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Fork2Farmer: Enabling Success of Small Farms Through Partnerships with Well-Known Chefs and the Tourism Sector

Abstract

A team of economic development, local foods, and tourism specialists from North Carolina Cooperative Extension is pursuing an initiative titled Fork2Farmer. The goal is to increase visits to local farms and diversify farm income by leveraging the high visibility of well-known farm-to-table chefs who support local small farms. To do this, those involved in the initiative are (a) producing and disseminating short videos about collaborative relationships between chefs and the farmers who supply their restaurants and (b) developing educational programs to facilitate agritourism microentrepreneurship and to nurture and leverage farmers' partnerships with chefs.

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Introduction

The local food movement is transforming the agriculture and food services sectors. This is particularly true in North Carolina, where both the number of farms selling directly to consumers and the value of agricultural products sold have increased (see Figure 1). The model of using locally sourced produce, protein, and dairy is trending in the high-end restaurant sector, resulting in a proliferation of chefs with notable awards and business success. It is also, however, well documented that small farms face many challenges for long-term survival (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). The new markets that are emerging as a result of relationships between chefs and farmers offer hope that some of the challenges faced by small-scale farmers may in time be diminished. The critical questions, therefore, for all local food lovers and community developers are as follows: How do we encourage sustained business partnerships? How do we leverage these relationships to build farm viability?

Figure 1.

North Carolina Direct Sales Change from 2007 to2012

| | |
|---|------------|
| Number of farms selling directly to individuals for human consumption | 21% |
| Value of agricultural product sales directly to individuals for human consumption | 9% |

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2012). *2012 Census of Agriculture*. Retrieved from <http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>.

The concept for the Fork2Farmer project emerged from the cross-pollination of ideas from economic development, local foods, and tourism Extension specialists. Widespread public interest in local foods is undeniable, but the proportion of the population who visit farms for leisure is very small. Accordingly, we developed the Fork2Farmer project to leverage the visibility of celebrated chefs and their collaborative relationships with local small farms to generate public interest in visiting farms. Another aim of the project is to help us understand and facilitate the needs of small-scale farmers (Muhammad, Tegegne, & Ekanem, 2004) embracing farm visits as a means of revenue diversification. Our tourism Extension work with small farms across the state has revealed that many small-scale farmers report high interest in receiving visitors as a strategy for earning additional income from the visits, selling farm products to the visitors, enhancing customer relationships, and even involving guests in some helpful farm work (Kline, Cardenas, Leung, & Sanders, 2007). Thus, the Fork2Farmer project was born to enhance farmer-consumer connections and increase farm viability through potential new income.

Raising Public Awareness

A critical component of the Fork2Farmer project is documenting collaborative relationships (Diamond et al., 2014) between select chefs and the farmers who supply them. Creating videos that highlight these connections both strengthens the relationships and increases public awareness of these vital connections. The foundation of our course of action for planning, producing, and disseminating these films is the Fork2Farmer engagement process described in Table 1.

Table 1.
Fork2Farmer Engagement Process

| Task | Stakeholders |
|---|---|
| Secure funding and support | Fork2Farmer lead team, county Extension offices, county tourism directors |
| Contact and discuss project with local partners to secure local support and match funding | |
| Select chef and farmer | Fork2Farmer lead team, county Extension director, county tourism director |
| Identify potential chefs and farmers in | |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>the region and discuss best case for film with local partners</p> | |
| <p>Recruit chef and farmer</p> <p>Connect with selected chef and farmer, and obtain commitment of time and willingness to be featured</p> | <p>Fork2Farmer lead team, county Extension director, county tourism director</p> |
| <p>Shoot film</p> <p>Spend 3 days on each site, filming in the restaurant and on the farm</p> | <p>Fork2Farmer lead team, farmer, chef, digital media company</p> |
| <p>Produce film</p> <p>Coproduce the film about the partnership through an iterative process of editing and feedback</p> | <p>Fork2Farmer lead team, digital media company</p> |
| <p>Disseminate film</p> <p>Share the film widely through social media and embed on websites of all project stakeholders</p> | <p>Fork2Farmer lead team, tourism retail company, chef, farmer, county Extension office, county tourism office</p> |

A key output of the project is a docuseries consisting of a set of short (3- to 7-min) professionally produced videos highlighting local Fork2Farmer partnerships. In most counties, the local tourism development authority provided matching funds to cover video production. The various stakeholders then actively exhibit these videos to the public, with the goal of celebrating local foods partnerships in the region and encouraging visits to small farms. To date, we have developed six videos, which can be seen at North Carolina Cooperative Extension's Local Foods YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1CvA6Q2fgG_Dxf_IVubgbJk2b9QIJKUO). All the videos accumulated more than 500 complete views after their first 2 months on YouTube, and the organic reach of related social media posts regularly reaches 2,000 Facebook viewers and more than 10,000 Twitter impressions. Additionally, we have observed that the reach of our communications about this project is exponential when reshared by the celebrity chefs and tourism offices.

Public-Private Partnerships for Fostering Farm Visits

A primary goal of the Fork2Farmer project is to enable small-scale farmers to generate additional income from farm visits. We partner with a tourism online retail company to convert this public awareness into farm visits. The tourism online retail company, People-First Tourism Inc., agreed to create a webpage for each chef/restaurant, listing local farms that supply the restaurant and accept visits. The Fork2Farmer page advertising all related experiences is www.peoplefirsttourism.com/fork2farmer. Companies that are part of the tourism sharing economy, such as People-First Tourism Inc., seek a return on their involvement by charging small fees to tourists when they make bookings.

In addition, each participating county's tourism development authority is actively promoting Fork2Farmer experiences. The tourism development authorities promote the networks of farmers providing hands-on experiences, and occasionally they promote events combining a farm visit with a meal at a corresponding restaurant. Most notably, before we began working with participating county tourism divisions, some tourism directors reported constraints in using time and funds to promote visits to farms that did not generate bed tax. As a result of their participating in the Fork2Farmer project, those county tourism division offices have reported a greater ease in working with agritourism microentrepreneurs because they can promote them in association with the local celebrity chefs.

Conclusion and Call to Action

Early program impacts show increased partnership between tourism and Extension offices in counties where pilot development of the project has occurred, with the two entities collaborating both to generate the necessary funds for the film and to involve small farms in the local food and tourism economies through their connections with notable local chefs. Additionally, the creative filmmaking process curated by the Fork2Farmer lead team has unearthed unique angles on each of the featured partnerships. It has also integrated the input of county partners and the journalistic freedom and technical expertise of our digital media partner.

In light of the encouraging early feedback from the pilot development of the project, we are collecting baseline data on the farmers' agritourism self-efficacy and revenues from agritourism so that we can monitor project impact on these critical indicators. Additionally, we are identifying educational programs for facilitating agritourism microentrepreneurship and conceptualizing new programs about ways to nurture and leverage partnerships between chefs and farmers.

Lastly, our interactions with partners and participants have made us redefine the relationship between the local food movement and small-town revitalization. We have observed that creative, risk-taking, well-resourced chefs are stubbornly opening their restaurants in economically depressed communities, establishing partnerships with willing local farmers with the help of their local Extension offices, and enabling the development of endogenous tourism growth sought by the local tourism office. As we continue our journey through the refinement and development of the Fork2Farmer project, we invite our Extension colleagues to adapt and replicate our efforts and to contact us with questions or contributions.

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