



GUIDE TO HOSTING MINI FOOD SHOWS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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a guide for community groups and
nonprofits working with local and
regional vendors

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United States
Department of
Agriculture

National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture

Event Description & Goals



Mini food shows are community-led events designed to showcase local farms and food producers to a variety of audiences, including buyers like restaurants and specialty shops, food distributors, and residents.

Generally, these events are smaller versions of smaller versions of publicly-supported food shows, often hosted by state departments of agriculture or others to connect food and farm businesses to buyers and to increase awareness of locally sourced food among consumers.. Food vendors and growers set up their products in a large venue, and buyers and residents are invited to browse, “shop,” and enjoy samples.

These events can be designed with a public visibility component, but also usually include the promotion of transactional relationships between food makers, growers, and restaurants and retailers.

These events also help business-to-business relationships between farmers and food makers, increase the profile of local food makers within their region and in new markets, and help encourage small business retention and expansion.

Choosing An Audience

These events can be designed in a variety of ways, to support the unique regional needs and assets in your community and to reach particular audiences.

Before beginning the event planning process, consider the following questions to help develop an event that meets the needs of your own regional food system:

- Is this a **regional event**, designed to highlight vendors that sell wholesale to distributors?
- Is this a **local event**, designed to provide an intimate setting for local food providers in a smaller footprint who sell directly to restaurants and shops?
- **Which companies are in the target group of buyers?** Are they large or small? Do they purchase at wholesale, at retail, or in some other fashion?
- **Who is the target group of farm or food businesses?** Are they large or small? Do they sell direct to consumer, direct to restaurants and local stores, or wholesale to larger markets?
- **Does your organization have the capacity to reach those audiences?** If not, the best approach is to *start small and work with what you know*. If you want to do a regional wholesale event, but your best connections are with local restaurants, consider hosting a first event focused on those buyers and then working outward from there with new connections made during the locally-focused event.

Stakeholders and Partners

It's important to involve partners in the event planning early in the process. It takes several companies, agencies, and vendors to make these events a success!

Potential Partners & Stakeholders

- Food makers (value-added businesses, bakeries, dairies, and other companies)
- Farmers (producers of meats, milk, produce, herbs, or other grown products)
- Restaurants
- Restaurant Associations
- Retailers & Grocery Store Managers
- Wholesale & Foodservice Representatives and Institutional Buyers
- Others who purchase/sell local products
- Small business centers
- Economic development offices
- Nonprofits or food policy councils supporting local food system work
- Local hospitals interested in CSAs or markets on-site
- Chambers of Commerce
- Travel & Tourism Authorities or Tourism Agencies
- North Carolina Cooperative Extension offices
- Incubator kitchens or community kitchens



Every community is different. There are often multiple agencies working towards the success of the local food system in your region – so it's best to identify a few key partners with whom the event can be planned, and a larger group of affiliated agencies who can help with co-promotion of the event.

Sample Event Schedule

Hours 1-3

Venue setup and vendor arrival

Hours 4-6

Private showing for buyers, restaurants, and retailers

**This element is determined by the type of event you chose at the beginning of the planning process.*

This should last between 1-2 hours and is designed to allow vendors to showcase their products to buyers (and provide quiet, one-on-one time for discussions about purchasing).

Hours 6-7

***Optional public portion of the event (if consumer markets are included)**

**This element is determined by the type of event you chose at the beginning of the planning process.*

Hours 7-9

Breakdown and Cleanup



Venue & Planning Considerations

Venue considerations include several important characteristics that can ensure a successful event:

- Ample parking
- Public access
- Easy to find – especially for out-of-town retailers and wholesalers
- Lots of space for table setup, and plenty of electrical connections for vendors who need warm or cold storage
- A catering kitchen will be handy, but isn't necessary
- Multiple entrances to the exhibition space (so that there is a free flow of traffic in and around the vendors)
- Cost
- Compatibility with your requirements for setup and breakdown (additional hours before and after the event)
- In-house staff who can help with setup and address issues during the event

You may need to discuss the venue selection in detail with several options before making a final decision. Even if there are venues willing to donate space for the event, make sure that you will have what you need before accepting – it's important to make a great impression on vendors and buyers alike.

Think Local & Start Small

These events, while focused on local foods, can also serve to connect, network, and showcase other small businesses in the area.

Consider including local breweries and wineries (always a draw for the attendees, and a good connection for farmers producing particular items of interest).

Also consider other small businesses who can contribute to the event – using a local event rentals company and showcasing their services, obtaining table décor from local florists, or inviting a local farmers' market or food council to table in the lobby. Ask these businesses to donate some or all of their services in exchange for advertising before and during the event.

