorized



Vermont Fresh Network outdoor dinner at Shelburne Farms, Shelburne, VT. (Vera Chang)



Sandiwood Farm, Wolcott, VT.

### VT Department of Health

Call, email, or [visit their website](#) to find out whether you need a food license. (802) 863-7221, [FoodLodgingVT@state.vt.us](mailto:FoodLodgingVT@state.vt.us).

<sup>1</sup>From Section 5-201 of the Vermont Department of Health “Health Regulations for Food Service Establishments,” available from: [http://healthvermont.gov/regs/03food\\_estab.pdf](http://healthvermont.gov/regs/03food_estab.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Your local VT DOH sanitarian can assist with questions on planning your operation and the specific details of regulations. Map of public health sanitarian coverage areas: [www.healthvermont.gov/enviro/food\\_lodge/documents/Sanitarianmap.pdf](http://www.healthvermont.gov/enviro/food_lodge/documents/Sanitarianmap.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>Application for this license at: [www.healthvermont.gov/forms/documents/Food\\_Lodging\\_license\\_application.pdf](http://www.healthvermont.gov/forms/documents/Food_Lodging_license_application.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>Regulations available from: [www.healthvermont.gov/regs/03food\\_estab.pdf](http://www.healthvermont.gov/regs/03food_estab.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>Contact the VT Dept of Health Food and Lodging Program at 802-863-7221. Detailed listing of the Temporary Food Stand Requirements is available from: [http://healthvermont.gov/enviro/food\\_lodge/documents/food\\_stand\\_requirements.pdf](http://healthvermont.gov/enviro/food_lodge/documents/food_stand_requirements.pdf).

## 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.

## DO YOU NEED A FOOD SERVICE LICENSE?

Licensing requirements depend on the frequency of food service. Generally, if prepared (ready-to-eat) food is sold to the public on the farm regularly (more than one day per month)<sup>1</sup>, appropriate licensing from Vermont Department of Health (VDH) is required.

- If you are selling prepared food occasionally (less than one day per month), a license is *not* required.<sup>2</sup> However, VDH would investigate any complaints they may receive about an operation.
- If you have a mobile unit/pizza oven or are selling any type of prepared food from a relatively permanent structure on the farm on a regular basis, you would need a license from the VDH,<sup>3</sup> and must follow the VT Health Regulations for Food Service Establishments.<sup>4</sup>
- If you are planning to sell prepared food on the farm from a relatively temporary setup, but on a regular basis, licensing is required regardless of the size of your operation, and you must also follow the VT Health Regulations for Food Service Establishments.<sup>4</sup> This would include picnic tours, regular farm dinners, etc.
  - If the food will be prepared, including any altering or heating of the food on the farm, and served in the temporary location/setup on the farm, you must obtain a temporary food stand license from the VDH.<sup>5</sup>
  - If you are preparing this food at home, and you bring it to the sales site packaged and ready for sale (with no altering or reheating on site), you will need a home caterer license.<sup>3,4</sup>
  - If you are preparing this food in a kitchen with commercial equipment, you need a commercial caterer license.<sup>3,4</sup>
  - If selling cold or hot foods, adequate refrigeration and/or hot holding units must be utilized.

“Food Service Licences” information from: [Food Safety: Selling Prepared Foods on the Farm](#). University of Vermont Extension, March 2012.

Additionally, contact your town health officer and town clerk to confirm that no other permits are needed before hosting the event, and the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR) Regional Office. Your project must have ANR approval before a license to operate your establishment can be issued by the health department.

## DO YOU NEED A LIQUOR LICENSE?

State law does not require a liquor license for food and alcohol that is served on a private property where food is prepared by a farm owner. If a caterer is hired to prepare and sell the food, the caterer is required to hold a liquor license, which typically must be filed five days prior to the event. Not all caterers hold liquor licenses, so hiring a separate bar service may be necessary.

