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# Planning an event— Consider serving local food

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Let's face it—  
fresh local food  
tastes better

**D**ue to media coverage of “buying local,” you might assume local food is everywhere. Not so! The good news is that you can help change our food system for the better—and support local farmers—by serving local food at workshops, conferences and special events.

Wisconsin chefs and University of Wisconsin–Extension educators wrote this publication to share our experience with sourcing and serving local food, which ranges from finding local food for snacks at short meetings, to serving three meals a day during major winter and summer conferences.

Organizing large events is a huge task. Why serve local food? Here are the reasons that motivate us:

## Practice what you preach

Cooperative Extension educates farmers on how, what, when and where to market. For years, we've worked with farmers who sell directly to consumers. However, our commitment to direct marketing isn't always reflected in the food served at workshops.

The first FarmDirect conference, organized by UW-Extension and held in Milwaukee in 1999, didn't offer local food. A presenter at the event challenged organizers to serve local food at the next conference. We took the suggestion to heart — local food was served every year since. During that time, we've evolved from working with caterers with no local food experience to partnerships with professional chefs committed to using local food.

## Educate conference attendees

Serving local food teaches everyone this lesson: There's room for change in our food system! Throughout the process, farmers learn about new markets. Educators learn the importance of "walking the talk." And food-service employees move from, "We can't do that," to, "That wasn't so hard!"

## Support local farmers and economies

While it may cost more, sourcing food locally supports local farm businesses.

## Enjoy better food

Let's face it: Fresh local food tastes better.

## Step 1

### Clarify your goals

First, clarify what you mean by "local" and list your other food-related other criteria. Ask:

#### How much food should be local?

You could start by featuring local food at breaks, a meal or part of a meal, using one or two local ingredients. Maybe you're ready to serve all local food. Time of year and event size are key factors in deciding how much local food you can source.

#### How do you define local?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines local as: *"of, relating to, or characteristic of a particular place: not general or widespread."*

Define local in a way that meets your needs. Perhaps you're holding a county meeting and want to highlight that county's farmers. Your focus might be regional or statewide. You might want products,

such as bread or coffee, that contain ingredients grown elsewhere but are processed in your area. Depending on product availability, you may need to broaden your search. For example, if you want local apples in late winter, you'll need to find farmers with storage capabilities. The same holds with items that store relatively well, such as carrots, winter squash, potatoes and onions.

## What about other criteria?

Perhaps you prefer certified organic, grass-fed meat or other features. For some criteria, you may have to set priorities. For example, Wisconsin has very few certified organic fruit growers, so you'll have to decide which is more important: local or organic fruit. On the other hand, having several criteria can boost your options. Coffee and black tea aren't grown locally (or elsewhere in the continental United States), but including fair trade and organic would allow you to serve coffee and tea that meet your criteria.

## What are your economic goals?

People new to sourcing local food often suggest that farmers donate products. Since a major reason for buying local is supporting the local economy, asking farmers to donate food is counterproductive. Making local food a sustainable, long-term option means including its true cost. If a business offers to donate food, you can, of course, accept, but relying on donations is not sustainable. Stay flexible. What's available locally—and what's not—may surprise you. Balance your criteria within two goals: serving food people enjoy and staying in your budget.

## Step 2 Identify your partners

To successfully serve local food, many players must come to the table, including: The **chef** and **catering**, or **hotel representative** of your event facility are critical partners. Before you decide on a location, make sure the facility is willing to buy and use local food. Their reactions could range from, "This is a great idea! I want to try it!" to, "It's revenue, so I'll do it," to, "I'm not interested."



## What is local food?



**Early on, share your definition of local food—and your other food-related goals—with the catering staff. One conference facility claimed they regularly served local food. When we discussed details, however, we found they meant buying rolls from a local bakery. They were shocked at the thought of buying products directly from farmers.**

Even if you source all the products, serving local food means extra work for the facility. It usually involves handling multiple invoices, extra food preparation time and working with new products.

