

Rural Roots Farmer Showcase, in Lac Ste. Anne County west of Edmonton- organized by a committee of 7 people with a variety of backgrounds; agriculture production, food service, promotions, and municipal government/tourism. Rather than inviting visitors to individual farms, we gather a group of producers and host the event at a local historic garden.



The idea and our goals

- 2019 was our first year participating in AOFD, with a vendor market and outdoor farm to table dinner. It was a lot of planning work with many last-minute details to accomplish at what is already a busy time of year. Through it all we said “2020 will be so much easier the second time around.”
- For 2020 we had big plans to add more activities and build on the success of 2019. Little did we know 2020 would be almost like starting all over again
- It took a long time to decide we had to abandon our plans and come up with a new idea
- Committed to participate in some way so as not to lose 2019’s momentum, the new idea needed to meet our core goals for participating in AOFD -
 - to showcase a wide range of local producers in our area, to provide a starting point for producers to host their own on-farm event, and to offer an exceptional meal
 - final presentation must meet food safe handling requirements, look professional, and be a product we were proud of
 - feature a local chef to extend the opportunities to promote our local producers

Building the box

- Decided to offer a take-out meal marketed as a Picnic Box, “a meal for two or starter for more”

- By June restaurants had forged this new dining option and customers were liking this way to support local businesses
- The foods included were a combination of what was available and what was needed to make a complete and satisfying meal (prepared meats, cheeses, salads, bread, pickles, and sweets)
- We struggled with many questions- what size portions? Logistically, what could fit in the bag? All items ready to eat or some needing preparation- such as meat to cook and coffee to brew?
- To make a complete meal we really wanted to include a beverage. Logistically though, how would we package it? Should we offer choices? Would the cost of beverages increase the price beyond what our clients would be willing to pay?
- The Picnic Box included a menu highlighting each producer, a flyer with producer contacts, and a copy of The Real Dirt on Farming
- Instead of a box we used an agricultural themed reusable grocery bag
- The food was prepared, packed, and stored in a local community hall's commercial kitchen



Connecting with producers

- Started with the group of producers we worked with in 2019. Many of them were keen to participate again
- We asked producers to think about how their product could be included in a picnic-type meal
- Via local channels (weekly newspaper, social media) invited area producers to participate
- At local Farmers' Markets sought out vendors with interesting products
- To fill gaps in the menu, producers recommending other producers was the best route for connecting

Calculating the costs

- Needed to find the fine balance between what we'd like to include and the right price point, we settled on \$65.00
 - Spent a lot of time calculating costs/portion for every ingredient and packaging supplies
 - Reduced some portion sizes because of the cost/person
 - Looked at the price of similar take-out meals in the area
 - Used some educated guesses
- Needed to know the numbers early in the process so we could begin promotions
- How many to sell? How much could our producers provide, how many were we capable of assembling and delivering, what number did we need to make the whole process worthwhile, and how many could we expect to sell?
 - It was important to us to commit to a number and have sales finalized at least 1 week before the event. Our thoughts ranged from 20 to 75. We settled on 50.
- One of our partners is a not-for-profit society. Producers sent invoices and were paid by the Society.

Good advice from others

- A conference call with AOFD's Nicola Doherty pushed our vague (and sometimes naïve) ideas into reality and that allowed us to begin planning in earnest
- Had several conversations with our signature chef for ideas- e.g. how to package, portion size, and creative ways to combine ingredients.
- We knew we needed to include a meat dish, to showcase that sector of producers and to add value to the meal. One of our farmers connected us with a local food market. This collaboration led to shared product, cross promotions, and a delicious pair of cured meats
- From our 2019 event and as individual producers we have a good working relationship with our local Alberta Health Services Public Health Inspector for information on food handling logistics

Promotions, sales, and delivery

- Using the experience of our producers, we set up a simple online marketplace using Square. Linked to our partner website, it was easy to track sales and make edits as needed
- Profiles of each producer were posted on the website. <http://www.pegggarden.org/events>
- Our promotions were spread across many avenues to reach a range of audiences. These included websites, social media, local newspapers, posters. Producers handed out flyers at Farmers' Markets and to their customers
- Digital promotional packages went to our producers and partners, to use for their own promotions.
- Being part of the AOFD promotions was a big boost- customers were primed to look for what was going on in their area

- The 2020 version had the potential to reach a wider audience by connecting with people who might not drive out to our community. It was our opportunity to increase exposure for our producers for future sales. To accommodate this, we offered three pick up points; in Edmonton, Stony Plain, and within our county. In two locations we scheduled a 2-hour pick-up time for their meals. Everyone showed up on time.

How it all turned out

- All 50 meals sold out by the August 10th deadline
- Promoted 17 local and regional producers and markets and highlighted our ag industry
- The historic site was open all day for the AOFD weekend. As we'd hoped, several families stayed for a picnic at the Garden. For some, it was like a reunion as it was the first time they had gathered since March. Others dined at home with a small group of friends.
- An online survey sent to all our customers yielded useful feedback and excellent reviews

Lessons learned (or reinforced what we already knew)

- Start planning early
- It was OK to start modest promotions before we had all the details worked out (e.g. final menu, locations for pick up points)
- Setting a price took time. Where we guessed at costs and quantities, some estimates were high others were low and fortunately they balanced out
- Have an excellent product description so customers know what to expect, saving time answering questions
- While the grocery bag was not as attractive as a box, it was sturdy, had room for all our items, and is reusable. They were bulky to store in the cooler once the meals were packed.
- We thought we had a good system for packing the 15 items into each bag. But we had packages left over at the end and no easy way to find where they belonged.
- It was tempting to keep adding small items- utensils, branded serviettes, colourful labels. Each add time and cost. Our customers loved what they received- keep it simple and save some surprises for next year.
- Knowing customers are well accustomed to buying online was key to the success of this venture
- Every partnership you make brings a new audience to your marketplace
- Having a deadline several days before the event was a motivating call to action. It allowed us time for final planning. We had some last-minute cancellations and people were not expecting a refund, but because we had some time to spare, we were able to sell those meals to people on a waiting list
- Offering only 1 option for payment and no options on the meal kept the process simple- this time it worked for us
- Customers indicated their pick-up point by email, requiring a lot of correspondence. Offering that choice as part of their online purchase would have saved us administrative time
- While we no longer needed a physical venue to offer the meal, several customers appreciated a pick-up point that included a trip to the country and an opportunity for outdoor dining
- A 1 hour window was plenty of time for customers to pick up their meals
- We asked a lot of our producers- some short timelines, requests for smaller packaging than their norm, and relatively small sales for some items.

- Some participated primarily because they like the opportunity to be a part of AOFD
- To accommodate our packaging, we made some changes to the way their product was served and they were a bit disappointed. With more conversation we could have found better solutions
- Keep detailed records so the next time is easier

We had fun, had no worries about weather, and are already planning for next year. Here's hoping the future is more certain for the 2021 event. Now we need to decide if we will offer a takeout option, as well as the vendor market and outdoor dinner!

Anyone interested in more details about our AOFD 2020 adventure is welcome to contact us at PeggBotanicGarden@gmail.com

The Rural Roots Farmer Showcase Committee

