

Farm Stop School: Business Success

Ensuring an enticing product mix all year round

Farmer relationships: initial outreach, building and maintaining mutual trust

Kathy Sample Co-Founder, Argus Farm Stop

After The Harvest Conference
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OBJECTIVES

- Learn how to engage with producers and get them on board and in the door
 - Establish and maintain mutual trust
- Learn about how we curate and brand a wide variety of local products through every season
 - Role of produce manager
- Identify where and how to market your business and connect to your food community



We choose consignment in our model.

- It preserves the **direct producer-consumer** relationship
- This commits us to be educators and care for products, much like being a vendor at the farmers' market
- It reinforces the message that “this was locally grown, by farmers you know”
- Gives the farmer as much money as possible
- By not purchasing the product, there is no cash outlay



Norman Holtz,
produce farmer in Ida MI

Delivering to Argus



At his booth at Eastern Market in Detroit

Defining Local

“as local as possible”

- We try very hard to stay **within the state of Michigan.**
- Fresh produce and meat is all Michigan grown
- Prepared foods are made by Michiganders in Michigan, with encouragement to use local ingredients
- We personally know our producers
- There are considerations and exceptions:
 - Location
 - Product variety
 - Relationships



What Products Are In Your Store?



- Consumers expect a robust shopping experience
- You won't be "everything", but you **have to be enough**
- Selection needs to be interesting and beautifully curated
- Educating the consumer is critical, because your business model will be different than where they usually shop
- We have focused on a combination of products that support our mission and high-quality customer service

Farm Stops provide year-round income for farms and extend seasonality

Yellow  = “extended season”

Purple  = “storage”

- Farm Stops have reliable & comfortable year-round shopping
- Expanded use of cold weather growing and storage techniques
- 36% of Argus annual produce sales take place from January - May.
- Expanded retail outlets encourage new products

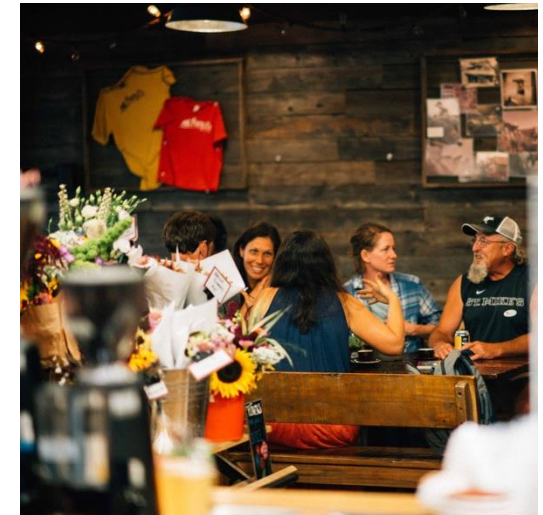
MICHIGAN PRODUCE AVAILABILITY

CROP	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Arugula												
Asian Greens (Mizuna, Pac Choi, Tatsoi, etc.)												
Asparagus												
Beans, Fresh (Green or Wax)												
Edamame (Green Soybeans)												
Beets												
Broccoli												
Brussel Sprouts												
Cabbage												
Carrots												
Cauliflower (inc. Romanesco)												
Celery												
Chard and Beet Greens												
Corn												
Cucumbers												
Eggplant												
Garlic												
Greens (Beet, Collard, Mustard, Turnip)												
Kale												
Kohlrabi												
Lettuce (Leaf, Iceberg, Romaine, Bibb, etc.)												

Source: MSU Center for Regional Food Systems

“Typical” MI farmer’s market season

The shopping experience must be enjoyable and different to a “big box” experience



