

2. Assessment: Is On-farm Food Service Right for You?

In this chapter, readers will:

- Assess if an on-farm food business is a right fit for you
- Identify what additional skills you may need to develop for such a venture
- Recognize how on-farm food service fits into your diversified business mix

Are you a Food Service Entrepreneur?

The on-farm food service business concept blends a diversity of entrepreneurial skills that can readily draw on your existing strengths while adding to your farm income mix. However, to be a successful food service entrepreneur means you need exactly that: a diversity of skills, many of which are outside of the standard successful farmer skill list. Just because you can grow beautiful heirloom tomatoes does not mean you can successfully transform them into pizza and sell it with a smile. You may cook up a gourmet Sunday dinner for your extended family of twelve, but those culinary skills don't necessarily translate to preparing a meal for 100. However, as most savvy entrepreneurs know, you can always train in and acquire the skills you currently don't have and we'll talk more on that later in this chapter.

A first step before starting to research any new business venture, especially something complex and requiring time and capital investment like food service, is to make sure the rest of your farm businesses are fiscally sound. While the ultimate goal of a food service venture is to add income to your bottom line, don't look to it as a way to bail out other sinking elements of your farm fiscal business ship. Whatever your current core business – from running a vegetable CSA (community supported agriculture) to grass-fed meats – make sure that your main income source is on solid ground before investing in something new and unknown.

Quiz: Am I a strong candidate for an on-farm food service business?

Any successful on-farm food service venture, from a casual pizza farm to a high-end farm-to-table dinner, obliges you as the owner to embrace and exhibit the entrepreneurial mindset. You're the one in charge of and responsible for the bottom line, necessitating an embracing of the variables involved. Do you have what it takes? Answer the following questions:

1. I'm comfortable making decisions.
True False
2. I can handle risk and situations where there is no simple "yes or no" answer.
True False
3. If I'm stressed out about something, I maintain composure and don't pass along that bad

energy to others. The show must go on!

True False

4. After any experience, I like to reflect and think about what worked well and what might need to be improved for next time.

True False

5. I have a strong network of friends and family that I can rely on for support and help, especially for childcare if needed.

True False

6. I'm comfortable with money, both knowing I have enough in reserves and spending as needed to invest in the business.

True False

7. I can accept and even embrace failure. It is important to keep trying new ideas. Some may prove more fruitful than others

True False

8. I don't take someone's "no" as the ultimate answer and always ask lots of questions. There are often many different ways to look at something. Even if that "no" is coming from someone of authority, I'm comfortable voicing my opinion and openly and collaboratively exploring other options.

True False

9. My husband/wife/partner/significant other is directly involved in this venture with me or, if not, is supportive and still helps in ways that they can.

True False

10. I thrive on being busy and realize every project has highs and lows. I manage my time and priorities well and already know from farming that an entrepreneurial lifestyle is never just nine to five.

True False

11. I readily pay attention to detail and am comfortable juggling lots of things simultaneously.

True False

12. I have a knack for dealing with different personality types, especially difficult people. I'm good at making people feel comfortable no matter what the situation, communicate boundaries effectively and don't let challenging and dominant personalities affect my mood and outlook.

True False

Comment [JJ1]: I wonder if we want to say something about attention to detail, or able to juggle a lot; and I also think about being good with people – in the customer service aspect – and realizing that everyone that comes might not be lovely. And then there is the whole thing about being able to set boundaries and tell people what they can and can't do ...

Comment [JI2]: Made Jan's comments above.

If your answer was “true” to these statements, consider yourself on the entrepreneurial start-up launching pad to exploring further your own venture. If you couldn't positively embrace these statements or if some of these thoughts made you uncomfortable, regard that as a reality check as you read forward in this manual. While the concept of running a farm-to-table dinner may sound fun, the reality of the risk and workload involved may not be a good fit for you right now.

For those perhaps not ready to take the entrepreneurial plunge, an option may be to work with an outside company that runs the entire event on your farm and you simply serve as the host site. One of the first such entities, Outstanding in the Field (www.outstandinginthefield.com), along with increasing numbers of new such ventures, like Dinner on the Farm (www.dinneronthefarm.com), offer these types of collaborations. The farm benefits from the marketing awareness and outreach such an event brings, and you the farmer can actually attend and enjoy the event. (See sidebar ## for more advice from Dinner on the Farm).

Another related option is to partner with a restaurant who would run and manage the on-farm event. Often in these situations, the restaurant's manager facilitates the event logistics and reservations and the meal is prepared by the restaurant's chef at restaurant and brought to the farm in a catering capacity.