If you work in a bureaucracy with rigid rules, talk to **fiscal staff** about what you can and can't do. Sometimes you just need to find a person willing to work with you within the system. These first steps can be tricky, but it's crucial to do your homework. Plenty of people will tell you serving local food just won't work. Don't believe them!

Share your plans—and your definition of local—with your **conference planning committee** and include them as partners.

If possible, hire a **forager** whose job is to find farmers, order food, and coordinate delivery and invoicing with farmers and hotel staff. If you can't afford a forager, assign this task to one or more committee members. The forager will serve as a liaison between chefs and farmers, especially if the chef wants to stay out of the sourcing process.

Assign someone the task of developing **educational materials** that tell conference participants about the farmers who produced the ingredients in their meals. Efforts might include tabletop tents listing farmers and products, inserts in conference packets, posters and displays.

## Step 3

### Plan the menu

Once you define goals and identify partners, it's time to plan the menu. What you serve will have a huge impact on your experience and the quality and cost of food.

If you don't serve local food, you work from menu options prepared by the facility and consider only two things: (1) Pleasing conference participants and (2) Cost. Serving local food means you have to pay attention to preferences and cost—in addition to other food-related goals—and the following considerations:

- What local products are available during your conference?
- What can you buy ahead of time and store?
- What can the facility prepare from the processed and unprocessed foods farmers will deliver?
- How much additional labor—and therefore cost—will it take to work with local products?
- How will you handle processing, such as peeling and chopping vegetables?
- What's your plan for extra, unexpected costs?

### Plan early

This is crucial if your event is in winter or early spring, but even if your conference falls in summer, starting early adds flexibility. Organizing a successful conference with local food can be done in less than a month. However, if you're new to the process, start planning several months in advance.

## Celebrate the season

Most Wisconsin vegetable harvest occurs between May and October, but can start earlier with frost-hardy greens such as spinach, and end later with winter squash and cold-hardy greens and root crops. In addition to fresh, seasonal food, consider using food grown in season-extending hoop houses, stored in root cellars or preserved through canning, freezing, pickling or drying. Some products, such as dairy and meat, are available year round. With enough lead time, you can serve locally grown meals in the heart of winter.

### Teamwork overcame obstacles

**First, the food committee tried to buy products from Stevens Point-area farmers. Although the committee had names of local farmers, no one on the committee actually knew the farmers. Due to limited local food supplies, the search expanded to farmers around the state. Since the process started in late fall, many farmers were sold out. Had the committee started earlier, they could have asked local farmers to set aside products. Despite these obstacles, we managed to serve local food by connecting with farmers in other parts of Wisconsin. As a result, conference participants, organizers and farmers brought food products to the conference from all corners of the state.**

—Local Food Summit, January 2007,  
Stevens Point, Wisconsin



## Plan well in advance



**At the National SARE  
(Sustainable Agriculture**

**Research and Education) conference in Wisconsin in August, dessert one night was local ice cream topped with strawberry sauce. Because menu planning started in January, the forager was able to buy local strawberries in June and have them washed, hulled and frozen for use at the August conference.**

**Include partners in menu planning,** especially conference facility staff, foragers and others with experience preparing local food.

**A chef with experience preparing local food** can help plan the menu and show your facility's chef and staff how to handle unprocessed or unfamiliar local food.

**Take advantage of the kitchen staff's skills.** Include the food-service staff (usually the chef) in menu planning. What are their favorite foods? What type of meals do they like to prepare? Try to incorporate some of their favorites in your menu.



Ask if they make items from scratch or whether they buy food processed or prepped (peeled, cut, sized, and partially or fully cooked)? They may be used to working with 7-ounce boneless, skinless chicken breast, raw, cooked or pre-grilled; whole, raw chickens may not be something they're prepared to handle.

**Use the regular menu as a starting point.** The facility's menu tells you what the staff is used to preparing and gives you and the conference facility a starting point for negotiating price. The chef should be able to estimate the amount of ingredients needed per person. However, keep in mind that ingredients supplied by local farmers probably won't be pre-processed, likely resulting in extra processing costs.

