

ELEMENTS OF A FARMSTAY

Before you begin planning your farmstay, you need to determine if it is feasible from a regulatory perspective (See Regulations- pgs. 35-39). If you've determined you have a green light, then some of the elements you will want to explore as you consider starting a farmstay are:

- creating an enjoyable guest experience
- managing your own time and human resources
- administering the daily operations
- marketing
- community relations

It is important to look at these elements from two perspectives: 1) your experience as a host; and 2) your visitors' experience as guests. For example, to create an enjoyable guest experience, ask yourself: What should my guest accommodations look like to please my guests? How much effort am I willing to put into renovating facilities and obtaining furnishings? What sorts of activities will people enjoy doing on my farm? How much of my time am I willing to devote to special activities, such as guided farm tours or prairie walks with my guests?

Think about what could set your farmstay apart and leave a lasting impression on your future customers, and also what you can manage as a working farmer. Activities can be a draw, but a happy host will also likely make for happy guests, and happy guests will naturally and eagerly help you grow your business. Word-of-mouth referrals and recommendations are the best advertising for farmstays.

Who Will Visit My Farmstay?

As with any business, the idea of "if you build it they will come" rarely works. Marketing is crucial to the success of your operation. Because the farmstay is also a new concept for many travelers, you will need to clearly identify the kinds of people who are interested in farmstays. Most of the customers looking for a farmstay experience will be leisure travelers or vacationers. Understanding your customer's goals and expectations can be invaluable to helping you design your visitor experience.

Different kinds of people may be attracted to your farm, and it is important that you can be open and tolerant of this diversity. As a host, you may encounter guests who are working through a troublesome family issue or, perhaps, don't share your worldview on a topic. You could have guests who want to take long afternoon naps, while others wish to partake in amorous activities, neither of which have anything to do with weeding the gardens or milking a cow. Not everyone will want to sit on the porch swing and sip fresh lemonade or read a book. As a host, you will need to be sensitive to your guests' interests and desires.

That said, what types of travelers are you most interested in hosting? What types of travelers are you best equipped to cater to? A farmstay can encompass a wide range of hosting options. Some guests will prefer minimal interaction, while others will prefer extensive opportunities to interact with you and your farm.

If you're catering to guests who just want to get away to a peaceful setting, a cabin or outbuilding set away from the farmhouse might be ideal. In this case, the extent of your hosting duties may be making the reservation, securing payment, and providing access to the accommodations. In this scenario you are likely seeking customers who would be attracted to vacation home rentals where there is not an onsite manager. The growth of "Vacation Rentals By Owner"⁵ model suggests there is a demand for this type of operation.

Or perhaps you want to attract guests who are keenly interested in learning about what you do and who want to immerse themselves in activities on the farm. This model involves a much greater amount of host/guest interaction but is an attractive draw for some travelers. And in between these two scenarios are all sorts of variations and iterations.

As you make your plans, it is important to not try to be everything to everybody. While you are obviously able to take reservations from curious visitors who just want to learn about your farm, having a basic profile of your customer will help you know how to reach out to those types of visitors and help them get the most out of their experience at your farmstay. Will you seek to attract elderly couples looking to relive their childhood experiences, families with children looking for quality time together, or solitary travelers looking for a new adventure or solitude?

Whatever your decision, there are multiple resources available to assist you including The Minnesota Bed & Breakfast Association, the Minnesota Resort & Campground Association, the Congress of Minnesota Resorts, the University of Minnesota Tourism Center, Explore Minnesota Tourism, and Green Routes (see Resources).

⁵ Vacation Rental By Owner is a service/website where people can rent their vacation or second homes to travelers seeking lodging. In the VRBO model the renter may never meet the guest. Payment can be done via phone or website and entrance to the lodging can be provided through a neighbor or by using a lock that requires a key code. (VRBOs are subject to the same licensing as other lodging in Minnesota.) For more information, see: www.vrbo.com.