## Alcohol Liability

Property owner liability insurance typically has a “social host exclusion” that covers on-property visitors who consume alcohol. However, where food is being sold for money, insurance companies will most likely require an endorsement that covers both food and alcohol consumption. An endorsement for BYOB is easier and less expensive to attain than including alcohol in the dinner plate price and selling it.

Contact your insurance company for more details and information on endorsements that they may require. For example, Cooperative Insurance requires an endorsement for any food events that are sold on farm premises. The endorsement covers the one-time event and can range from \$100–\$200. BYOB or privately sold alcohol is not covered by the endorsement; they require a licensed caterer to sell the alcohol.



Fall dinner setting at Trevin Farms, Sudbury, VT.

## Caterers

One way to simplify the planning of your dinner is to hire a commercial caterer who holds a license already. There are several farm-to-table-oriented caterers in Vermont:

- American Flatbread  
Traveling Hearth
- Bontemps Gourmet | Chefs  
Gretchen Saries and Greg  
Labarthe
- Fiddleheads Cuisine
- Have Your Cake Catering
- Michael's Good-to-Go  
(Chef Michael Flanagan)
- Mix Cupcakerie (Chef  
Carole Kelaher)
- The Nomadic Chef,  
specializing in gourmet  
ethnic cuisine
- NOFA Vermont Traveling  
Oven
- Occasions Catering & Bar  
Service
- Sweet Jean's Confections
- Sweet Simone's | Scout's  
Honor
- Three Penny Catering (Chef  
Joey Nagy of The Mad Taco)
- Three Penny Taproom
- Vermont Farms Catering
- Vermont Harvest Catering

## Bar Services

- Fluid Bar Service
- Have Your Cake Catering
- Sugarsnap
- Three Penny
- Tru Spirits



Chef Chris Conn smokes onions for soup at Rockville Market Farm, Starksboro, VT. (Natalie Stultz)

## 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.

**EXAMPLES:** *employee hits a customer’s car in the parking lot*

### Personal Liability

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

**EXAMPLES:** *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).

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.

Sandiwood Farm Dinner, Wolcott, VT.



## 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.

For more on managing your liability, visit the [Rutgers Extension Training for Agritourism Development webpage](#) or contact Lisa Chase at University of Vermont Extension: (802) 257-7967, [lisa.chase@uvm.edu](mailto:lisa.chase@uvm.edu)

## 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
<b>Net Income</b>		<b>\$570.50</b>

## 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 have 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.

### Event Organizers

Here are a few event organizers in Vermont:

- Pam Knights Communications
- Pollination Event Company
- Meg Schultz Events

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

## 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.



Sugaring season brunch at Green Mountain Girls Farm, Northfield, VT.

### 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). Consider listing your event on Dig In Vermont or *Seven Days*, sponsor a well-respected travel blog, buy a Facebook ad, explore a partnership with Localvore Today.
- 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.
- 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!



## Day-Before-Dinner Checklist

- 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.
- Complete seating chart; write name cards (these change up to the day of the dinner 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.
- Organize staff and allocate jobs: bussers, servers, back-end help, dish-washers, 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.
- Set up event tent with tables and chairs.
- Mow and weed whack.
- Set up lights in tent and elsewhere; illuminate path going to Port-O-Let.
- 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.

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.*

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. Design by Holly Brough, Shelburne Farms. 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.

 Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. University of Vermont Extension, Burlington, Vermont. University of Vermont Extension, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, cooperating, offer education and employment to everyone without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or familial status.

**Also in this series**

**Best Practices in...**

- Assessing Your Farm for Agritourism
- Land Use and Zoning for Agritourism
- Offering High-Quality On-Farm Experiences
- Business and Financial Planning
- Safety and Risk Management
- Marketing

**How To...**

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

Download at [www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism](http://www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism)



The dessert table at a Twilight in the Meadow fundraising event for Rutland Area Farm and Food Link at Beaver Meadow Farm, Shrewsbury, VT.

*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.*