While such arrangements typically are not big income generating sources for the farm – or at least not as much as if you ran the event on your own – your time commitment and overall risk is heaps lower because a third party is the key organizer. Depending on the event size and scope of the menu, selling your produce, meats or other items you produce for ingredients in the meal can be an additional income source.

Comment [JJ3]: Makes me think about the different between restaurant and catering license – and if the restaurant needs to get a different license to do this – but I think that shows up in Rachel's chapters. Also, I think food could be done on site if done under a special event license.

Comment [JI4]: Will let others more wise on MN comment here . . . we can delete the reference here if that's best.

Building your tool kit: What skills do I have and what do I need to further develop?

(Design note: This could be graphically enhanced via a chart format, where readers “grade” their skill on a scale of 1 to 5 with a 5 the highest grade. Underneath each skill would be several ideas on how to improve if needed).

In addition to embracing the entrepreneurial lifestyle, there probably will be **additional** skills you need to learn or further develop in order for your business to succeed. Here are five key skills vital to a successful on-farm food service business, many of which you probably already have to some degree but that may need to be taken up a notch for this new venture.

Rate your own current status of each skill with a “1” representing no experience and a “5” designating you’re a seasoned expert. Suggested skill-training ideas follow for those areas you need to further **develop**.

- **Food Safety Training**

[Awareness of key food safety issues like “danger zones,” foods susceptible to bacteria, food grade work surfaces, etc.](#)

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 _____

Training resources:

[Minnesota Certified Food Manager \(MCF\) training, offered through the Minnesota Department of Health](#)

- **Financial Management**

Understanding how to keep accurate account records of your business, from tracking expenses to managing payroll.

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 | _____

Training resources:

[Fearless Farm Finances](#): A book written specifically for farmers by the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) with instructions, tips and tools for setting up and managing a farm’s financial system.

- **Culinary & Kitchen Management Skills**

Developing menus, inventory planning, table design

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

Comment [JJ5]: I think we need to add another question – food safety. Do you know what the “danger zone” is, what foods are susceptible to bacteria, what kinds of surfaces you should be working with ... There is a food manager certification that I’ve taken, and I would highly recommend it for anyone doing on farm food service. I think people think they know good sanitation, but there is a lot of misinformation out there.

Comment [JI6]: Added Food Safety per Jan’s comment above. Please add anymore MN specific resources.

Training resources:

Work part-time in a restaurant for behind-the-scenes, hands-on training
Attend a culinary boot camp session at an institution like The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) (enthusiasts.ciachef.edu). With campuses in New York, California and Texas, the CIA offers culinary education programs in the form of “Boot Camps” designed around specific kitchen techniques such as specialty and hearth breads.

- Event Management

Understanding the flow and overall set-up of successful on-farm events

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

Training resources:

Visit as many such operations as possible and keenly observe and ask questions. Take photos if possible. Remember any related costs and fees are business expenses during your research phase; make sure you ask for a receipt for everything.

- Legal Savvy & Insurance Coverage

Knowledge about how to structure your business and ensuring that adequate coverage exists

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

Training resources:

Further detail in Chapters 3 and 4 of this manual
Farm Commons (www.farmcommons.org); non-profit organization providing various simplified and accessible resources specifically designed for farmers to navigate legal issues.
Schedule an appointment with your current insurance agent to review your plans and assess potentially needed policy changes

- Customer Service Skills

Feeling comfortable and confident in interacting with guests in a friendly, stress-free manner.

Skill Rating: 1 2 3 4 5

Training resources:

Work part-time in a restaurant for behind-the-scenes, hands-on training
[State tourism offices may offer webinars and resources for customer service training](#)
[The Tourism Center at the University of Minnesota offers various customer service training, including “At Your Service,” which focuses on increasing the skills and knowledge](#)

Comment [JJ7] : I think we can find more resources for training –and don’t

needed to deliver high quality customer service while recognizing the significant role that culture plays in the such experiences.

Host larger private on-farm parties to garner experience (See Chapter 3/pg. # for a definition on private parties)

Other Things to Consider:

Remember you're pioneering new entrepreneurial territory with your on-farm food service business. As a new industry, there is no tested model on what a successful business must look like. While there are legal and regulatory requirements (more on this in Chapters 3 and 4), from the marketing standpoint, you can lead and direct the business how and where you want it to go. Here are some key variables to consider and think through in assessing such a business start-up:

- Farm Presentation and Appeal

Remember that while your farm operation may be a perfectly functioning agricultural enterprise, those coming as guests to an on-farm event may have a different image of what a "farm" should look like. Can you meet those expectations currently? Does your farm give off a generally neat and tidy impression? Get rid of any old equipment and make sure all storage areas and shelves appear uncluttered and clean or minimize what these folks can see by closing barn and shed doors.