Make sure you know what your “magic number” is – the number of vendors and buyers that need to be present so there is a variety of product and several opportunities for connections to be made.

Most importantly, stick with what you know and start small. Even if your goal is a larger regional event, it is best to show success with a smaller local event first, to build relationships among providers and local buyers and to gain experience in planning & promoting these kinds of events.

Planning Timeline

Three Months Ahead:

- Send initial email and make phone calls to the vendors, buyers, and venues you want to consider. Provide an estimated week or month in which you'd like to host the event, and ask for what works best with their schedules before confirming a date and time.
- Make sure to give vendors plenty of time, and don't schedule during a time of year that farms are in planting or harvest season. *Note that spring and fall are often incredibly busy times for farmers, who are either planting or harvesting – aim for late spring or late summer events.*
- Communicate with your organization about your plans and identify any partners – a local food council, Cooperative Extension office, or health and wellness group, for example – who may want to be involved.

Two Months Ahead:

- Confirm the time and date for the event.
- Visit venues and discuss your needs before confirming the venue rental.
- Reach out to volunteers who can help with setup and breakdown with a calendar invitation.
- Create table layout and space diagrams to help with setup.
- Email a "Save the Date" flyer to your partners, vendors, buyers, and your own outreach list; promote through social media.
- Send promotional copy to your partners and include sample Facebook posts and sample tweets, to help your partners promote you quickly and easily.
- Order any paid public outreach, such as radio or newspaper ads, to begin two weeks prior to the event.
- Print & distribute postcards or flyers that can be used in community locations to advertise the event, especially farmers' markets, grocery store events, and other places where local food is a focal point.

Planning Timeline

Two Weeks Ahead:

- Make sure any paid ads are set to run.
- Confirm all details of the schedule with the vendors and buyers. Make sure buyers know the private showing times and have directions and parking information, as well as a cell phone contact for the day of the event.
- Draft table signage, banners, and any other promotional materials needed for the event and send for printing.
- Check in with vendors. Do they need any additional items, such as business cards, tablecloths, etc.? Ask about their plans – it helps to make sure the vendors are bringing an appropriate amount of product to share and products that will create visually engaging displays.
- Verify that you have all supplies needed, including clipboards, registration sheets, nametags, tablecloths, décor, signage, spare pens, and any other resources vendors and buyers may need.
- Re-send electronic flyer and promotional copy to your marketing sources, and send promotional material to vendors so they can help promote.

One Week Ahead:

- Print all signage and materials, including surveys.
- Purchase any additional supplies.
- Create volunteer task list and schedule and send to all volunteers.
- Do a last social media push reminding people of the event, and get a final headcount to your vendors so they have a good estimate of how much product will be needed.
- Create “take-away” items that have vendors’ contact information listed, so they can be provided to buyers and consumers who are interested.
- Touch base with all partners to confirm tasks and schedule.

Post-Event Tasks & Evaluation

Record feedback during the event. What do people say while talking with the farmer or food maker? What are the primary concerns of buyers? Of restaurants? Of consumers?

Another option is to prepare a short survey – five or fewer questions that fit on a half-sheet of paper – and ask those who stop to chat with your staff and volunteers to answer them quickly.

Leftover food items can usually be donated to a local food bank, pantry, or soup kitchen.

Within two days:

Send a thank-you email to the vendor, buyers, and partners, with any additional information such as initial feedback or upcoming events. Check to see if anyone needs further information or if there are opportunities for future events, such as training classes, another networking opportunity, assistance connecting with someone who attended, or other tasks. Include a list of attendees and their contact information and links to any additional resources that may be useful.

Within two weeks:

Summarize event surveys – What worked? What needs adjustment for future events? Are there additional events or information that you might be able to take on in your community? Share your findings and thoughts about future events with your local Cooperative Extension office, farmer groups, food producers, health & wellness groups, and other community advocates in your network.



Event Setup

Make it beautiful!

- **Tables** should be set with tablecloths if possible; fresh flowers from a local farmer add a nice touch. Make sure vendors have clear signage and enough stands and products to make visually engaging displays. **Signage** should clearly indicate the logo, website, and name of the farm or food company. Other signs you may want throughout the event include:
 - Partner and sponsor logos;
 - Registration and information tables;
 - Infographics or other informational posters about the local food economy in your region; and/or
 - Signage that reflects something unique to your region, such as a local branding initiative, farmer cooperative, product, or nonprofit effort.
- **Encourage vendors to give free samples** – this is an important way to get customers – both buyers, and consumers - to stop and talk with you! Use toothpicks and offer napkins so there are no food safety issues. If using cold-store products, make sure to bring coolers and plenty of ice.
- **Make bright, colorful nametags** for your organization's members, volunteers, buyers, and vendors.
- Bring along some coffee, snacks, and bottled water for the vendors and keep it in a back room for breaks.



