

# EADT24

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## Farm Shop owners driving a retail revolution

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INSPIRATION was what farm shop owners were seeking in Ipswich this week as they took part in a new Tastes of Anglia event which it is hoped may become a regular fixture.

Well over 100 of them gathered for the food and farm retail conference, the first regional event of its kind, with the timely title of 'Creating and sustaining a successful farm shop and farm retail business in an economic downturn'.

Farm shops have not been immune from the effects of the global economic gloom, and, as they learnt at the farm shop conference, which was supported by LandSkills East, retailers, including themselves, need to be "great" if they want to succeed rather than founder in these tough conditions.

The two-day event, held at Belstead Brook Hotel, included a warm-up tour of five Suffolk businesses which have really helped to put farm shops, and local food sourcing, on the map in the county.

Farm shop delegates took in Hollow Trees at Semer, near Ipswich, Alder Carr Farm at Needham Market, Suffolk Food Hall at Wherstead, Ipswich, Friday Street Farm, near Saxmundham, and Jimmy's Farm, also at Wherstead, near Ipswich, before settling down to the main course - a series of talks and workshops aimed at stimulating a new way of looking at their business.

The launch at Hollow Trees Farm of a Suffolk Farm Shop Charter - the first of its kind in the country - underlined efforts to drive up standards in the industry.

Tastes of Anglia chair John Cousins said over the next 20 or 30 years, Britain was going to face a major challenge with increasing populations putting pressure on resources. Meanwhile, in this country, we are reducing our self-sufficiency in food, he said, and predicted this could come down to 50%.

"We want people to make more local food and we want to produce more local food," he said.

Tastes of Anglia has got together with seven other regional food organisations to form the English Food and Drink Alliance, working together to promote local food across England. His local example of the movement in action was Hollow Trees Farm, lying just four miles from his home, and "a fantastic example of what can be achieved".

Jonathan Winchester, of Shopper Anonymous, who works with many independent retail food outlets, including in East Anglia, hosted one of the workshop sessions. A lot of the businesses participating in the conference were clients of his already, he said.

He believes it is important for farm shop owners to recognise the important part staff play in making a business successful.

"It's all about leadership and recruitment - how you recruit the right people," he said.

"You want to keep customers in your store for as long as you possibly can. If you engage with them and build a rapport, you are hopefully going to inspire them to stay longer."

Farm shop owners had an advantage in that they knew their products - how to cook them and what to do with them, he said. They could also deliver best value - in that their products have not had to travel far, and are therefore often much fresher.

"If you look at all aspects of retail, the friendliest types of service you'll get are in farm shops because they are foodies, basically. They are very passionate about their product. You definitely get a lot of passion, the challenge is in these economically tough times to get that converted to the bottom line and to get people buying more," he said.

"I think the main positive in this sector, in this room, is the passion and the enthusiasm for promoting the industry and working together."

The main failing within the farm shop sector, he said, was "getting the retail disciplines in place consistently across the shop".

The farm shop charter, he said, was "a great idea".

"Producers are very good at producing a good product. They are not so good about doing the stuff around them," he said. "This will encourage them to get that right."

Labelling correctly was an important part of getting the offer right, he said.

"Retail is detail and that's what it is all about - it's getting the details right," he said. "You should be saying in big, bold, neon letters: 'this is made in Suffolk'."

There to give the keynote speech was retail expert and ex-sportsman Dennis Reid, chairman of Retail Performance Specialists. He asked farm shop owners to consider where they are strong, and where they are weak, and not to settle for second-best.

He asked them whether they had a written game plan for the business, and whether they were instilling in their staff the message that theirs should be the best farm shop in the country and setting targets for them.

"It's moving the numbers that matters," he said.

"This is like being in the SAS. the next-door farm shop will take out you if he can."

Retail is a contact sport, he said.

"You have to make the mental decision that my farm shop is going to be the best," he said. "As (American business magnate) Warren Buffett says, it doesn't matter if there's a recession or not, when the tide goes out, you find out who has not got any clothes on."

It was important to get staff to understand the importance of conversion rates and improving the retail spend per customer, he told delegates, and also to examine how the shop performed when different staff members were on duty.

"Your job is to create the environment where they turn up and do a fabulous job," he said. "Drop a piece of paper on the floor and see how long it stays on the floor."

Selling was "a piece of theatre", he said, and staff needed to be taught what was required of them.

"You try and tell them to be nice to customers, but it's the sales that matter," he said. "Understand you are in the people business."