- Peak Summer Timing

It's a crazy concept at face value: Adding another time-commitment business layered on top of an undoubtedly super busy summer farm season. But that's the reality of on-farm food service: customers want to come at a time when they can both enjoy the farm's scenic beauty while savoring fare made with the farm's fare at the peak of ripeness, hence the majority of all of this takes place at the apex of summer. Simply put: If you think you're working hard already, it's only going to increase.

However, if you're of that seasonal workload mindset where it's a constant schedule overload all summer long that is then balanced with some time off and a lesser workload in the winter months, things can balance out. Do keep this in mind when planning your on-farm food service venture and prioritize down time during the winter months to re-group and re-charge for the following season.

- Date and timing of event

Take the summer schedule to heart when plotting exactly when you host events. You will need to balance customer demand (i.e., when folks want to and can come) with your existing schedule (i.e., existing commitments to farmers' market and CSA deliveries). For dairy farmers, this may mean timing events around milking times. Livestock operations may have more flexibility in scheduling options.

Because your on-farm food service venture is not open daily and year-round, you have the

Comment [JJ8]: I don't know where this fits, but I think some place we need to talk about your farm "readiness" to do an event. I know of a farmer who really wants to do these events – but his farm is rather a mess.

Comment [JJ9]: Added Jan's comment below under "Other things to consider"

Comment [JJ10]: The one thought that comes to mind is that we're we're assuming vegetable farming, and might want to think if considerations differ if you are doing other types of farming – i.e. livestock, dairy ...

advantage of strategically creating an event at an off-peak time. For example, maybe you pick Tuesday nights so your weekends are open for farmers markets and other commitments. Then the strategy would be to build a loyal customer following on that night when you're likely not competing with as many other local events. Such information needs to be clearly communicated on your website and other marketing materials as this is still new territory for potential customers: the idea that a place that serves food is only open one night a week or a handful of times a year. That said, this concept could work to your marketing advantage as it by default gives your venture a uniqueness factor from the start by not always being available.

- Family involvement, scale & staff

Your business size and volume will be, granted, a bit of a moving target, particularly during the early start-up phase. It will be tricky to determine exactly how many people will attend and how much staff and support you will need to make those 100+ pizzas or whatever the meal plan may be. A key factor to success in these situations is to ensure you have a supportive base of family and friends to pitch in and help as needed in addition to farm staff you can draw on.

The friends and family side form your core support network and are integral to your ultimate business success, from helping with childcare to providing an objective sounding board when something doesn't go as planned or you hit roadblocks.

- Timeline to launch

As you'll quickly realize when navigating the rest of this manual, successful on-farm food businesses do not pop-up quickly overnight. These ventures take time to thoroughly research and plan, particularly as you navigate the regulatory and legal issues outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. As a first step, given the busy summer farming season, allow yourself time during the off-peak winter months to first fully explore, research and think through this idea. The more time you can allocate to this research and planning phase, the more money you'll potentially save in the long run too. For example, commercial kitchen equipment will come up for sale intermittently at auction or there may be other opportunities to buy used equipment at a significant cost savings. The key is you won't know when it will come up for sale. If you can identify early the items you need, such as a commercial floor mixer, and keep your eyes open for a decent used one, this can lead to significant savings, but will take more time.

Synergy with other farm operations

How a new on-farm food business fits into what already exists in your farm operation is a key question in successful diversification and risk management. Ideally, something like a pizza farm or farm-to-table enterprise will enhance and build on what you already are doing and not cause wheels to spin in directions that unnecessarily absorb time and money.

Some things to think about:

- Where is the bulk of my current time and commitment to this operation going?

Comment [JI11] : Added Jan's comment per above.

Is your business more seasonal focused, such as a maple syrup operation with heavy spring commitments, that then opens time for something else into the summer? If you're a vegetable CSA, when do your deliveries stop and would that potentially be an opportune time to do a farm-to-table event with a harvest theme?

- What are my off-farm commitments?

Do you have an off-farm job and how does that factor into your schedule and timeframes? Is there any flexibility in your employment schedule during peak times of the potential on-farm food venture?

- What are my family responsibilities?

Do you have younger children needing childcare, particularly during event preparation and facilitation time? Some creative CSA farms trade a share for a designated number of on-farm childcare hours. Another option is two neighboring farms pool their kids and "share" a baby-sitter for a designated number of hours.

- What is my current weekly – and daily – schedule like?

Is there space for something new? Does something need to be removed from your business mix before adding in on-farm food service? There may be a ripe time to look at a piece of your income pie that might have been languishing that could now be deleted to open up room for this new venture. Is there a certain farmers' market you've been attending since you started farming that you may be emotionally attached to but isn't bringing in the income it used to? Perhaps you could let go of a certain labor-intensive crop to open up some time?