What Can My Guests See and Do?

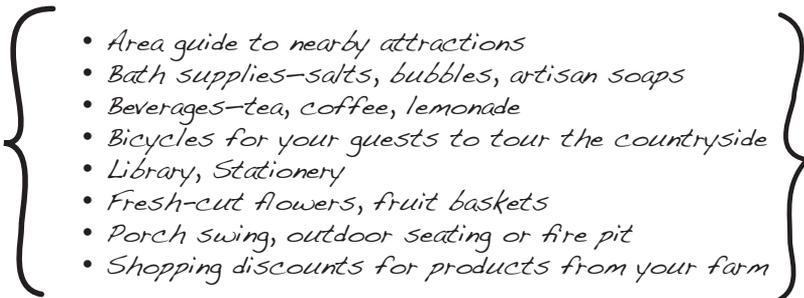
Which attractions and activities you choose to offer on your farm depends on just how deeply you want to dive into the agritourism side of your farm business. Some farmstays cater to more independent travelers and offer few amenities outside of the accommodations. Other operators find they derive such joy from running the farmstay that it grows to become a substantial part of their business. Over the last several decades, agritourism in America has largely been built around attractions like corn mazes and pumpkin patches. But when visitors are coming to your farm or forest overnight to experience a working rural landscape, it is useful to consider options beyond the customary roadside attractions.

While ideas for amenities can certainly be borrowed from other types of guest accommodations, the unique amenities and attractions you can offer may be an extension of what your farm is already doing. Your guests may enjoy the opportunity to walk through, or learn about, vegetable gardens or livestock pastures. Guests may come specifically to milk a goat, ride a horse, or pick and eat sweet corn fresh from the field.

While certain guests seek solitude, others seek learning opportunities as a core component of their guest experience. Many people look to small-scale family farms and forests to help them understand how their parents or grandparents once lived off the land. Providing educational opportunities around family farming, rural culture, food and fiber production, and local history will make your farm more attractive to some guests.

Amenities can be an extension of your personal hobbies, too. Focus on what you are passionate about. Do you collect antique farm equipment? Do you like to hunt or fish on the property or does it offer good game or bird watching opportunities? Is anyone in your family experienced with massage, yoga, or healing arts? Does your operation have renewable energy systems to demonstrate? Do you process your farm products into things like cheese? Wine? Even pizza? All of these activities, with a bit of creative adaptation, can become indispensable amenities that will set your farmstay apart from any other.

In addition to the unique activities you can offer, some simple amenities can add aesthetic and functional value to your visitor's experience:

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- *Area guide to nearby attractions*
 - *Bath supplies—salts, bubbles, artisan soaps*
 - *Beverages—tea, coffee, lemonade*
 - *Bicycles for your guests to tour the countryside*
 - *Library, Stationery*
 - *Fresh-cut flowers, fruit baskets*
 - *Porch swing, outdoor seating or fire pit*
 - *Shopping discounts for products from your farm*

Finally, you may need to reconcile potential guests' expectations about amenities that are often "standard" in traditional lodging accommodations which you do not have, for example: private bathrooms, air conditioning, in-room TV, cell phone reception or free wireless Internet. You will also need to clearly communicate the size and type of bed you're offering. Many people may not be able to comfortably sleep on a full size (or smaller) mattress or other types of mattresses, such as a futon.

*Business Name: Nature's Nest Farm
Website: www.naturesnestfarm.com
Operator: Cathy Rose*

At Nature's Nest Farm in Montrose, MN, innkeeper Cathy Rose recalls one of her favorite experiences running her farmstay, when a vibrant young couple spent a weekend in her log cabin. The young lady was passionate about books and reading, and she spent most of her stay listening as her new boyfriend read to her aloud for hours on end. They were enchanted by the quiet they found at Nature's Nest, and the experience clearly made a lasting impression. They called a year later and asked to hold their wedding on the farm.