While working off the regular menu has advantages, you can't usually substitute local food for standard fare. Local, sustainable meats cost more – sometimes twice as much. However, you can substitute less expensive cuts, such as sirloin tip roast, for prime rib, or reduce portion size. To minimize cost and effort, if you're planning a buffet, consider offering one salad with a variety of local ingredients rather than three or four.

Most conference centers work on a 31 percent food-cost basis. In other words, for every \$100 in food sales, they expect to pay \$31. To come up with a menu price, they multiply food costs by 3.23. For example, if you spend \$500 on local food for a meal, the menu price would equal  $\$500 \times 3.23$ , or \$1,615. Do the math to make sure your menu fits your budget.

## Creative menu planning helps in managing your budget



**One of the choices on the regular menu at the**

**National SARE conference is a dinner buffet with prime rib of beef, roast loin of pork, chicken, choice of potatoes and vegetables. Conference organizers chose roasted red-skinned potatoes, which did not require peeling, cutting or mashing, and a medley of seasonal vegetables. They substituted marinated tofu (made locally from local soybeans) for chicken to provide a vegan option. Instead of using prime rib, they used a steamship round of beef (a less expensive but flavorful cut commonly used for roast beef). Substituting tofu and steamship round lowered costs enough to make up for the more expensive local, grass-finished beef and pasture-raised pork, as well as the added cost of preparing unprocessed vegetables.**

**Remember beverages.** Think about substituting local juices, cider or milk for soda. Tea and coffee may not be grown in the United States, but you should be able to find a local fair-trade processor or importer. You can also offer local cream or milk rather than nondairy creamer.

**Celebrate the season!** In an era when Midwesterners can buy “fresh” strawberries and peaches flown in from Chile or South Africa during winter, seasonal produce adds flavor and excitement to your menu. Fresh, local produce is hard to match. If you live in the Midwest, instead of starting a winter meal with a ho-hum lettuce-and-tomato salad, how about serving soup with winter vegetables or a salad featuring cold-hardy greens and stored root crops? The result will be nutritious, warm and surprising. And you’ll be serving local food!

#### Coordinate with the facility and local suppliers

**At the National SARE Conference, the conference coordinator arranged to have SARE pay local suppliers directly and deduct the cost of local ingredients from standard menu charges. With careful substitution of less expensive meat cuts, local ingredient costs stayed below 30 percent of the Olympia’s regular menu charges. The end result: Both SARE and the facility were happy. The biggest challenge was getting vendors to submit invoices before the conference ended so that SARE could document ingredient costs when the facility presented its bill at the close of the conference.**

## Step 4 Tackle logistics Financial arrangements with the facility

The conference organizer and facility representative should agree in advance on who will pay local food vendors and how to adjust menu prices. If the facility pays, they should be aware that local food vendors will submit varying invoices. Find out ahead of time if the facility charges extra if local ingredients prove more expensive than standard ingredients. If the conference pays local vendors, you and the facility should negotiate a discount off regular menu prices since the conference will pay most of the ingredient costs.

## Financial arrangements with others

Discuss financial arrangements with your conference-planning team and forager. If you are paying someone to source local foods, what process will you follow?

Make sure farmers and other local vendors know they must submit written invoices to the facility—or the conference coordinator or forager if the conference is handling payment—at the time of product delivery. Some facilities will not pay late invoices. After the conference, follow up with farmers and other product suppliers to make sure they were paid. Too often, farmers had to wait three to six months to get paid. Following up helps ensure good working relationships in the future.

Finally, think about how to charge for food. The easiest way is to fold food costs into the conference registration fee.

### Food donations



A number of Wisconsin food businesses offered to

donate local products to the SARE conference, including a family-owned cheese factory that buys from sustainable dairy farmers, a local brewery that uses Wisconsin-grown grain in some of its beers, a major organic marketing cooperative, an international soy sauce maker that processes local soybeans in a nearby plant, and an organic grain milling cooperative, among others. We acknowledged donations in the conference program but ended up buying most of the local food at market rates. If you receive food donations, decide how to acknowledge them.



