

## **Food for Thought: How Ann Dougherty Wants to Change the World – One Bite at a Time**

After 20 years as a chemical engineer, and a variety of assignments throughout the Midwest, Ann Dougherty decided to start her own company. Her criteria in starting up Learn Great Foods were 1) to keep using her education and experience; and 2) to help the environment. In 2005 she began organizing natural food tours designed to give non-farm folks a closer look at sustainable food systems and healthier food choices. Based in Mt. Carroll, Ill., the business has grown each year, and in August 2008, it won the “Outstanding Agritourism Business Award” at the Illinois State Fair.

In 2005, she was given a Challenge Grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. These grants are intended to assist Illinois companies or startups, demonstrating rapid growth and job creation potential, with projects that will help them move to the next level. Don Henry, the director of the Northwest Region Entrepreneurship Center (NWREC) manages the effort in the 10 counties in Northwest Illinois. He and an award committee review applications and conduct interviews to make the determination on grants in the region. The grants, which must also be used for the project, require a 100 percent cash match by the recipient.

Dougherty said, “Years after the initial grant, I can still rely on Don for good advice about starting up a business. He has such good sense, has seen everything in his years of business, and has referred me to others for further ideas and professional guidance.”

Dougherty’s grant was earmarked for marketing materials. She says she truly valued the amount and the timing. It paid for targeted ads in an upscale travel magazine in northern Michigan and a sustainable foods magazine in the Chicago market. She also used the funds to attend a biennial food workshop in Detroit that gave her tours exposure to a very receptive audience.

While her enterprise is actually self-funded, this \$5,000 boost helped her to become better organized with her marketing plans. In retrospect, Dougherty said, “If you are going for a grant, be very clear about how you are going to spend it. And then apply that same clarity to your own money.”

A native of Farmington Hills, Mich., Ann Dougherty is a warm and friendly woman with expressive hands, a steady gaze and a ponytail of curly ringlets. Her office is sparse and well organized, situated in several rooms in the Campbell Center, a former college campus in Mt. Carroll. The subdued setting is two hours from Chicago, but smack-dab in the rolling hills of prime farm country.

She describes her work as “world-changing,” and says that it feels very good every day to be in this line of work. She recognizes food and water quality and availability as the most significant issues facing the planet—now and in the future.

She coordinates one-day and weekend tours for people who are interested in observing first-hand the operation of sustainable farms. In most instances, they also get the pleasure of preparing or being served these foods in a celebratory meal at the end of the day. It has taken several years to refine the tours, which include about 40 different farmers, livestock growers, vintners, brewers, beekeepers and others who consistently use organic or sustainable farming practices. She also works with a select set of area chefs, who cook and instruct tour members about healthy foods and good eating. “We have great ingredients and talent. I enjoy good relationships with the chefs and food producers—it’s all quite mutually satisfying.”

“The farmers love the tours, but it takes their time—about 30 minutes for a demonstration, and then sometimes an hour for a tasting of the cheese or chocolate or wine. But we bring a passionate audience each time, and everyone enjoys the experience,” she said.

Dougherty splits her year between two main locations, Mt. Carroll and Petoskey, Mich., where she has literally cultivated another set of farmers, producers and chefs to take advantage of that region’s specialties. And now, with confidence and enthusiasm, Dougherty is about to expand to the St. Louis market, with an operation based in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

“It took four years to develop the right group of farm guides and make the right contacts among the farmers in Illinois and Michigan,” said Dougherty. And she expects it will take a while to become as familiar and comfortable with this new territory.

She employs two part-time assistants to oversee the office work—registering tour members and coordinating a seriously crowded calendar that includes special events such as “All Things Chocolate,” “Wild Foods,” and “Go Fish.” But she contracts out a great deal of the associated tasks to extra tour guides, a cookbook editor, a Web site developer, and a team of chefs who work in restaurants in Galena, Stockton and Bloomington, Ill., as well as Monticello, Wis.

Consistent with her efforts to improve the world with sustainability, she minimizes her own paper trail by using business-card-sized handouts at farmers’ markets and demonstrations, guiding people to [www.learngreatfoods.com](http://www.learngreatfoods.com). Her Web site is colorful, educational and inspiring, well organized and thorough. There are careful explanations of each tour and beautiful graphics that show the sumptuous food and farmland.