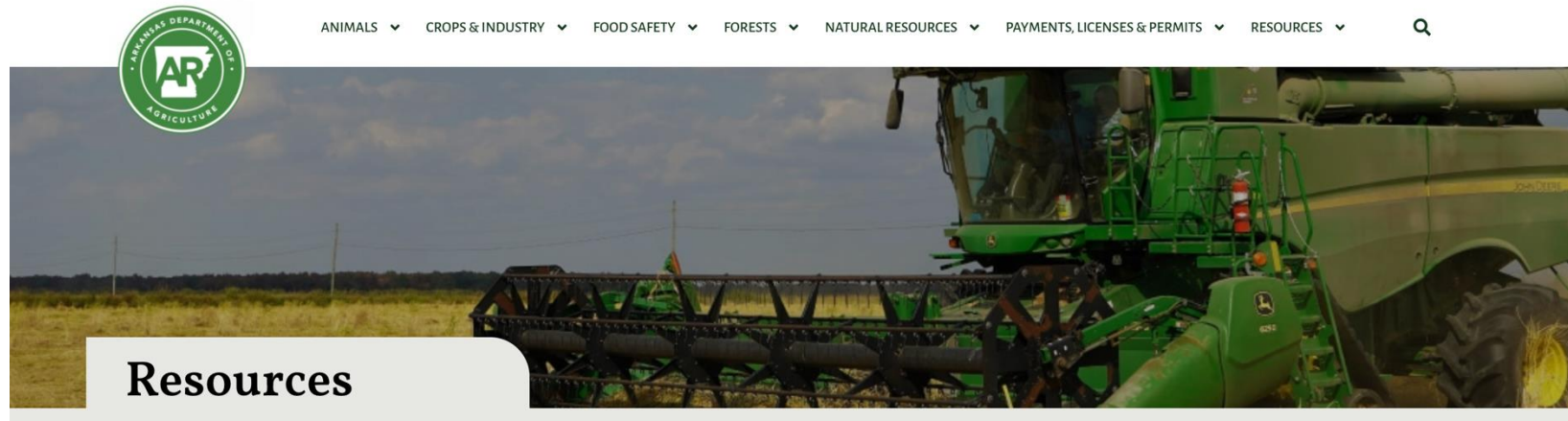
Finding Your Food Producers

- Go to farmers' markets (online too!)
 - Fresh produce, prepared foods, locally made or grown
 - Arkansas Dept of Ag has support materials:
<https://agriculture.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/FarmersMarketGuidelines-7-28-25.pdf>
 - Farmers' market websites (they often list their producers)
 - We attend the annual Making it in Michigan conference where local producers are featured
 - Farmers can introduce you to other farmers
- Notice *trucks*. Who is distributing food in your area?

Many of your area's best farms might not be visible.
Some farms might *only* sell on-farm or online.



Arkansas Department of Agriculture



[Agriculture](#) / [Resources](#) / [Programs](#) / Farmers Market Programs

Resources

- About
- Concerned Citizen Feedback
- Disaster Assistance
- Farm Stress & Mental Health
- Market Reports

Farmers Market Programs

Each year, the Arkansas Department of Agriculture (Department) partners with Farm Credit to help the state's farmers markets through the Arkansas Farmers Market Promotion Program and Arkansas Farmers Market Bag Program. These programs are administered by the Department and sponsored by Farm Credit to help promote local community-based farmers markets with multiple vendors.

Arkansas Farmers Market Promotion Program

The Arkansas Farmers Market Promotion Program, which is administered by the Department and sponsored by Farm Credit, continues to

When speaking with potential producers:

- Be curious.
 - What are they growing?
 - Where are they selling?
 - What are *their* future business plans?
 - What are they most proud of growing?
 - What would they like to add to their list?



Karlene Goetz, Riga, MI

- Invite producers to a group discussion or meet individually
 - Tell them your story. Make it compelling. Be prepared.
 - Show photos of what you envision
 - Have a ‘pitch deck’ – not too long – describing what you are doing
 - Be able to describe how your business would work and who your customers are
 - Learn who the “thought leaders” are in your farming community and get them on board

Producer Applications



Argus Farm Stop Producer Application

Thank you for your interest in selling with Argus Farm Stop. We are a year-round, all-local Farmer's Market operating on consignment terms with our producers (producers retain ownership of their goods, set the prices, and are paid-out twice a month at 70% of the retail price).

We review applications on a monthly basis. We will reach out to you about the status of your application after the next review.

Producer Name *

What is your Farm or Business called?

Your Name *

Who is our main point of contact for your business?

- Producers *apply* **online** to sell products at our store with an Airtable application that allows us to review easily and generate staff input
 - We accept them based on many qualities
 - We approve *exactly* what types of products they can bring
 - They can easily submit new products for approval
- We ask for business insurance & appropriate licensing
 - Growing practices
 - MDARD license
 - Others (GAP, GAAMP, etc.)
- We do charge shelf rentals; it's about managing producers and their attention to their products
- We highly recommend doing this all **digitally**
- *We review these on a regular basis and provide direct feedback to all – accepted or not.*

Product Selection Considerations



- Ideally, you want three (3) types of each product to have a good mix of:
 - Varieties
 - Producers represented
 - Growing practices (certified organic, organically grown, pesticide free, naturally grown)
- Encourage producers to grow unique varieties and extend their growing season.
- Be aware when producers start bringing new products that were not on their original application (it will happen).
- Understand there are certain difficult seasons to keep your shelves full. You can *rearrange displays to accommodate this.*

Producer Relationships

A good relationship from the start will be rewarded!

- Get to know them. Visit their farm. Take pictures.
- Ask them what they want the customer to know about their products
- When they are delivering, introduce them to customers. Treat them well. (free coffee helps!)
- Make sure your relationship is honest, frank, and two-way. Don't set false expectations.
- Check in periodically.