He added: "It's not their fault, it's yours. Everyone is good. Your job is to make them great. Create the environment where they turn up and do a fabulous job."

Stop trying to save customers money, he said, as they know how to do that already. Be brave and put up prices. It's about 'telling your story', he said, as farm shop owners have a great story to tell.

"People want to belong to your club - give them a reason to belong."

Among the delegates was Chris Reeks, partner in La Hogue Farm Foods, at Chippenham, near Newmarket, who said

both he and wife, Jo, had come away buoyed with new ideas.

“Both Jo and I came away feeling like we had been given a shot of an inspiration drug, and it was also fantastic to mutually share our experiences with other delegates,” he said.

“The farm shop retail sector is pretty challenging at the best of times, so it really is vital that conferences such as these are there for us. I know from conversations, everyone I spoke with shared these views.”

Susie Emmett and Pat Harvey, of Green Shoots Productions, looked at harnessing the power of social and online media, while Paul Castle, business manager at Farringtons Farm Shop, Bristol, which this year scooped the British Champions Local Food award from the Countryside Alliance, shared his knowledge of running a successful business.

Tony Bower, operations director at Tastes of Anglia stressed the importance and value of offering more local products to customers as a means of helping local producers and giving consumers more choice. He pointed to Tastes of Anglia’s own distribution service, which delivers weekly to more than 140 outlets, including farm shops and community stores.

“We were delighted with the attendance at this conference and the support and hospitality of the farmshops they visited on day one. They gained a really good insight into how some of the leading farmshops in the region run and what they offer,” he said.

“The passion and belief of the retailers to bring the very best service and products to their customers, is clear - the conference helped them consider the actions and change they need to make to survive and thrive in a more difficult economic climate.”

Mr Bower believed the event would help farm shop owners to shape successful futures for their farm shop businesses.

“The delegates got so much from the conference. The idea was to provide them with the tools they need and ideas to take away to apply to their own business. The speakers gave suggestions on how to improve their systems, focus on investment in staff, teamwork and getting a better financial understanding of their business. The speakers spoke with passion and used a variety of techniques, including audience participation, to get the message across,” he said.

“Local products are a very important part of retail offering in the region and the demand from customers is still growing. Our service and the activities of Tastes of Anglia, champion the local producer members and the very best food and drink from the region.”

Judy Randon, owner of independent business consultants for rural enterprise Cassava Limited, which worked with Tastes of Anglia and LandSkills East to organise the event, said the conference had given the delegates an “excellent opportunity” to learn from each other through sharing best practice and gathering ideas.

“The atmosphere at the conference was vibrant with many delegates telling me how much they had learnt over the two days and enjoyed meeting many other independent farm and food retail business owners and staff,” she said.

“The great range of subjects delivered by the speakers had truly inspired them to go back to their businesses and implement some of the techniques learnt straightaway. The aim of the conference was to give them key information and systems that they could utilise immediately to make a real positive difference to their bottom line.”

The conference provided a launch-pad for the official unveiling of Suffolk Trading Standard’s Farm Shop Charter.

It’s the first such initiative in the UK, and already, 15 of the county’s farm shops have signed up to it.

They have agreed to monitor the labelling, pricing, weights, measures and origin of all food and drink on sale to demonstrate their commitment to raising food standards.

It follows research in 2010 which found some food products in farm shops lacked the correct label information, or failed to meet clear standards when it came to advertising the source of the produce.

The Trading Standards team is now working with small producers in Suffolk to resolve over 300 wrongly-labelled foods found during the project.

County Councillor Colin Spence, Suffolk County Council’s Portfolio Holder for Public Protection, joined members of the Farm Shop Charter for the official launch of the scheme as they ate locally-sourced food prepared by Hollow Trees staff and cut a cake made by trading standards officers to celebrate the occasion.

Charter members are audited to check they meet relevant criteria. On achieving the standard, shops display a certificate

to give consumers greater confidence about exactly what they can expect from their purchases.

Farm shops who are members of the charter commit to working with Suffolk Trading Standards to work with their Suffolk suppliers to improve food and allergen labelling, check that 'local' food is locally grown or sourced, maintain accurate weighing equipment, display clear and transparent pricing, handle complaints fairly and provide full traceability of food produce.

Councillor Spence said: "I am thrilled we have been able to launch a scheme that will positively affect businesses in our county and enable members of the public to purchase goods with complete confidence.

"I hope that many more farm shops across the county will get in contact with us and become part of a well respected and trusted charter."