



Vermont Fresh Network Annual Report - 2018





About Us

The Vermont Fresh Network is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded in 1996 with the mission of advancing relationships among farmers, chefs, and consumers to grow markets and eat more locally grown food.

The Vermont Fresh Network (VFN) is dedicated to a flourishing local food system for the benefit of our environment, our communities, our health, and the overall strength of the rural economy.

We approach this work through connections between farmers and chefs. Chefs and other culinary professionals play a key role in shaping our daily food lives and they present unique market opportunities for Vermont food producers. We are the primary statewide organization representing this perspective in local food work.

We are a membership-based organization. We offer programs for Partner Members, businesses that meet our local food purchasing requirements, and Supporting Members, any businesses or individuals interested in our mission. In complement to our membership-based benefits, we also offer consumer education, and professional development programs throughout the year that are open to everyone.

Staff:

Helen Labun
Executive Director

Tara Pereira
Communications Director

Zea Luce
Membership Manager

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Farmhouse Group

Doug Paine, Vice President
Hotel Vermont & Bleu

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Farrell Distributing

Annie Rowell, Secretary
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Joe's Kitchen

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Vermont Farm-to-Plate

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Conant's Riverside Farms

John Mandeville
Lamoille Economic
Development Corporation

Susan Reid
King Arthur Flour

Lyndon Virkler
New England Culinary
Institute



Highlights from 2018

22nd Annual Forum Dinner

We welcomed **650** enthusiastic participants to the **VFN Annual Forum Dinner** at Shelburne Farms this August, in an event featuring **22** different chefs and over **35** food producers. Every year we draw a mix of regular participants (for over two decades!) & newcomers discovering this event for the first time. **Save the date of August 4th, 2019** for the best meal of the summer!

A New DigInVT.com

In early 2018 we relaunched the DigInVT.com website - one of the largest **collaborative food & farm tourism** platforms in the country. DigInVT brings together **10** food producer organizations to guide visitors and Vermonters exploring our working landscape & delicious cuisine. Our site visits **more than doubled**, we featured almost **1,000 events** in 2018, grew the **Fresh Feed** to **4,600** subscribers, profiled **537** places, and collaborated on projects including **Vermont Wine Week**, **Open Farm Week**, and the **International Tasting Trail**.

4th Annual Open Farm Week

Open Farm Week brought curious visitors to over **70** events on **41** farms around the state. VFN managed this project through our DigInVT platform. Farmers report this event is a good way to strengthen connections with consumers and explore agritourism as a possible income source. This is a collaborative project that began at the **Farm to Plate Agritourism Task Force**. In 2019, VFN will co-chair this task force, which works to make Vermont a world-class destination for authentic on-farm and farm-related experiences.

International Tasting Trail

VFN worked with UVM Extension, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Vermont Department of Tourism, and representatives from Quebec, New York, and Ontario to launch a first-of-its-kind **International Tasting Trail**. The Vermont portion takes visitors along Lake Champlain and is called the **Lake Champlain Tasting Trail**. VFN has funding in 2019 to develop this trail by engaging farms and eateries that are stops along the way, creating materials to tell the story of agriculture in the Lake Champlain Basin, and continue to build the international system.



Wine Project

Our Vermont wine project has worked with **20 wineries** -- plus distributors, restaurant wine buyers, wine writers, & the wine appreciative public -- to build a stronger market for wines made locally from local ingredients. We sponsored the first **Vermont Wine Week** in March, published guides to Vermont wine tasting and Vermont grapes, offered workshops and a wine pairing event, and led field trips for restaurant groups. Vermont wine sales are growing and our winemakers are garnering national praise -- now is the perfect time to explore Vermont wines.

Conference Program

We launched the **VFN Conference Program** - a program that helps food system professionals attend nationally significant conferences (& other gatherings outside our region), then share what they learned with the larger VFN network. In 2018 participants attended **Slow Food Nations** in Denver, the **FoodTank Summit on Food Waste** in NYC, and the **Food Loves Tech Expo**, also in NYC. We want Vermonters represented in food discussions all across the country!



Professional Development

In 2018 we offered two new resources for professional development, **Marketing Webinars** & the **Fresh Insider** newsletter. The Fresh Insider provides twice-monthly news, announcements, original articles like our series on labeling, and notices from our members. Our webinars are presented live, then followed with recordings, notes, and links to more resources - they are part of our effort to reach all regions of the state with professional development opportunities.

We also expanded our **Annual Meeting** and moved it to the end of January. While we still address core VFN business with members in the meeting, we've added more panels, discussion, and networking, and welcome non-members.