A well-selected library, either big or small, offers a wonderful way for guests to slow down and enjoy the more pleasant pace of life on your farmstay—without a blaring television or the constant hum of the city they are accustomed to. Each new generation is growing more dependent on flashy, fast-paced media at every waking hour, and the simple pleasure of reading is almost becoming a lost art.

What Can't My Guests See and Do?

While it may not be the most enjoyable part, establishing and upholding guest policies is a key part of customer service. Clear policies help guests to understand their boundaries and will establish an agreement between you and your guests about what your expectations are. Some policies will stem from your personal preference, some may be the result of an unfortunate guest experience, and some may be required by your insurance policy.

While setting policies, think about how they will affect your life as a manager as well as your guest's experience. Some rules you will need to set in stone (e.g., safety hazards that must remain off limits to guests), while others you may be flexible about (e.g., your guest needs some extra time to check out). Key policies that you should think about before opening your farmstay are:

1. Check-in and Check-out times: How late are you willing to stay awake waiting for late arrivals? And how early will you need one party to vacate so you can prepare a room for new guests? Do you want to set certain hours for check-in and check-out?
2. Breakfast time and place (if served): Will you deliver breakfast to your guest rooms? Will you provide a dining room? Can guests choose the time they would like to eat?
3. Smoking Policy: Is smoking allowed in guest rooms? Outdoors on the premises?
4. Payment: How will you accept payment: cash, check, major credit card, and/or PayPal? Will you charge a deposit to hold the room and reservation?
5. Rental Contract: Will you have guests agree to and sign a rental contract, outlining the policies and terms of their stay?
6. Cancellation: Will you charge your customers for cancellations? How much notice will you need to stand a good chance of rebooking a room?
7. Pets: Will pets be allowed to accompany your guests? What type of pets? How might a guest's pet interact with animals already living at the farm? Would you prefer to ask for a pet damage deposit?
8. Children: Are children welcome at your farmstay or would you prefer to uphold a minimum age?
9. Good Neighbor Policy: Depending on how close your neighbors are, your farmstay may have an effect on them—from more traffic on the road to people accidentally trespassing on their land. It is important to give your guests guidelines about where they can and can't go and to ask them to respect your neighbors' privacy. If possible, talk with your immediate neighbors when you're planning your farmstay so that communication channels are open.

How Will I Cater to Guests?

Hospitality and excellent customer service are key components of running a successful farmstay. The basics include managing reservations, preparing guest rooms, showing arrivals around the house or to their accommodations, and catering to their requests and needs. Some additional tasks will depend on how you design your visitor experience. A farmstay, by definition, is an accommodation for guests on working land and time spent working the land must remain a high priority for many farmers. Some, however, may choose to shift their focus when guests are on the farm, opting to be more attentive to guests and their needs. Greeting new arrivals when you're hot, sweaty, and dusty after

coming in from the field may not start the farmstay experience for your guests on the right foot. While you may have clearly communicated a check-in time policy, not all of your guests may strictly adhere to it. After all, they may be on holiday and on their own schedule. To be more flexible if farm chores must be done while hosting guests, perhaps one person might be more “presentable” while others continue their work on the farm.

Preparing guest rooms should become a predictable routine. A good estimate, depending on the size and type of accommodation, is to spend an hour or two per guest room to prepare accommodations between guests. This would not only give you enough time to change the linens and towels and clean the farmstay rooms, but also provide some time to spot clean the other common areas that may be made available to farmstay guests. Some rooms may require more cleaning and preparation than others after guests check out.

While you’re not trying to recreate a luxury hotel, unless your guests are informed otherwise, they will tend to expect a certain level of comfort and cleanliness: clean sheets, hot water, spot-free carpets, and an odor and dust-free environment. Some of these expectations need always be met (like clean sheets for new guests) and some of them can be adjusted by ensuring your customers know ahead of time exactly what it is you are offering. If your farmstay is designed to provide a rustic experience without hot water or your guest cabin is located near animal pastures where odors are inevitable, these are essential things to communicate to your customers before their reservations are finalized.