Producer Relationships

5 Key things

1. Make a good **connection** with key individual(s) for regular communication
 - Your farms are your **customers** when it comes to interactions
2. Define **expectations** – have clear guidelines and understand their needs too
3. Establish clear **schedules** and communications methods, make sure everyone is connected efficiently
4. Establish pricing and communicate payment **schedules**
5. Be **partners** in promotion and events, and be supportive of each other



Marketing – making yourself known to the community and individual customers



Early on: Build Community Awareness



- Pre-opening community buzz
 - Signage and fliers
 - Start an e-mail list – a must-do!
 - Get to know your neighbors
 - Your site should show that something is happening!
- Establish an online presence
 - ✓ Website
 - ✓ Social media: Instagram and FB
 - ✓ Google Business – a must-do – maintain it
 - ✓ ~~Yelp~~ – \$\$\$ and not worth it unless your community uses it a lot
 - ✓ Local food listing sites – somewhat worthwhile
 - ✓ Local Harvest
 - ✓ Taste the Local Difference
 - ✓ Edible WOW



Engage Your Community

- Attend neighborhood fairs and events
- “Like” your producers, neighbors, and allies on social media
- Interact with school programs, camps with educational events

Some ways we network:

- Michigan Food & Farming Systems
- Making it in Michigan Conference
- Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference
- Taste the Local Difference
- Michigan Farmers' Market Association
- Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance



Keeping Your Customers Engaged

Having a website is not *enough*

- Produce an e-newsletter
 - Information that entices customers to store
 - Not too frequently, learn your customer's tastes
- Constantly be involved, contributing, and networking in your community
- Exterior and interior signage
 - Consumer education
 - What's In Season
- Host events – your own and others
- Word of mouth is your best friend
- Thoughts on customer loyalty programs



Keep Your Customers Engaged

Things that we do:

- A quarterly monthly-ish e-newsletter
- Instagram
- Facebook
- Google ads (now experimenting)
- Joint programming with related businesses
- University affiliations
- Work with the City on initiatives
- Advertising periodically in a key “paper:
- In-store tastings and pop-ups
- Donations to key organizations
- Notes to big or frequent customers



Customer engagement examples



Engaging passersby



Clear messaging



Tabling at events

Going to classes and organizations to talk about the impact on farms



Merchandising – once a customer is IN your market, the products need to be appealing!

- Layout is critical to making sure the consumer sees the things you want them to see!
- Constant improvements are necessary
 - Interior and exterior
- Product placement is really important
- Seasonality may require rotation
- Get objective feedback from experienced friends/professionals



No Signage? **No Sale!**

Simple, durable, laminated

- Easy to update pricing w Expo markers

Include:

- Producer
- Product Name
- Price

Consider including producer logos, locations, and growing practices



Pine Ridge Organics

Homer, MI



Ann Arbor

Regenerative Ranching and Maple Sugaring in the heart of the Huron River watershed.

Producers

- Recruitment Process
- Online Application – make it easy
- Develop Trust and Agreement
 - Customer service important
- Transparency
- Regular and Clear Communication
- Culture of Great Service
- “Going the Extra Mile”



The Produce Manager is important



Dani, Produce Manager

- Knows the producers, understands the mission
- Knows produce
- Is good at customer communication
- Curates variety and quantities of products
- Keeps in regular communication with producers
 - Gives feedback to producers, good and bad news
- Resident “expert” on all products
- Oversees displays of all products
- Monitors refrigeration equipment
- Manages ordering of products

Preserving Producer Identity



The
consumer
wants to
know

Preparation: Managing the Mix



- Appoint key staffers as complexity increases
 - continuum from one to several people
- Produce Manager
- Dry Goods
- Frozen
- Specialty
- Meat
- Non-food

*Active curation in each area – **proactive** vs. passive work

Communication Essentials



- Orders, Inventories, and Checks
- Don't lose track
- Touch everything on a periodic scale: minutes, hours, days, weeks, months
- Organize "best" communications for both us and producer
 - Phone, text, email, in-person, mail

Ordering Products

Ideally, you want (~3) producers for each product to have a good mix of:

- Varieties
- Growing practices
- Price points

Managing fairness in ordering

- Size of business/farm
- Reliance on Argus for revenue
- Seniority
- Quality
- Uniqueness



Wholesale Relationships

One-on-one Independents & Distributors



Why?

- For some products, it is the only option
- To fill gaps in local production
- To offer a different variety or price point
- To complement other products
 - Heavy cream during berry season
 - Mozzarella during tomato season
- To offer something you couldn't otherwise
 - Some producers simply will or cannot do consignment

Keeping Shelves Full Year-round

Summer/Fall

- Height of variety and harvesting
- Local producers are growing in abundance
- Requires constant attention and maintenance
- Lesser wholesale presence; true mission focus

Winter/Spring

- Make sure it always looks full
 - Larger displays of fewer items
- Do more frequent targeted outreach to your producers
- Utilize wholesale accounts for more variety

Giving Great Customer Service: Producer Relationships are Key to Success



Problem Solving

- Brings too much or not enough product
 - Brings products you don't think you can sell
 - Brings products of questionable quality
 - Product is not traceable to Michigan
 - Producer stops growing certain products
 - Inventory doesn't match sales records
-
- Be swift and honest in resolution. Look for win-win.
 - Always remember, the whole purpose is to help local producers succeed
 - Go the Extra Mile