## Figuring out how much food to order

How many people will you feed? If you're using local food, you have added challenges:

1. You, or the person (or people) in charge of sourcing local food, must order local food ingredients early.
2. You must know how much of each ingredient to order, not just the number of people to feed.

To help address these challenges, you may want to create a list of farmers who produce the products you plan to serve. That way, if an order from one farm falls through, you'll have options. To get an early estimate of how many people you need to feed, think about offering a discount for early-bird registrations, or use attendance at past conferences as a guide. Once you have a rough idea of the number, the facility's chef or other experienced chefs can estimate how much of each ingredient you'll need. Now, if not sooner, develop a spreadsheet or other system to track ingredient orders. (See page 9 for a sample spreadsheet)

## Finding local food sources

This is the fun part! Chances are you're already connected to local farmers. Different parts of the country have different local food networks, so consider these suggestions a starting point.

### Options for finding farmers include:

- state agriculture departments
- farmers' markets
- local Extension offices
- Local Harvest: [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)
- local farmers' associations
- Slow Food chapters
- local produce or meat distributors

### Options in Wisconsin include:

- Farm Fresh Atlases [www.farmfreshatlas.org](http://www.farmfreshatlas.org)
- SavorWisconsin.com
- Slow Food Wisconsin Southeast [www.slowfoodwise.org/](http://www.slowfoodwise.org/)
- Slow Food Madison [www.slowfoodwisconsin.org](http://www.slowfoodwisconsin.org)
- Fair Trade and Local Food Directory
- Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice, [www.wnpj.org/pdf/fairtradedirectory06.pdf](http://www.wnpj.org/pdf/fairtradedirectory06.pdf)

You may be able to find businesses that specialize in delivering locally grown food. In Wisconsin, Just Local Food Cooperative (Eau Claire), Artisan Foods Delivered (Madison), Wisconsin Home Harvest (Prairie du Sac), and Homegrown Wisconsin (Madison) distribute local food from farmers to retailers and restaurants.

## Complying with health and safety regulations

Food-related health regulations vary from state to state and within communities. In general, stringent regulations govern meat and dairy processing and packaging. To date, little regulation of unprocessed fresh fruits and vegetables exists. However, food safety regulation is evolving, and new requirements may arise.

To learn about regulations that will affect your event, contact your state department of agriculture and local health department.

## Placing and tracking orders

Keep written records of what you order, from whom, and delivery or pickup dates. (See page 9 for a sample spreadsheet.)

When you place an order, discuss the following with each supplier:

- Product
- Quantity
- Date needed
- Delivery or pickup
- Price
- Packaging: Will you have to return boxes? Can you handle bulk produce?
- Special handling or preprocessing
- Storage: Will the conference facility know how to store the item?
- Payment: How and when will the farmer be paid? On what date do you need a written invoice?





## Deliveries

In addition to discussing delivery with farmers, plan deliveries with the facility. Make sure they know how to handle the many small deliveries they'll receive from farms that are not their usual suppliers.

If possible, work directly with those in charge of handling deliveries at the conference facility to:

- Clarify the kind of delivery, when it will arrive, and the purpose of smaller deliveries, and be aware that this may create extra work for them.
- Make sure they clearly label items designated for your conference.
- Make sure they understand and follow storage instructions, i.e. which products require cooling or freezing.
- Check the facility's delivery rules (hours, packaging/cooling requirements) and make sure deliveries comply.
- Develop a system that helps kitchen staff find ingredients when they need them.
- Decide how to handle invoices accompanying deliveries.
- Give the facility your phone number.

## Food preparation

Local food is typically minimally processed, which can require considerable meal prep. Many conference facilities, lacking the staff or equipment to handle raw foods, work solely with preprocessed ingredients.

