

Supper

Farm-to-Table

A How-To Guide By Daja Gombojav

It was 2012 and Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution Day was coming up. My best friend, Kristina, and I had just launched a food centered business called The Provision Room. We decided we would do something to celebrate this day as a kick-off event. We sat at a small family-owned sustainable organic winery sipping the most sublime grenache we have been privileged to taste, and in that reverie we dreamed up the entire menu. We served a four-course farm-to-table garden supper for 20 local pastors and church leaders (encouraging them to support local food movements and community gardens), sourcing everything from produce and meat, to the wine and cheese within a 100-mile radius. Although we were already "foodies," it was then that we fell in love with farm-to-table.

Since that time, I have been blessed to make farm-to-table suppers ranging from the intimate garden party to hundreds at community suppers. It is always a beautiful experience that I find

to be fairly transformative as I interact with food from field to fork, dialoguing with farmers, ranchers, and growers about their processes and hearing about what is exciting them at the moment, taking those bits of excitement and beauty and working them onto the plate. All these things go far beyond "party planning." It crosses over into what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God."

DEFINING FARM-TO-TABLE

The term "farm-to-table" has been getting a lot of traction in foodie circles and in some ways has started to be co-opted by the larger market. In the same way that the words "natural" and "fresh" have lost some of their oomph, because they are so loosely defined, farm-to-table requires some definition.

What do I mean when I say "Farm-to-table"? I mean, that as much as possible every major ingredient on the table has been

sourced directly from the farm without the middleman of distribution companies, supermarkets, or other commercial vendors. In addition, it means that the food was produced or grown locally. Therefore, even if I could directly source zucchini from Mars, that wouldn't be farm-to-table. Farm-to-table implies a relationship between chef and farmer, a relationship that extends to the diner. Farm-to-table requires integrity to care where the food comes from, how the food was produced, that the farmer is receiving equitable compensation, that the land and/or animal is being stewarded with care, and that the transition from farm to table was made as locally as possible.

This is a stringent standard, but not one without grace. Moreover, it is more doable than it first appears. Often those at my table are surprised to learn the variety and quality of food grown a stone's throw from the supper and obtained easily and affordably.



HOW-TO

So, you want to host a farm-to-table supper for your community, parish, or family and friends? How do you begin?

1 Pick a date for your supper with enough time for planning. Because a farm-to-table supper is more than just throwing together a party with a trip to a big-box store, you may need to have extra time for planning, especially if your party is large. Depending on the climate where you live, what will be available and at what quantities at the time of your supper may vary greatly.

2 Decide on a goal budget and decide how you will cover the cost. This could mean that you ask for donations from diners, sell tickets, have a fundraiser, or find a sponsor—be it with the parish, local non-profit or other community organization. While sourcing our farm-to-table suppers, we have often been able to obtain amazing deals from lo-

cal growers by buying in large quantities and sometimes having food donated. However, I always operate on the premise of paying farmers a market price. It's hard work farming, and a workman is worthy of his hire. I never go in expecting a hand-out.

3 Contact local farmers, ranchers, and growers. Think broadly. You can look to larger farms, but also to the community garden at a local school, to the backyard gardens in your neighborhood, to the 4-H kid raising his first lamb. Sometimes food can be sourced from unlikely places. Proverbs 13:23 tells us that there is food in the gardens of the poor, but because of injustice it goes to waste. Try to reach out to those places and people. If a relationship can be established it can be a blessing to all.

When you contact them find out what they are growing and about what they are most excited about. Maybe they are trying a new variety of spinach that no one else is

selling or maybe breeding a heritage line of pigs that has almost been phased out. Make a list of what is growing and where. Cast that broad net initially. Think of multiple categories as well—fruit, vegetable, herbs, meat, dairy, and grains. You may be surprised what is available in your own neighborhood!

Check in with your farmers and growers leading up to the event. For the farm-to-table supper I prepare for the Catholic Rural Life Festival in Farmington, Maine in mid September, I contact the growers in early summer initially. But, I check back with them later in the summer. And again a few weeks before the event. Maybe they were hoping for a big crop of butternut squash, but turns out the acorn squash did much better that year. Keep your list of what is available current. This will prevent you from having to redesign your menu too many times.

4 Design your menu around what is available, rather than the reverse. Conven-

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tional dinner planning has one making a menu, then finding those ingredients. Farm-to-table makes you work in reverse. Take stock of your available produce, meat, dairy, and grains. See what things combine logically. An old chef's rule of thumb is that, "if it grows together, it goes together." Tomatoes and peppers? Naturally best friends. Beans and corn? Happiest together!