“We update our Web site weekly as our calendar and offerings change,” said Dougherty. “In our fourth year, I am really focusing on documenting everything better and communicating more effectively.” She said they have mostly received compliments from clients, but recalls one critique that dinged her kitchen in the lower level of Hathaway Hall at the Campbell Center. “We had a good tour and a very enjoyable meal,” said Dougherty, “but this one client was upset that we had fed her in a basement setting.”

That basement kitchen is a happy and practical place for the chefs and clients to learn and cook together. The exposed stone walls and displayed kitchen equipment lack pretentiousness, but instill confidence and whet the appetite. According to Dougherty, her clientele is a real mix of urban, suburban and rural folks.

The people drive their own cars on the tours, led by the tour guide and using maps with each stop carefully marked. “Cell phones don’t always work in this part of the world,” said Dougherty, “so our maps have to do the job. We have made a few wrong turns along the way, but we have never lost anyone!”

Each year, she schedules a few family weekends that include children, but they have not been as well attended as she would have hoped. “This experience is geared more toward adults. We constantly try to assess client expectations. Some people want a lot of discussion on environmentalism; others don’t want so much. The other tour guides and I strive to understand each group’s focus,” said Dougherty.

Her best-attended event ever was a chocolate tour in the fall of 2007, which included 25 “very happy” people. The usual tour size is between eight and 12, according to Dougherty. She explained that it requires a 12-hour day from her to provide a six-hour tour for the visitors. She figures to serve four times as many people in 2008 as she did in her inaugural year, 2005. And the economic impact of her business is multiplied by tourists who stay overnight, even after a one-day tour, and by those who buy food directly from the growers.

Along with the geographical expansion of the enterprise, Dougherty has also launched a FoodBooks series for cooks and/or natural food enthusiasts. Each one is 16 pages long and filled with recipes, photos, stories, conversations with farmers and practical facts. Priced at \$5 each, the current booklet topics include tomatoes, herbs, fish, bison and asparagus. The next set of tour-tested recipes will feature lettuce, beef, eggplant, pumpkin/squash, and mushrooms. The book project began in 2007, and she anticipates producing five books per year.

Learn Great Foods has a 1979 Ford F350 truck which is used to transport the operation from Illinois to Michigan (and soon to Missouri) from season to season. It hauls grills, tables, LGF displays, linens, etc. and office materials in support of this effort. “My real job is to teach, and to increase peoples’ awareness of where

food comes from,” said Dougherty. “It’s a great opportunity for those who appreciate the concepts of natural foods and sustainability.”

On the day of this visit/interview, she was preparing for six guests for a Culinary Escape weekend. Their trip will include visits with producers of chocolate, cheese, beef, shiitake mushrooms, herbs and wine. And their meal will be supervised by Chef Donna Duvall of Food Fancies in Bellevue, Iowa. Ann’s eyes sparkle as she explains that, due to good timing, this group will actually get to pick grapes at the Massbach Ridge Winery in Elizabeth, Ill. Scheduled for 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning, the trip, she admitted, is an optional event, not required of the sleepyheads in the group.

A weekend trip like the one described above costs \$325 per person, and includes the tours, cooking classes, five meals, two nights’ lodging and “a few surprises,” according to Dougherty. The one-day tour and meal costs \$95 per person, or \$35 for teenagers.

The winter tours are not limited so much by the weather, but by people’s busy schedules in November and December, so few tours are on the calendar at that time of year. “The winter tours are slower paced and so comfortable and open. Then is when farmers can take their time and talk about the basics of organic foods,” said Dougherty.

Four years into the enterprise, Dougherty says her happiest days are when the thank-you notes arrive, extolling the food, principles and sheer joy of a tour. She said, “There was one day, when we were written up in the Chicago Tribune (July 13, 2008), when I got calls from family and friends. It was exciting and satisfying.”

On the down side, she says she tries to learn from the occasional dissatisfied customer, realizing that people’s expectations are varied and unique. Luckily, those have been rare compared with the kind notes and gifts from happy customers. After a tour, one client reported, “I really felt refreshed, like I was in another world for six hours.” Others report that they have re-created the recipes from the tour at their own home for family and friends—to great reviews.

In a reflective moment, Dougherty said, “I am not a cook, a farmer or a good driver, but I love this business, which relies on all three.” It is evident through her smile and demeanor that Ann Dougherty enjoys her work and her mission. “My other professional career focused on environmental concerns, she said, “and I see this as an extension of those interests.” And the environment is truly better off, with entrepreneurs like Ann Dougherty—doing well while doing good.