

Plan a Potluck: Simple, Social Fun on the Farm

Here's how to plan a potluck and stir up simple, social fun on the farm.

By Lisa Kivirist

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When someone says to me, “Come to my farm for a potluck,” I feel like I hit the country-living jackpot.

A collection of cuisine, conversation and community amongst the crops and cows—that’s my idea of a four-star restaurant. For those overwhelmed by the concept of entertaining or, like me, simply too busy to cook for a crowd, potlucks provide a straight-forward opportunity to blend social gatherings with busy, rural lifestyles, quickly creating an anticipated tradition on one’s farm.

It’s important to be a good potluck guest, too. Get a few tips >> Some date the word “potluck” to 16th century England, where it was originally described as a meal “taking the luck of the day’s pot,” offering guests whatever food happened to be available.

An even older tradition was the “potlatch”; observed by indigenous people in North America, it encompassed varying ceremonies and feasts involving the community.

Today, pot-lucks typically are gatherings where each participant brings a dish to be shared among the group. Usually a relaxed, informal get-together, potlucks inspire spontaneous and larger gatherings since the pressure to cook everything is lifted off the host. With a wide variety of dishes, potlucks satisfy the various tastes of a crowd.

While potlucks are inherently a simple concept, in our decade of hosting a range of such gatherings on our Wisconsin farm, my family realized that a dash of thoughtful planning goes a long way in keeping things easy and stress-free for us, and more fun and memorable for our guests. Here are some ideas and approaches to making potlucks part of your farm tradition:

Plan Your Potluck Theme

The key ingredient for a potluck remains constant: the food. While we must confess that the majority of our potluck gatherings skew toward the informal—with a “bring whatever” message to guests and no planned menu—when we do take the time to pre-plan a food theme and décor, the gathering snowballs into a richer affair.

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Recipes to Try

Here are two recipes to try at your farm home potluck or anytime:

Tomato Crouton Casserole

Zucchini Mystery Cobbler

The seasonal flow of farm life gifts us with a calendar of potluck themes. Celebrating the fall harvest calls for dishes showcasing fresh produce abundance or creating a menu theme around a specific fruit, vegetable or herb. “Ode to the Tomato” or a “Basil Buffet” could hatch culinary creativity among your friends.

A potluck menu theme can also stem from a main dish that the host family provides. This may involve engaging someone with unique culinary talents.

When our food-loving friend, Marshall, planned a visit, we cajoled him into bringing along his turkey-frying gear; a memorable potluck ensued with a turkey as the guest of honor.

Our friends Brenda and Luis throw spontaneous “soup nights” at their place; during these informal gatherings, they provide two different kettles of soup, leaving guests open to bring any kind of dish to share.

Another approach stems from asking each guest to bring an ingredient that adds up to a main dish. Once we asked guests to bring a vegetable for tempura in addition to a dish to pass. We provided tempura batter, dip sauces and a fryer (a five-gallon sized turkey fryer works best for crowds), and everyone had fun slicing, dipping, frying and sharing. The same idea also works well with a fondue dessert, with the host providing the chocolate and the guests bringing items to be dipped; creativity, naturally, is encouraged.

Look around your farm for uncomplicated, country-themed decorating ideas. Need extra outdoor seating? Throw some old quilts over straw bales. Votive candles in open canning jars, particularly the older jars made from blue glass, create a pretty glow without the worry of hot wax dripping on the table. And nothing says “country” more than a gingham tablecloth.

Or take the opposite approach and twist the farm backdrop with the unexpected, transporting guests to a different era or place. The tomato-and-basil theme lends itself to a “Night in Tuscany,” with Italian music, colorful tablecloths and ceramics, and a Tiramisu competition for dessert.

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When friends visited from Scotland, we hosted a potluck where Donald, a retired Scotch whisky maker, gave an informal presentation on the making of single malt whisky. He even brought a slide show, which we “projected” onto a white sheet tacked to the outside barn wall, kind of like our own farm drive-in.

Once word gets out about your themed events, be open to serendipitous guests, like the local bagpiper who heard about the Scottish night and stopped by in full garb to play a few songs between drams.

Another memorable event came from a potluck brunch where we transformed an old shed with just the roof remaining into our “Parisian Café,” with small, cabaret-style tables decked with red tablecloths and the soundtrack from “Moulin Rouge” playing in the background. Folks brought a dish to pass, many getting into the French theme with croissants and pastries.