One way around this is choosing items with minimally processed ingredients, such as whole roasted potatoes, rather than scalloped potatoes or French fries (see Step 3 for details on menu planning). You may also be able to find local businesses that prepare items ahead of time. In some cases, your facility's chef may be willing to allow additional volunteer or paid staff into the kitchen to help with food prep. Helpers should have commercial food prep experience, although untrained individuals can help with things like shucking corn.

## Using leftovers

Ideally, you'll order exactly the right amount, but it's a good idea to plan how to use excess food. Options include donating the food to a food pantry or sharing extras with committee members or conference attendees.

## Learn from your experience

Early in the planning process, give some thought to how you'll learn and grow from the exciting experience of serving local food. If you already have a conference evaluation form, consider adding food-related questions. If possible, solicit feedback from facility staff. Finally, before moving on to other projects, make sure your local food committee takes time to reflect—on what worked, what didn't and what you'll do differently next time.

## Educate and celebrate

Let diners know where their food came from! Place a card with a list of menu items and the farmers who provided them on every table. Encourage people to connect their food with names and locations of farms. Include a list of farmers in conference packets to remind participants of the delicious local food they enjoyed at your event.

Highlight your conference's fresh, healthy local meals in pre-conference publicity and registration materials. Consider letting the press know about your efforts. Your local newspaper, state or local farm periodical, food or dining publication might jump at the chance to run a story on your event's fabulous food.



Forager works with local businesses

**The National SARE Conference forager worked with licensed local food businesses to prepare local foods. For example: A local soup maker made gazpacho using locally grown vegetables. A caterer cooked succotash from local corn and beans. Bakeries made muffins and quick breads with local eggs, carrots and fruit and a baker made cheesecake using local eggs, cheese and fruit.**

Publicly thank those who worked so hard to bring local food to the table, including your team, your farmer suppliers and conference facility staff. You can put it in writing, but a more effective way is to give a short speech thanking every person by name at a main meal. Asking kitchen staff to come to the dining area for a personal thank-you is a great way to show your appreciation.

Finally, congratulate yourself for supporting local farmers, and for working to change our food system for the better, one meal at a time.

# Resources

## Publications

*A Guide to Serving Local Food on Your Menu*, published by the Glynwood Center, is an excellent guide for using local food in restaurant menus, with much that applies to conference meals.  
[www.glynwood.org/resource/GuideLocalMenu.pdf](http://www.glynwood.org/resource/GuideLocalMenu.pdf)

*A Guide to Serving Local Food at Your Next Event*, also published by the Glynwood Center,  
[www.glynwood.org/resource/GuideLocalEvent.pdf](http://www.glynwood.org/resource/GuideLocalEvent.pdf)

*Guidelines for Offering Healthy Foods at Meetings, Seminars and Catered Events*, published by the University of Minnesota School of Public Health,  
[www.sph.umn.edu/img/assets/9103/Nutrition\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.sph.umn.edu/img/assets/9103/Nutrition_Guide.pdf)

Sustainable Table  
[www.sustainabletable.org/issues/buylocal/index\\_pf.html](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/buylocal/index_pf.html)

# Sample job description for local foods forager

The forager will:

1. Communicate regularly with the local foods team and conference coordinator through e-mail, phone or face-to-face meetings.
2. Communicate regularly with the conference catering director.
3. Create two ingredient lists: one for locally sourced ingredients and one for ingredients sourced through the conference; estimate amounts needed for local ingredients; develop and review the list with the catering director and chef, and with the local foods team.
4. Make sure foods comply with federal, state and local health and safety regulations as well as the center's food-procurement rules and regulations.
5. Work with the local foods team to identify ingredient suppliers.
6. Contact local suppliers, negotiate prices and keep records on who can supply what. The forager, or broker, should serve as the contact person for follow-up, delivery and billing, but food committee members may initiate contact with local suppliers.
7. Work with the conference coordinator to set up a system to submit and review farmer invoices and make sure farmers get paid.
8. Arrange for ingredient deliveries. The forager may ask other team members to help arrange deliveries.
9. Solicit advice from conference center staff and possible help with food prep, recipes, having certain items prepped in other places and arranging for experienced kitchen help.
10. Keep records on local ingredients for future use in conference handouts, tabletop tents or menus, which can be designed with the help of conference staff. Include names of farmers, products, farm locations and one- or two-sentence descriptions about ingredients.
11. Verify that deliveries are on schedule.
12. Make sure payments are made.
13. Be on hand the day before and during the conference to answer questions.
14. Determine ahead of time what to do with leftovers.