A Growing Network

The Vermont Fresh Network is celebrating its 23rd birthday - and our network is growing! We had **51** new partner members join in 2018, plus a very successful renewal period with an **85%** retention rate. We have **274** partner members, **111** agricultural, **159** culinary, **4** distributors. And through the DigInVT partnership, we have an opportunity to work with over **500** exceptional food businesses across the state. We look forward to working with everyone and continuing to grow in 2019!



Thank you to our sponsors: In 2018-2019, the Vermont Fresh Network Affiliate Partners are Black River Produce, Farrell Distributing, Foley Services, and Hotel Vermont. We also have sponsors and funders for each of our individual projects and major events, see our Financial Report section for the full list.



Relaunch of DigInVT.com

DigInVT.com is a website that began in 2011 when 10 Vermont producer organizations partnered to build the most comprehensive portal for finding authentic food and farm experiences in Vermont. There's a lot happening here and we want to help visitors, travelers, our neighbors, and even ourselves sort through it all to find great experiences. The Vermont Fresh Network leads the DigInVT project and manages the website.

In 2018, with funding from the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, NOFA-VT and the Lamoille Economic Development Corporation, VFN completed a major rebuild and relaunch of DigInVT.com. We made the site mobile responsive, increased the features available, refined its search mechanisms, and updated the look. Today, DigInVT.com users will find:

- Place Profiles for farms, eateries, farmers' markets, retail stores, inns, B&B's, and more. **We will start 2019 with 537 places.**
- A comprehensive events calendar focused on local food and farms. **In 10 months in 2018, we listed 985 events - August had the highest number, with 200 events.**
- Trails library with suggested itineraries that take travelers throughout the state, including the **Lake Champlain Tasting Trail, the Vermont section of the world's longest international culinary trail.**
- My Places folder that lets users create their own trails and share them through social media.
- Original content written for the blog and twice-monthly Fresh Feed newsletter. **We published 60 articles in 2018.**
- Features on signature events and out of the way discoveries, stories that showcase all corners of Vermont. **Other media outlets use DigInVT for story ideas and interesting events to cover, resulting in over 62 media mentions in 2018.**

DigInVT Partners:

Northeast Organic Farming Association • Vermont Farmers' Market Association • Vermont Brewers Association • Vermont Cheese Council • Vermont Cider Makers Association • Vermont Farms! Association • Vermont Fresh Network • Vermont Grape & Wine Council • Vermont Maple Sugar Makers' Association • Vermont Tree Fruit Growers Association • Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets • Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing (advisory)

What Makes DigInVT.com Different

How information is shared: The 10 DigInVT partner organizations pool membership information for places open to the public (at least some of the year). VFN uses this information to build place profiles. VFN staff populate the database with events, original articles, and suggested trails, updating it several times each week. The website contains a relational database, which means it pulls all this information together to guide site users - showing, for example, when a place is also hosting an event or appears on a themed trail, or if someone goes to an event what other events are taking place nearby. It helps everyone explore further.

How information is gathered: A lot of websites rely on “crowd sourced” information, users putting in reviews like on TripAdvisor. Or they rely on the profiled places wanting to spend a lot of time entering and updating information. We draw information from membership renewals that businesses are doing anyway for organizations they’re already part of. And we scour the web every day for content to enhance our listings. It’s time intensive, but it means that we’re up to date and we aren’t relying on a “crowd” - a strategy that often favors cities and penalizes crowd-less rural places.

How we use the platform as more than an online guide: The real strength of DigInVT is the way it can serve as a starting point for bigger projects. It provided the framework to create Open Farm Week, a week of open houses and events on Vermont farms that’s about to enter its 5th year. We are supporting the International Tasting Trail by filling in the Vermont section of the route. We’ve used DigInVT to host a Vermont Wine Week and will be working with the Cheesemakers Festival to use this platform to encourage attendees to spend the full weekend exploring Vermont food. DigInVT.com is a flexible, collaborative tool that can be used to support a range of agritourism and food tourism projects.

Who Uses DigInVT.com

Website use has more than doubled, and for some indicators even tripled, since the new version launched at the end of February. In 2018, we had **32,000 new web visitors**, **130,000 page views**, and our site is now being found by mobile traffic, with **12,800 visitors using mobile devices** (compared to 126 in 2017 - yes, that was a big problem). Our Fresh Feed newsletter had **4,600 subscribers** and total social media followers (VFN & DigInVT, excluding the newsletter) was **17,866**.

We have a mix of in-state and out-of-state users, about **45% from Vermont and 55% from outside of Vermont**. The top non-Vermont states using the site are New York (12% of all visitors), Massachusetts (8.5%), Connecticut (7%) and New Hampshire (4.5%).

