



The Community Table: Party Planning Tips

Develop closer community ties and endorse local food by planning your next get together using these tips.

(from The Community Table, by Lisa Kivirist, page 2 of 2)

Local-food Party Planning

Follow these five steps to plan your next on-farm celebration using local fare:

1. Do some research

Think about the food assets of your community. What makes your region unique? What foods and agricultural products are associated with where you live? This is often referred to as the “terroir” of food, based on a French term that refers to a certain geographic region’s contribution to local-food flavors.

Write an inventory of the types of food that come from your vicinity. Sometimes discovering (or rediscovering) our community’s food roots requires us to think beyond the supermarket aisle.

Also consider:

Settler stories

What drew settlers to your region? What ethnic group settled your landscape and what food traditions did they bring? These answers may reconnect you with the food heritage in your region, back to the day when all food came from local sources.

My farm nestles in the heart of southwestern Wisconsin, originally settled by Swiss immigrants 150 years ago who came for the ideal agricultural landscape and climate. This evolved into the dairy industry that still shines today.

Fortunately, a buffet of small, artisanal cheese factories in my county still make local cheese in the Swiss tradition and sell directly to consumers.

Dig deeper to find possible other local culinary traditions to showcase at your gathering. Aside from cheese, there are ranges of Swiss-inspired dishes, from fondue to “bratzli” cookies that local restaurants have discarded or forgotten over the years. These dishes will get your attendees talking, particularly seniors warmly reminiscing about the foods of their childhoods.

Small farms

When we hosted a local-food-inspired potluck on our farm, I entered our zip code into Local Harvest, which includes a listing of farms that sell directly. The website has an underlying goal of connecting farms with folks looking for local food. From eggs to honey, you may be surprised at the range of local-food options in your community.

Your garden

The most “local” food resides in your own garden. We run a small bed-and-breakfast, Inn Serendipity, on our farm and say our breakfasts are based on the “100-foot diet,” with most ingredients harvested within 100 feet from our back door.

Think about what you’re growing and what unusual or perhaps historic varieties are doing well in your garden for new perspectives on “local.”

We experimented with growing leeks a few years ago, primarily motivated by our love for potato leek soup. While leeks had been standard garden fare a few generations ago, not many folks were growing them anymore. Showcase such items at your gathering, providing party guests new perspectives on what can be grown in their backyards.

2. Invite guests and give direction

A local-foods potluck allots you the opportunity to expand your guest list.

The local-food theme encompasses a wide range of people—from area farmers to people who run businesses that value local foods, such as a restaurant that shops at the farmers’ market.

Strive to attract a range of ages at farm parties; there’s nothing like watching our neighbor, a senior farmer, sharing his



memories of “back when I was your age” with our 7-year-old son.

Likewise, there may be people you invite who are new to the local-foods movement. Be sure to offer suggestions of foods they can bring.

In today’s online world, party invitations on paper are a novelty—and perfect for a local-foods gathering. Explain the concept of local food, encouraging folks to showcase foods raised within 100 miles of your community. On the invitation, provide a list of foods that will be in peak season during that time. Include information on when and where the closest farmers’ market is held, which will be helpful for folks who don’t garden.

“A local-food-themed potluck encourages people to think outside their routine recipes and draw inspiration from seasonal produce to try out a new dish,” says Cindy Torres, manager of the Longmont Farmers’ Market in northern Colorado. “Stop by your local farmers’ market for an inspiring ingredient list of what’s in season. Ask growers selling at market what’s their favorite recipe, as they know their product best.”

The Spanakopita (spinach pie) recipe on page 18 and Roasted Root Vegetables recipe on page 22 do exactly that: showcase standard garden fare in fresh, innovative, flavorful ways.

Plan the date of your gathering to coincide with the peak of your area’s growing season, probably mid-summer to early fall. This way, everything will be at maximum abundance—a righteous celebration of the harvest.

For the enthusiastic gardeners in the crowd, encourage folks to bring their excess produce to the party to share with others.

3. Set the stage

Blend good food with a dash of education by creating a setting that engages and sparks thoughtful conversation among your guests.

Provide blank index cards and pens for guests to write the name of their dish and what specific ingredients came from local sources, like “Lamb brats from Jordandahl Farm in Argyle, Wis.,” or “Red Pontiac potatoes from the gardens at Inn Serendipity.”

Maps visually connect guests with their local-food sources. Take both a state and county map (usually available free from your area chamber of commerce) and mount them to a large piece of cardboard.

Provide small star stickers for folks to mark where their food sources came from. You can even give out a prize for the person who brought the dish made with the greatest amount of local ingredients. A regional cookbook written by a local writer or compiled by an area organization makes a nice prize.

Give your guests reason to mingle and talk to people they don’t know by creating a local-foods scavenger hunt. These can be open-ended statements, such as “Favorite restaurant that uses local food” or “My favorite way to eat tomatoes.”

Provide each guest with a list of questions and pencils, and encourage folks to talk to each other and to collect answers.

Don’t forget to involve the kids. A craft table with a food theme provides engaging activities. Gather a stack of old seed catalogs (the kind with lots of color produce pictures), scissors, paper and glue sticks. Kids can cut out various fruits, vegetables and flower pictures and make a collage of their “dream garden.”

Or cut potato chunks into shapes with cookie cutters (heart, star, bear) and use water-based ink pads to make prints on paper. Be sure to share this creative “food art” with the party: String a laundry line across the potluck buffet table and use clothespins to hang the finished masterpieces for display.

For folks bringing extra garden produce to share, designate a specific area with a sign: “Free to a good home” and provide bags for folks to take home their booty.

4. Think beyond food: Celebrate rural life

What other ways can your local celebration go beyond food, showcasing regional artistic talent? The creative energy in your community may simply need a venue like your potluck to go public.



Cara Carper discovered this when her family started hosting a biannual barn party on their Wisconsin family farm.

“My family is quite musical, especially my husband, Dave, and we wanted to create a venue at our barn party for local folks to share their talents in an open, friendly environment,” explains Carper. “The barn stage is open to anyone; we even take out an ad in our local newspaper encouraging folks to come play. The rich music talent in our local community always amazes me. I love how people leave our gathering saying to each other, ‘Wow, I didn’t know my postman plays the bass.’”

The Carpers also add a dash of local creative barter to their barn party. A neighbor gives them a pig to roast for the evening’s main dish and the Carpers, in turn, let this farmer store his classic car in their barn over the winter.

5. Stir up outcomes

Don’t be surprised if your local-food gathering serendipitously stirs up new connections and ventures among your attendees.

When you gather people around a theme of local food—especially if you create a setting that encourages dialog and discussion—passions can connect and ideas may percolate. Two women may discover their mutual love for baking and talk about taking a cake-decorating class together. A seasoned gardener may offer to host a tour of his growing fields and garner an enthusiastic response.

Gathering people around the table breaks barriers and perceptions that, in other situations, may hinder connections. By hosting a local-foods potluck, you may be planting seeds for future collaborations and friendships that reach beyond your expectations. Savor that harvest!

Wendell Berry said, “Eating is an agricultural act.” As the cornucopia of summer bounty peaks, celebrate and educate the power we all hold to make healthy, sustainable food choices that steward our landscape for generations to come.

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About the Author: Lisa Kivirist writes from her farm and B&B, Inn Serendipity, in Wisconsin. She is co-author of *ECOprenuring* (New Society Publishers, 2008) and *Rural Renaissance* (New Society Publishers, 2009) and is a Kellogg Food & Society Policy Fellow.

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