What may seem normal to you on the farm may be unacceptable to potential farmstay guests. When in doubt, inform your guests about what to expect before they arrive. Allergies to pollen, insects of all sorts (many farms experience a huge influx of Asian beetles and Box Elder bugs during certain seasons), stairs in the farmhouse, indoor pets, shared bathrooms, the availability of air conditioning, even your decision to use chemicals in your farming operation are important issues that may be worth mentioning to guests, especially if you opt to accept reservations by telephone.

A 2000 survey by the University of California Small Farm Center yielded the following as the top nine reasons people go on vacation:

1. *To build and strengthen relationships*
2. *To improve health and well being*
3. *To rest and relax*
4. *To have an adventure*
5. *To escape*
6. *To gain knowledge*
7. *To mark a special occasion*
8. *To save money or time*
9. *To reminisce*

For those farmstays that choose to serve breakfast, cooking and cleanup are major responsibilities and may consume a significant amount of time. If you do choose to include breakfast, there are many models to choose from: simple continental breakfast, a fully-cooked meal, or even providing simple ingredients for guests to prepare at their leisure. If you do serve breakfast, be sure your operation is in compliance with state and local regulations. Different types of breakfasts (e.g., pre-prepared foods versus cooked on site) require different licensing by the Minnesota Department of Health.

Most of your guests are coming to see, feel, and experience rural life. Considering that farming is your primary business and that the farmstay itself relies on the continuing farm business, it is okay to refuse guests when the demands of farming make your time constraints unmanageable. Be courteous and direct, and most guests will understand.

Accommodating Guests with Disabilities

The farmstay is a unique type of accommodation, and this is an area where being up front and clear with guests before they finalize their reservations is very important. It is better to be honest about what types of disabilities your facility can and cannot accommodate than to invite a guest who will leave disappointed.

While all businesses serving the general public are legally responsible to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), there are a few exemptions to ADA rules for very small lodging businesses that will likely apply to farmstays. Specifically, if your lodging facility has five guest rooms or fewer and is occupied by the proprietors as their residence (in the same building), then ADA regulations generally do not apply.

You may, however, identify a strong market among people with disabilities and be able to justify the expense associated with the renovations to accommodate these individuals; then such a move is warranted even if your operations are small. There are many resources available to help business owners comply with ADA requirements. For more information visit www.ada.gov.

How Do I Design My Farmstay?

The way you design and decorate your farmstay is your greatest chance to express your creativity—decorating should be a fun and rewarding part of establishing your new business. That said, décor can define your visitors' experience. Farm visitors are coming to a working farm, so it doesn't always have to be postcard perfect. But first impressions still count. If you do have a genuine eyesore (jumbled rolls of old fence, a broken-down tree house, an abandoned coop full of musty straw), try to take care of it before your first guests roll down the driveway. In the case of farm equipment or old fencing, perhaps you can move it to a less conspicuous spot on your property.

Make Design Intentional

It is important to plan the look you want to create rather than let a mismatched collection of furnishings just fall into place. Pieces like art and furniture should either be new or functionally reused. Avoid pulling musty beds from the kids' room and the 1970's TV from grandma's house. Instead, take the time to compose a new, intentional, arrangement where all pieces work together to make a whole.

If you are doing an extensive remodel, or a new construction, consider materials and design elements that will have a minimal environmental impact or maximize energy efficiency.⁶ Products like locally milled or salvaged lumber, cork flooring, non-toxic paint, and energy efficient lighting are forming a new architectural aesthetic. They leave a smaller environmental footprint and are valuable amenities that may attract guests.⁷

⁶ The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Green Building Program provides an array of information and resources. Visit their website at www.moea.state.mn.us/greenbuilding/residential.cfm.

