



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

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Family-run restaurant offers big-city flavors with small-town charm

By Liz Stewart and Carlos Barcenas

When Ernesto Estrada Marquez came to the U.S. in 2001, he didn't plan on eventually owning a restaurant. But he took jobs in the food industry after arriving in Chicago, and he discovered he enjoyed it immensely.

Ernesto has worked off and on in the restaurant industry for the past two decades, and now he and his brother, Alejandro, own Palermo Italian Cuisine & Bar, in Jackson, Nebraska. A true family-run business, they operate the restaurant with their wives, Jessica Marquez Velazquez and Dayana Cross Magana.

"My brother was living here in Nebraska before me, and his wife's family had been living here as well," said Ernesto. "So, after talking about and planning to open a restaurant, he thought we



Brothers Ernesto and Alejandro Estrada Marquez opened Palermo Italian Cuisine & Bar in Jackson, Nebraska. With the help of the Center for Rural Affairs, they solidified their plan to buy the building and equipment, opening in August 2022. | Photo by Kylie Kai

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5 tips to promote your farmers market

By Deborah Solie, deborahs@cfra.org

Coordinating a successful farmers market is a rewarding experience that comes with opportunities for growth and learning.

We've gathered advice from five farmers market managers to help you plan for your upcoming market season. From marketing strategies to vendor relationships, these managers are spilling the beans on how they've built, sustained, or improved their local farmers markets.

1. How do you advertise your farmers market?

Social media is a great way to get the word out about your farmers market. Loretta Brenton, market manager of the Red Oak Farmers Market in Red Oak, Iowa, uses multiple forms of advertising, but has found the most success with Facebook.

"I make several posts a week, and a few more if we are having

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Editor's note

By Rhea Landholm, rheal@cfra.org

Local, state, and national policy directly impact how we live. We always need advocates to speak up for rural America.

At the Center, we work to amplify your voices. But, we cannot do it alone. You can:

- Make your voice heard. Call, email, or write your elected officials. Keep their contact information handy. Legislation can move fast; be ready at a moment's notice.
- Step up and take action. Write a letter to the editor. Speak out in your community. Attend a listen-

ing session. Testify at the state capitol.

Don't know where to start? Reach out and let us know how you want to get involved. Many of our staff have experience serving in elected bodies, whether it is on a village committee, city council, school board, board of supervisors, natural resource district, or even the state senate. (See pages 8-7 for more.)

Make sure you are signed up for our email updates to get the latest on state legislatures in Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota, as well as with the



federal farm bill. When the legislatures are in session, we send emails every other week. When we have a farm bill update, you will get that in your inbox.

Contact us at outreach@cfra.org and we can add you on an email list or guide you to our staff members.

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entertainment and food trucks," she said.

2. How can we increase attendance?

A great selection draws people in and keeps them coming back, according to Kathy Dirks, co-manager for the Welcome Center Farmers Market near Missouri Valley in Harrison County, Iowa.

"Diverse options give people choices," she said. "Not everyone likes the same things."

The Welcome Center Farmers Market offers shoppers more than meat and produce.

"The market gives people an alternative place to buy gifts or food," she said. "We have a rule that vendors are required to 'grow, make, or bake' their products."

3. How can we reach underserved populations?

When vendors can accept a variety of payment forms, people from

all backgrounds are able to shop. Erin Lewis, Kearney Area Farmers Market manager, serves as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)/Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB) coordinator. With these services, market vendors can accept a variety of payments including cash, credit/debit card, check, Venmo/Cash App, and Apple Pay.

4. How can we engage our diverse community?

Adding entertainment has been an effective tactic for attracting diverse audiences at the farmers market, according to Schuyler Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Audra Jedlicka.

"We went above and beyond to make sure it was family-friendly," Audra said. "We included the schools to have the cheerleaders and dance team perform and we bring in music. We try to select

diverse bands that meet different cultures, and focus on what families would like to have there. We host a lot of kids' activities as well."

5. How can we attract new vendors?

Fostering relationships among vendors and customers is essential for retaining and attracting vendors, according to Margaret Brady, market manager of The Market at The Mill in Shenandoah, Iowa.

"My personal goal is to help vendors grow to full time if that is their dream," Margaret said. "We provide them with all of the tools to be successful in growing and expanding their businesses."

How the Center for Rural Affairs can help

If you're interested in starting or expanding a farmers market in your community, the Center has the resources you need.