Bring a clipboard or two for surveys and note-taking during your conversations with attendees, and let vendors know this is a good opportunity to collect contact information for their own email lists during the event.

Supplies and Costs

Estimated Cost	Recommended Supply Items (for 20 vendors)
\$40.00	Toothpicks, napkins, and tablecloths
\$20.00	Clipboards, pens, pencils, etc.
\$50.00	Cost for Vendor Products This is a variable cost that will change depending on how many vendors are attending, how long the event will last, and how many people are attending. Remind the vendor that although they are giving away product, they are receiving direct contact with potential consumers at one of their larger retail outlets – which typically can't be purchased through traditional advertising.
\$10.00	Ice for coolers, if needed
\$50.00-100.00	Printing This includes larger signage, such as a foamboard or poster display or a banner, as well as table signage, printed surveys, and any other regular printing needed. <i>*You can also design this banner or foamboard in such a way that it can be used more than once – at farmers' markets or other events – as a way to make this purchase more useful long-term.</i>
\$5.00 per vendor	Bottled Water, Coffee, or Snacks This is not essential, but is a kind way to tell your local food providers that you value their time and appreciate their assistance.

If you need sponsors, consider approaching some of the food businesses in your region. Offer opportunities for adding their signage to the event, including their logos on marketing materials, and giving them space in the post-event thank-you email for advertising or promotions.

Suggested Language

Save The Date for Vendors and Partners

Date + Time

Hosts & Sponsors

Location

Registration cost, if any

Are you a farmer or food maker interested in connecting with restaurants, retailers, and wholesalers? Are you a buyer looking for great local vendors of farm and food products?

This Mini Food Show event will connect producers and buyers in a private setting, showcasing the great products available in our region, and will then offer an opportunity for consumers and civic groups to attend.

We'd love to have you join us to showcase your products, see what's available in our region, connect with other small businesses, and learn more about the market opportunities available to your food business.

[customize for audience – change language for buyers or retailers as necessary]

Full event registration will be announced on (date) and can be found at (website, office locations, etc.).

Make sure to include event partners/sponsors names/logos, including any buyers who may be attending if they are to be counted as sponsors or partners.

Make sure to include RSVP instructions.

Full Event Registration Flyer / Letter

Join us for a Mini Food Show (or other event title) and support local foods!

This event connects our regional farm and food producers with wholesale, retail, and restaurant buyers, and this year, we're opening the doors to consumers and residents in our community, too!

Location

Date

Private Showing Time

Public Event Time

RSVP Link:

Admission Cost, if any

We hope you'll join us to learn more about the food makers and farmers in our region, help them connect with other small businesses and consumers who want their products, and support the retailers, wholesale buyers, and restaurants who make the effort to support our local food economy! (Include any additional local providers here, such as breweries or restaurants, who may also be showcased.)

If you're interested in sponsoring this event, or attending as a buyer or vendor, please contact [staff assigned to manage vendors and buyers, include both phone and email options].

For additional information, please visit (your website link) or click [HERE](#) (actual link to registration form).

REGISTRATION DEADLINE:

If you need additional assistance, please contact (your agency information here). Include hosts/sponsors, along with their logos, as needed.

Include sponsor logos and website information!

Buy Local Trends & Data Points

Use data and research in your invitations to restaurants, wholesale buyers, and research – demonstrate key reasons that local food is important to your economy and show them direct benefits for them to attend.

- Research indicates that desire to support local business is one of the key drivers in choosing a grocery store for most consumers (Tsoodle et al., 2011).
- Market trends indicate that consumers increasingly demand to know where their food comes from and how it is produced. This trend transcends gender, education level, geographic location, and income level. However, despite a desire to buy locally grown products, convenience remains a key determinant of where people buy their groceries.
- The Mintel firm conducted a survey to better understand American consumers' interest in buying local products. The conclusion of that research is that although Americans are "drawn to the selflessness of living local" their decision whether or not to purchase local items ultimately comes down to convenience. "Consumers want to purchase local products – namely the local produce that they tend to most associate with their own health – but they don't want to go out of their way to get them" (Grabowski, 2013).

