

Diversify Your Minnesota Farm Business Through Food Service:
Case Study: Dinner on the Farm (Rochester, MN)

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

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!

“Often at our events, the host farmer works in the field till 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 Rochester, 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 to farmers 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, primarily in Minnesota. 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 stated 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:

- 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 reading first thoroughly understanding the regulations yourself – asking questions as needed but taking 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.

- 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 category and 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.”

- Find an internal ally

Eventually, Walch found someone within the Minnesota Health Department 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 doing on, but once that trust built up on our relationship, I haven’t had an inspection since.”

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 Sundays, 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.