Plans for 2019

With the site rebuilding work done, we’re in full marketing mode! VFN Partner Members should be sure to **provide up-to-date information** in member renewal, **follow DigInVT on Facebook and Instagram**, tag your experiences **#DigInVT**, look for special events like **Open Farm Week**, follow the **Fresh Insider** for marketing projects, and let us know about **events** and **stories** to feature. You can also check out quarterly marketing reports posted on the Member Login page at VermontFresh.net.



Financial Report 2018

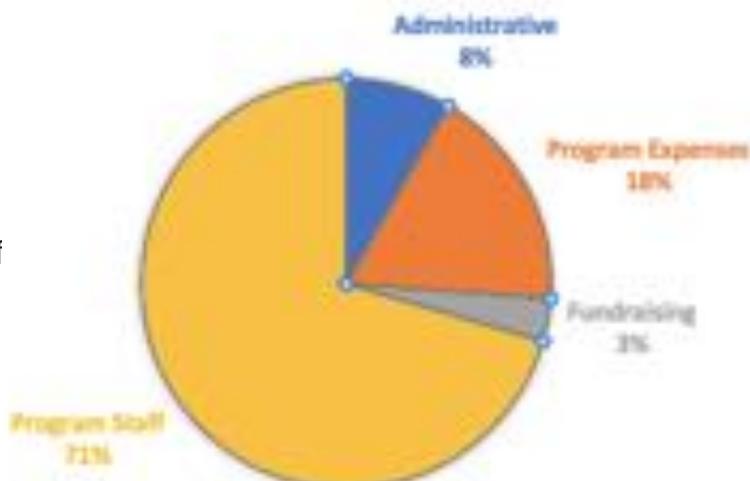
Some notable changes in 2018:

- Both our total membership dues and dues' percent of total income are up slightly (by \$3,860.75 and 5% respectively). Our goal is to see that positive trend continue in 2019.
- Grants are a smaller percent of total income in 2018 than 2017, reflecting primarily the completion of the grant-funded portions of the DigInVT.com rebuild.
- Sponsorships are a larger percentage of income, 30% vs. 24%. This change reflects primarily the addition of new sponsorship opportunities with DigInVT and an expanded Annual Meeting.
- A goal at the start of 2018 was to get back to a point where VFN could employ 3 FTE, which allows us to meet our programming objectives and best serve members. In 2019 we will accomplish that goal.

In 2018, VFN completed two major website projects. We relaunched DigInVT.com, our food and farm tourism platform. We also added a detailed member directory to VermontFresh.net, and updated the way our databases talk to each other to automate more of our membership enrollment process and move the records to a digital format. These investments dramatically improve VFN's marketing tools, offer a platform for more collaborative projects, increase our members' ability to do market research, and allow us to handle more member data with fewer staff hours.



EXPENSES = \$182,122.71



We used grant funding to pay for the lion's share of these website projects. However, they required significant staff time and not all of the development costs were covered by grants. Ultimately we invested \$24,837 from our reserve funds in these assets, which we believe will be an important foundation for our future marketing work.

The Vermont Fresh Network is ending the year with more than 4 months operating expenses in reserves (the recommended reserves level for nonprofits is 3-6 months).

The VFN Board has approved a balanced budget for 2019 that is conservative in its spending plans, giving VFN staff time to focus on getting the best results from the new projects and programs that received investments in 2018.

Major Sponsor & Funders in 2018

Affiliate Partners: Black River Produce, Farrell Distributing, Foley Services, Hotel Vermont

Annual Forum Gold Sponsors: Citizen Cider • Dealer.com • Shelburne Farms • Vermont First • Zero Gravity Craft Brewery

Annual Forum Silver Sponsors: Bluehouse Group • Community National Bank • Front Porch Forum • Gallagher Flynn & Company • Gardener's Supply Company • People's United Bank • Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets • Vermont Creamery • Vermont tent company • Vermont Department of Tourism & Marketing • VT SKI + RIDE

Annual Forum Bronze Sponsors: Cabot Creamery Cooperative • City Market/Onion River Co-op • Hannaford Supermarkets • New England Culinary Institute • New England Federal Credit Union • UVM Extension

Conference Program Sponsors: Butterfly Bakery of Vermont • Chelsea Green Publishing • City Market / Onion River Co-op • Farm to Plate Investment Program • Mad River Food Hub • Sustainable Future Fund

Member Menu Fundraiser Donors: Farmhouse Tap and Grill • Long Trail Brewery

Other Grantmakers: High Meadows Fund • Lamoille Economic Development Corporation • NOFA-VT • Specialty Crop Block Grant Program • Vermont Agency of Agriculture • Vermont Community Foundation • Working Lands Enterprise Fund