Consumers are demanding locally grown and produced goods for a variety of reasons:

- Research indicates that "private factors," which include freshness, quality, health benefits and food safety, are the primary factors motivating people's local food purchases (Grabowski 2013, Bond et al 2008, Nurse & Thilmany 2010, Ostrom 2006, and Schneider & Francis 2005).
- However, "public factors" are of primary significance to a smaller group of local food shoppers and of secondary (but still significant) importance to the group most concerned with private factors. "Public factors" include "giving back to the community," "keeping dollars in the community," "supporting small farmers," "farmers receiving fair returns," and various other social and environmental issues (Bond et al 2008, Nurse & Thilmany 2010, Ostrom 2006, Schneider & Francis 2005).

Benefits for Retailers

Additional research points or statistics may be useful when talking with retail or wholesale buyers. These are taken directly from the NCGT Assessment for Hosting Successful Meet the Farmer Events (2013), which is linked on the last page of this guide.

It is no surprise that the degree to which a grocery store is engaged with the local community has been shown to increase loyalty to the store and shoppers' perception of the higher value of the goods, which leads to increased patronage and a willingness to pay a premium for goods (Landry et al., 2005).

Community engagement, or the extent to which a store has connections to and interacts with the community, is important for creating trust between people and supermarkets in locations where people have previously mistrusted chain stores or corporations.

Creating community engagement is a function of knowing the community well, bringing the community together, and creating a reciprocal relationship with the community. For example, when stores show customers how buying local products from their store affects the local economy and community, or when they provide a place of congregation for community members such as by offering cooking classes, a sense of community is created.

Meet the Farmer events provide the grocery chain a chance to create a sense of community and are therefore important to their strategy of improving their position as a family- and community-based grocery store.

Customers have the opportunity to meet the people who grow their food or produce their favorite sauce or spread, enforcing the idea that the stores consistently offer products that support the local economy and community.

Additionally, some studies have shown that when customers are able to taste local products before they purchase them they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards them and pay a higher price for them (Avitia et al., 2012).

- NCGT Assessment for Hosting Successful Meet the Farmer Events (2015)



For more data on the demand for local produce and other items, you can also check out the Food Manufacturing Institute at www.fmi.org.

Adding a Direct-to-Consumer Element

You may choose to add a direct-to-consumer element like a public food show at the end of the event. This portion opens up the show to members of the public, community partners, and others interested in supporting their local food system. Sometimes, vendors can provide samples and sell small orders of product directly to consumers during this time, although this is dependent on your local jurisdiction's permitting requirements for food sales.

These types of events can provide visibility for the vendors among their local community, but should be carefully planned and considered depending on your ultimate goals for the event.

- Will the public element have an admission cost to help cover the costs of the event?
- Is the public food show attractive to the vendors, or would they prefer to focus on their work with buyers?
- Is there a need for increased visibility about local food producers in your community, or a policy or project that is driving attention to the matter? If not, it may be hard to ensure that the audience for the public portion of the food show will make it worth the vendors' time to be there.

References

Many of the references mentioned in this guide were originally published in “Holding Successful Meet-the-Farmer Events,” a 2013 research report from the NC Growing Together Project authored by researchers from the Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention and the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. (See next page for links to research and resources.)

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More Information



NC GROWING TOGETHER

Connecting Local Foods
to Mainstream Markets

This guide and its associated resources are available from NC Growing Together, an initiative of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS). CEFS is a partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. For more information, please visit www.cefs.ncsu.edu.

Associated Research & Resources

[NCGT Holding Successful Meet the Farmer Events Assessment](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NCGT-Holding-Successful-Meet-the-Farmer-Events-10-20131.pdf)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/NCGT-Holding-Successful-Meet-the-Farmer-Events-10-20131.pdf>

Additional Resources for Community Food Advocates

[NCGT & UNC-Chapel Hill Research on Grocery Retail Settings \(2013-2015\)](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/research/unc-chapel-hill-grocery-consumer-demand-project/)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/research/unc-chapel-hill-grocery-consumer-demand-project/>

[NCGT Guide to Hosting Grower-Buyer Networking Events](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/ncgt-resources/ncgt-grower-buyer-connections-event-planning-guide/)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/ncgt-resources/ncgt-grower-buyer-connections-event-planning-guide/>

[NCGT Resources for Community Advocates](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/for-educators-advocates-students/)

<https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/for-educators-advocates-students/>

ALL NCGT RESOURCES ARE ARCHIVED AT [HTTPS://WWW.NCGROWINGTOGETHER.ORG/](https://www.ncgrowingtogether.org/).

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