# Sample spreadsheets for tracking food orders

To stay organized, make two spreadsheets: one with contact information for each food source and another with quantity, price and delivery details.

<b>Farm or business name</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Zip code</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-mail</b>
Meat						
Bakery						
Snacks						
Beverages						
Vegetables						

<b>Item</b>	<b>Amt ordered</b>	<b>Delivery/Who</b>	<b>Delivery/When</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Status</b>
Meat						
Bakery						
Snacks						
Beverages						
Vegetables						

## Sample daily delivery notice

**To:** Person in charge of shipping/receiving

**From:** Conference forager

**Subject:** Today's deliveries

50 dozen carrot muffins, Elegant Foods, refrigerator

Cut-up chicken, Elegant Foods, refrigerator

6 bushels apples, Brightonwoods Orchard, refrigerator

10 gallons apple cider, Brightonwoods Orchard, refrigerator

22 baguettes, Harlequin Bakery, for today's 5:30 reception

26 sliced artisan bread loaves, Harlequin Bakery, for today's 2:30 break

40 cheesecake, Wisconsin Cheesecakery, refrigerator upstairs

25 gallons vanilla ice cream, Castle Rock, for today's 6:30 buffet

38 gallons 2% milk, Castle Rock, refrigerator

10 vegetarian quiche, Harlequin Bakery, for today's 6:30 buffet

620 breadsticks, Harlequin Bakery, dry storage

45# cheese, Roth Kase, via UPS, refrigerator

181 pieces trout, Rushing Waters, refrigerator

30# blueberries

60# peaches

26 cases yogurt plain and vanilla, CC's Jersey Crème, refrigerator

## Sample description of locally sourced foods

**Wisconsin Home Harvest** works to promote a viable regional food system that supports the local economy, contributes to the sustainability of family farms and improves the flavor and quality of food.

### **Beef from Straka Meats**

Plain, Wisconsin

Straka Meats is a third-generation family owned business operating for more than 50 years. This state-inspected facility offers full-service processing from slaughter to retail and specializes in custom-cutting for small producers. All meat in the retail case is locally produced.

### **Breads from Wooden Spoon Bakery**

Max Shapiro and Kevin Mealer  
Reedsburg, Wisconsin

Wooden Spoon Bakery is Reedsburg's only artisan bread bakery. Max Shapiro has more than 15 years in the culinary arts and uses only the freshest ingredients and Old World methods to create sweet, savory food. Co-owner Kevin Mealer is training to become a chocolatier.

### **Eggs from M&M Organic Farms**

Wonewoc, Wisconsin

M&M Organic Farms near Wonewoc is run by three generations of the Miller family. Certified by MOSA (Midwest Organic Services Association) since 1997, they are Organic Valley Co-op members and keep a flock of 14,000 laying hens.

### **Maple syrup and potatoes from Pleasant Valley Farms**

Ron and Maureen Bula

Pleasant Valley Farms is a 160-acre certified organic farm producing specialty potatoes, vegetables and grain. The farm also has a 30-cow herd and finish calves. Son Patrick produces maple syrup and is starting a Berkshire hog operation. Daughter Justine recently started a honey enterprise.

### **Pears, apples and apple cider from Maple Hill Orchard**

Tom and Diane Stein and family

Maple Hill Orchard has been in business 11 seasons. The 80-acre orchard has more than 3,000 apple trees and 15 varieties. The Steins practice integrated pest management, host tours and have an on-farm store.

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