This can sometimes take some experimenting. I keep a journal in my kitchen. When I put something together that works, I make a note of it. So, when I need ideas of what might work, I can refer back to it and not rely solely on my memory. Some ideas may never see a large-scale event. But having jotted it down may help later to inspire an idea that does make it to the table.

It can be helpful to talk with the growers for suggestions, especially if the ingredient may be slightly unusual or new to you. I remember when a farmer offered me a large box of kohlrabi. At the time I was unfamiliar, so what did I do? I asked. I tasted. I went by their recommendation of how they have been enjoying it. Turns out a slaw from it with cilantro and lime is out of this world.

If you are asking people to reserve a spot at your table or to purchase a ticket, it can help

greatly to publicize your tentative menu. Just remember the "tentative" part (see the next point) and make no promises. Diners may get excited to see what you will do with potato curry dumplings with elderberries or what peach-basil trifle will taste like or jump at the chance to have duck confit with roasted beets.

5 Be flexible. As the pithy saying goes, "Blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape." This is very true. You may have had your heart set on lettuce, but at the last minute an early frost killed off the last of the lettuce. You will have to switch things up! Look back at your list of what farmers have available. That hearty kale might still be great and your salad just took a turn for the trendy! Be flexible, let go of previous plans, and move forward with joy. As the legendary Julia Child proclaimed, "No matter what happens in the kitchen, never apologize."

6 Enlist help. Contrary to what you might surmise from competitive cooking shows, cooking (and the end result of eating) is a communal event. It is not something any one person can be a superstar about. Farm-to-table affirms this because of the chef's direct connec-

tion to farmer. The preparation of the meal takes the same kind of character. Invite others—be it family members, neighbors, parishioners, or community members to help you. Every year at our Catholic Rural Life Festival, a community of moms come together and help prep the farm-to-table meal, the parish bread guild, comprised of parish bakers and Father Paul, bake the bread, teenagers from the community wait on the tables, the Knights of Columbus help with clean-up, and the list goes on. It is truly an all-hands-on-deck experience. And through the act of serving together, we bond. We learn to love one another better. We learn to participate in this redemptive act together. And our capacity for joy increases.

Chef and Presbyterian pastor Francis Foucachon writes in his book *Food For Thought and Thoughtful Food*, "...closeness didn't happen in a vacuum. It was build up over years of loving fellowship, communion, and communication—and much of that happened around the table at mealtime... Discussions, sharing, and learning happen naturally when you eat with someone. Eating together is a communal activity. Doing something together helps to dissipate potential tension and nervousness with people

you are just getting to know.”

7 Slow down. Sometimes simply by the nature of feeding a large quantity of people we can fall prey to the pseudo-virtue of efficiency. But, farm-to-table eating is about connection and not about efficiency. When possible, I like to roll out farm-to-table food in multiple courses. This by its very pace forces out pragmatism and restores the principle of cherishing those with whom are sharing the meal and appreciation of what is on the plate. This can be simple: Appetizer, Main Course, Dessert. Or this can be more detailed: Bread, Soup, Salad, Main Course, Cheese Course, Dessert, Digestif. Wherever your meal falls on this spectrum, the important thing is not to rush, but to savor.

In staying true to the principle of food and community, do not underestimate preparing the table. Tables themselves are of divine origin. God himself “prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies.” (Psalm 23) In the book, *Radial Hospitality*, Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt write, “The table is a place where you connect and belong. It is a place where the past remains alive in the memory of the very old, and the future sparkles with possibility. It is enchanted. We lean close together, we share a glass, we tell a story. Through this simple human relating, the universe feels as though it is right again... We all have memories of tables prepared for us and those we have readied for others. Some of the memories are from childhood. Others are memories of good friends, of falling in love, or of deeply con-

necting with another human being. Meals are powerful symbols in our memory... Setting a table and making ready for a meal involves preliminary thought and consideration for others... Preparing for another pulls us out of ourselves—that is one of the good gifts of hospitality.”

So, prepare and set the table. Cloths, real dishes and cutlery (never mind the washing up that will have to happen later), candles, flowers, etc. are all touches that take a meal out of the mundane into something that has a sacramental-type meaning. “... understand[ing] that in preparing a table, he is not just setting a place to eat. He is making room for one of God’s children. He is creating a space for a human being, and human beings are sacred. This means you do it right, you pay attention...” (Radical Hospitality)

JOYFUL TRANSFORMATION

Father Paul, parish priest and the driving force behind Catholic Rural Life Maine writes, “One expression of the transformation made possible in Christ is an increased capacity for joy.”

Preparing and sharing in a farm-to-table supper, from the planning, to the execution, to the final clean up, can be a transformative and joy-filled experience that leads us closer into Christ’s vision for our lives and communities. It is one way we can see God’s kingdom come and His will be done, a little picture of the great feast that awaits us in heaven.