⁷ The University of Minnesota's Center for Sustainable Building Research maintains a building materials database where you can compare various building materials. <http://www.buildingmaterials.umn.edu/>

Business Name: Moonstone Farm

Website: <http://prairiefare.com/moonstone/>

Operators: Audrey Arner and Richard Handeen

Year Established: 1872 (By Richard's Great Grandparents)

Moonstone Farm in Montevideo is home to one of the most creative adaptations of the farmstay concept. Richard and Audrey renovated an old brooder house into a charming farmstay—appropriately named “the Broodio.” The farmstay complements their grass-fed beef operation on their 240-acre century farm.

The one-room cottage offers a comfortable bed, original artwork, and handmade furniture. A small refrigerator, coffee-maker, and WiFi round



out the amenities. Bathing facilities are in the main farmhouse, or guests can use the outdoor privy—down the garden path.

Deterred by a number of things required to offer a full breakfast, Audrey and Richard opted for the simpler option of offering pre-made food. They've dubbed it a “bed & bagel” and deliver a continental breakfast to Broodio guests.

To boost sales, Audrey and Richard, check guests out at the farm store. In addition to their grass-fed beef, they sell Richard's pottery, greeting cards made by local artists, locally-made jams and jellies, and a variety of other products.

Keep Décor Authentic

If you're running a Minnesota farmstay, you probably shouldn't decorate to convince your guests they are on a Caribbean vacation or an African safari. If you are renting out a hunting or fishing cabin in a working forest, your guests may enjoy a rustic environment that can add to their experience. If you accommodate couples on romantic getaways, they'll surely enjoy the deep colors and simple luxuries that will make their stay memorable. In short, be true to your place and be true to your home. Visitors choosing to stay at a Minnesota farm generally won't be expecting Navaho rugs or Hawaiian rattan chairs. They are coming to sample farm life, even your life in particular. If you feel it is representative of what you want your visitors to experience, consider a similar look for your farmstay quarters as you have in the rest of the house.

Honor Your Guests

Seek feedback from your guests about the décor and design. Keep track of aspects that guests like and things that prove to be very memorable. Also be open to accepting negative feedback. Design with your target audience in mind, especially if it will be narrowly defined. Hunters won't be too thrilled with a rose garden theme and crafty scrap-bookers won't care much for trout and tackle upholstery. Families will call for durability.

Honor the History of Your Location

While not every farmstead or working forest is surrounded by a long and fascinating history, some first-hand research can help you to discover the history of your business or property. In decorating, this may mean pulling the original wooden tables, cook stove, and steel beds that your grandmother used out of the shed and putting them into the new guesthouse (so long as they aren't an eyesore and serve a real function). Everybody loves a comfortable and stately antique rocker, and even more when they can reminisce about the generations past that enjoyed the same gentle sway accompanied by the creaking sounds of a wooden porch. Providing such opportunities to learn and experience interesting things about the past can add great value to your visitors' stay, can help you to design the experience you are working to create, and will allow your visitors to forge a genuine connection with your property that encourages them to return.

Keep It Unique

Avoid modeling your decorations after a standard hotel with double beds and a TV in the middle of the room. Consider decorating with pieces from local artists; even offer them a trade. Your customers come to your farm or forest because they are looking for an experience they can't find elsewhere.

Business Name: The Whistle Stop Bed and Breakfast

Website: www.whistlestopbedandbreakfast.com

Operators: Jann and Roger Lee

Year Established: 1992

Trains come rolling by at all hours on the tracks near The Whistle Stop B&B in New York Mills. Some might consider this a problem, but owners Jann and Roger have crafted a brilliantly focused railroad experience using club cars and cabooses as lodging—thus tying the train noise directly to the visitor experience. "We have family history in the railroad, and we like the lifestyle," explain the Lees.



You can have resounding success with strongly presented guest room themes such as Victorian, Bunkhouse, or Lodge; but a theme works best if there is some natural fit with your history, your ancestry, or your building's architecture. If your leaning towards a theme, look at what is unique about your place, about your interests, or your history and develop your theme from there.