

# green entrepreneurs



## Ann Dougherty, Learn Great Foods

by John Gruidl, Professor, Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University



**Main Service.** Tours of local sustainable farms, complete with cooking classes and gourmet foods

**Business Started.** 2005

**Background.** Environmental Engineer

**Words of Wisdom.**

Entrepreneurs must “stay strong, be careful, and keep moving forward”.

Ann Dougherty is passionate about two things, food and the environment, and she has combined these passions in an innovative company called Learn Great Foods. Taking a cue from the tour business, Ann began with the idea of offering tours of local sustainable farms. Then she added her own unique twist to the business: dynamic cooking classes and delicious gourmet meals.

During a typical one-day tour, participants get a close look at the operations of local sustainable farms, including organic beef and dairy farms, fruit/vegetable farms, wineries, creameries and local coffee roasters. They have a chance to ask the farmers and vintners questions about anything, from growing techniques to ecological issues. Following the tour, a hands-on cooking class is taught by a chef using that day’s fresh farm produce. And participants end the day by dining on the gourmet feast that they have cooked themselves! Ann believes that this type of fun interactive tour is an effective way to introduce people to the connections between sustainable farming, great cooking, and the environment.

Since its inception in 2005, Learn Great Foods has expanded its geographic reach steadily every year. At present, tours are offered in three regions: Northwest Illinois with southern Wisconsin and eastern Iowa; northern Lower Michigan, into the Upper Peninsula; and Southeast Missouri, along the Mississippi River, with Kentucky and Southern Illinois. In 2010, Learn Great Foods will contract with 10 chefs, five tour guides, and more than 60 farms and gourmet shops.

Ann is actually an engineer by training and experience. Although she has extensive experience in chemical and manufacturing engineering, she

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considers herself first and foremost an environmental engineer. She describes her knowledge and interest in the environment as leading naturally to her company’s focus on food. To her, Learn Great Foods is “about having fun with air and water and what better way to do that than through food”.

As Ann reflects on her journey from engineer to entrepreneur, she recalls a class that she took in 1998 while earning a Master’s degree in Manufacturing Engineering at Northwestern University. The entrepreneurship class was taught by the man who had invented a special door handle for Ford automobiles (the late Don Frey) and featured guest speakers who had started their own businesses. Ann found these people inspirational and recalls, “I didn’t realize that I was being recruited to become an entrepreneur myself one day”.

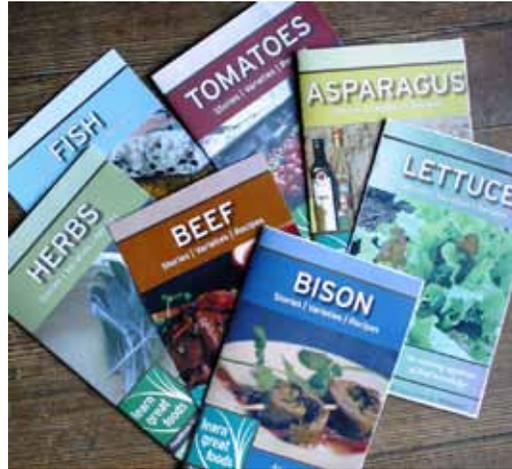
Before launching Learn Great Foods, Ann spent a year investigating her business idea and finding farms that could be featured on her tours. Ann had to be very selective in choosing farms or other sites, realizing that the customer experience at each place had to be engaging and fun. She evaluated the hospitality that could be expressed at the site as well as the appeal of the particular product, whether vegetable, cheese, wine, etc., and the overall aesthetics. The farmers needed to be well-versed in the practice of sustainability, have a story to tell, and be able to teach others about what they do. In other words, they would have to be good teachers and hosts as well as good producers.

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While traveling and visiting a number of farms, Ann fell in love with Carroll and Jo Daviess counties in northwestern Illinois. She decided to locate her business there. The area reminded her of the northern part of Lower Michigan where she grew up, before the explosion of people and development.



By the end of her business' incubation year, she had selected farms to tour and developed her basic one-day tour model: a tour of two farms or producers, a cooking class taught by a gourmet chef using fresh farm produce, followed by a dinner with food prepared in the class.



Her resourcefulness as a small business owner was tested by the economic recession that began in 2008. Very few customers contacted Learn Great Foods from October 2008 to April 2009. It was a disconcerting time. Fortunately, Ann discovered that tour groups originating from banks, corporations, and travel agencies were looking for day trips in the region. The local farm and food tours offered by Learn Great Foods appealed to them. There was even a culinary school from Indiana that wanted a weekend experience. By adapting her business model to target these particular groups, Ann was able to find an additional revenue stream during a difficult time. As a result, the company has now added weekend retreats, tastings and travel vacations to its repertoire of tours.

Learn Great Foods also began compiling food booklets. Each sixteen-page, full-color "FoodBook" features a particular farm product found on the company tours. Current titles include *Eggplant*, *Tomatoes*, *Lettuce*, *Squash*, *Potatoes*, and *Venison*. The tomato booklet, for example, contains tidbits about the history and varieties of tomatoes, delicious fool-proof tomato recipes, and directions for preserving tomatoes after the season. Stories and photographs of the farmers, food artisans and the region are also featured.

The FoodBooks have proven to be popular. In addition to individual sales through online ordering, the company has made several large-quantity sales to farmers markets, CSAs, butchers, and others, providing another revenue stream to the business. Another fifteen FoodBooks and a new product, customized booklets, are in development for 2010 and beyond.

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## ***An impressive aspect of Ann's business is the extensive network and support system that she has developed.***

For the past two years, Learn Great Foods has been managed by a team of three people, including Ann. The team approach allows people to do what they do best for the advancement of the company. The resulting division of labor has enabled Ann to focus on sales, finance, legal issues and insurance, strategy, and public relations.

Learn Great Foods operates year round. Even in the depths of Midwest winters, Ann and her colleagues are marketing the business at farm shows and expos, such as the Iowa Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference. Also, Ann is a frequent speaker at conferences dealing with wellness, organic farming, and agri-tourism.

An impressive aspect of Ann's business is the extensive network and support system that she has developed. Eight people are advisors to Learn Great Foods. They include technical assistance providers to small businesses, such as SCORE and the Northwest Illinois Entrepreneurship Center, a banker, a community builder who works with farmers and agri-tourism, and several entrepreneurs. This advisor group has expertise in many areas relevant to Ann's business.

Due to difficult economic circumstances and Ann's willingness to be flexible, Learn Great Foods has been modified and expanded well beyond Ann's original idea of a farm touring company. With the addition of the FoodBooks and other services, Ann sees her business evolving into a "food knowledge company". As the business is re-imagined, Learn Great Foods will likely be lead into other markets and innovations, as in the new LGF Consulting arm, officially launching in fall of 2010, for example.

Ann's parting advice to entrepreneurs is straightforward, but wise. "Stay strong, be careful, and keep moving forward". To which one might add, "develop strong allies".



*Green Entrepreneurs, Learn Great Foods* is one of a series of case studies conducted with support from the Illinois Council for Food and Agricultural Research. Additional case studies are available on the Institute for Rural Affairs website at [www.IIRA.org](http://www.IIRA.org).



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