My husband, John, made crepes on an electric crepe pan. He dressed up for the part with a chef’s hat and pencil “mustache,” compliments of my eyeliner. Throwing a potluck brunch provided a refreshing twist to the typical evening gathering, especially for area seniors who don’t like driving at night.

Don’t overlook the farm itself as a reason to bring people together. We host an annual summer open house where we offer farm tours throughout the day and provide a potluck lunch and dinner, which works well for those driving a ways to get to our place. This is one of our liveliest potlucks since the mix of guests, many of whom don’t know each other, is so diverse in background, yet arrive with common farm interests.

Ways to Involve Potluck Guests

While food brings people together, it’s the conversation and community that cause folks to connect. I remember a summer potluck where we stood in our driveway for hours, talking to lingering guests; folks aimed for their cars to head home, but were enjoying themselves so much they stayed to chat. That’s my sign of a great gathering. With potlucks being an inherently informal affair, it’s an easy means to invite people you don’t know well, but who would add newness; perhaps people you cross paths with all the time, but don’t see socially—your librarian, mailman or child’s teacher.

As the host family, we like to gather everyone’s attention right after they sit down to eat, more formally welcome everyone and thank them for coming and bringing dishes, and to introduce friends visiting from out of town or new to the group. Depending on season and theme, we’ll do a short reading to toast the mood. A favorite is this traditional Irish blessing: “May you have warm words on a cold evening, a full moon on a dark night and a smooth road all the way to your door.”

Providing informal activity choices gives guests more opportunities to connect. Easy pick-up games like horseshoes, croquet and Frisbee work well or even a table with a jigsaw puzzle if the potluck is indoors. Remember the kids by providing an activity table stocked with art supplies, cookies with frosting and decorating supplies or a piñata.

Organize Logistics for a Stress-Free Potluck

A dash of planning goes a long way in hosting a stress-free potluck. Showcase the food by elevating the serving dishes on the buffet table with “risers,” which could be as simple as phone books stacked under the tablecloth to give height to the second row, making sure the dishes lay steady.

Place plates on the front end of the serving table with silverware on the other so guests don’t need to juggle utensils while dishing up.

Provide blank cards and pens, encouraging guests to write down the name of their dish and its ingredients; this garners appreciation for their culinary efforts and helps anyone who may have food allergies.

We have a collection of unmatched plates, silverware and mugs that serve as our potluck dishes, acquired from garage sales and friends’ cast-offs over the years. In addition to reducing our environmental impact, we believe a floppy paper plate doesn’t do justice, in our book, to serving friends’ foods. If something breaks, no great loss. The ceramic chips become drainage material for the bottom of a container plant in the greenhouse. Bring an array of serving utensils, knives, cutting boards, bowls and baskets to the buffet table for guests who bring a bag of chips or bread that needs to be cut. As host, a range of condiments at the end of the serving table, such as salt and pepper, butter, jam, mustard and ketchup, is always appreciated.

Keep an eye on how long the food stays out on the table to ensure food safety; make sure nothing is left out for more than two hours, less if the event is held outdoors in the summer.

One thing that helps with this is encouraging guests to arrive at a designated serving time. We’ll often start a party at 4 p.m. and then specifically state the potluck buffet is at 5 p.m., which gives folks leeway on arrival. In today’s world of e-mail and text messages, we like to send out homespun, handmade paper invitations when we can. This better ensures people arrive on time to eat, gives folks an opportunity to think about and get creative with their dishes, and creates an anticipated aura for the event. Have extra ice blocks on hand for keeping food cold; have netted covering available, too, to keep bugs away from the dishes if eating outdoors.

Clean up is a breeze with our “tub method.” We place empty, heavy-duty plastic bins (ours are old recycling containers) near the serving table with signs: “Please place all dishware in here, including food scraps, paper napkins and recyclables.”

This keeps everything neatly contained and prevents finding used dishware all over the place. We bring the tub to the dishwasher at our leisure and easily separate dishes from compost for recycling. We use this system so frequently that we printed the signs on cardstock and stuck them in plastic sheet covers so we can readily reuse them for multiple gatherings.

Whether as a host or guest, savor the next potluck opportunity that comes your way. Cooking up community in the country brings out the best that farm life has to offer, one covered casserole at a time.

About the Author: Lisa Kivirist is the co-author of *Rural Renaissance* and *Edible Earth*, and hosts many potlucks at her farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity, in Browntown, Wis.

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