Visit cfra.org/farmersmarkets.

Paper & e-news

This newsletter is available both electronically and in print. To receive it online, visit cfra.org/sign-up or email outreach@cfra.org.

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Palermo Italian Cuisine & Bar, in Jackson, Nebraska, serves up different types of food to provide options for people to try. Owners Ernesto and Alejandro Estrada Marquez use social media to entice more customers to make the 15-minute trip from Sioux City, Iowa, to try their food. | Photo by Kylie Kai

Big-city flavors, small-town charm, continued from page 1

should do it in Nebraska. I moved, and we got to work.”

Their first step was finding a location. By a lucky coincidence, a friend who also owns a restaurant connected the brothers with the owner of a building in Jackson, a town in northeast Nebraska near Sioux City, Iowa. After reaching out to that owner and placing a phone call to Adriana Dungan, a consultant with the Center for Rural Affairs, the brothers solidified their plan to buy the building.

With assistance from the Center, they were able to get a loan to buy the building and equipment they needed to open their restaurant in August 2022.

“Their journey from Chicago to Jackson reflects a deep commitment to family and community, highlighting how their experiences in the culinary world have shaped their vision for Palermo,” said Adriana. “Small businesses can enrich communities, and their story inspires others to pursue their dreams and emphasizes the transformative power of community and hard work. Their narrative is not just about food; it’s about family and the power of community ties.”

Palermo is a full-service, family-style Italian restaurant that

offers cuisine inspired by authentic family recipes. The business owners’ goal is to provide a dining experience that draws customers in and keeps them coming back for more.

“Our inspiration came in trying the best that we can to offer good food to people, and even though we are Mexican and Mexican food is great, we also wanted to give different options for people to try,” Ernesto said.

The menu at Palermo includes appetizers, salads, fried calamari, and carpaccio-sliced meats. They also have beef and tuna, as well as pasta with seafood and chicken. Other chicken dishes are available, as are beef tenderloin and ribeyes. Customers can dine in or order food for carry-out.

Jackson has a population of about 200, and that has its disadvantages, Ernesto said, adding that they work to find fresh, innovative ways to attract new customers.

“We are one of the few restaurants here,” he said. “It can be challenging trying to grow our clientele, especially since we are in a small town.”

Most of their competition is in nearby Sioux City. The brothers

have been using social media to entice more customers to make the 15-minute trip to try their food.

The flexibility of being a small-town business owner has some perks, too. Ernesto believes the success of the business comes down to how much effort the family puts in. In addition to Ernesto, Alejandro, and their wives, they employ two other people who help with food preparation and dish washing.

“Since it’s our business, we can work as much as we want, and we want to make it successful because the business depends on us,” Ernesto said. “We want to continue to grow our business, and we will see what will come in the future.”

He encourages people thinking about opening a business to go for it, and to look to the Center for assistance if needed.

“It is one of the best things you can do, to be a business owner and make it successful,” he said. “Everyone at the Center has been so helpful, and they have so many resources to use.”

Are you in need of financing to buy or upgrade a business? Email us at loans@cfra.org.



The first of its kind in the nation, Minnesota's Tribal Advocacy Council on Energy comprises a primary appointee from each Tribal Nation, as well as an alternate. Ten of the 11 Tribal Nations in the state have chosen to participate. | Photo submitted

Tribal Advocacy Council on Energy first in nation

By Cora Hoffer, corah@cfra.org

As Minnesota transitions to a clean energy future, modernizing and upgrading the state's energy transmission infrastructure is crucial for a more efficient electric grid. However, transmission planning must prioritize careful collaboration with neighboring communities.

Because planned energy infrastructure often crosses Tribal lands, cooperation with Tribal entities is essential. One advocate is paving the way for these critical changes by championing Tribal Nations' renewable energy options.

Tribal lands in Minnesota make up 2% of the state's land portfolio, or 0.7 million acres. Facilitating transmission system development requires proper consultation between the state and the state's Tribal Nations. Historically, communication and collaboration between these two parties has been sparse, according to Robert (Bob) Blake, Tribal citizen of the Red Lake Nation, owner of the solar installation company Solar Bear, and executive director of Native Sun Community Power Development.

Recognizing the challenge, Bob began working to support an effort to engineer a council that could combat historical challenges faced by Tribal Nations.

Minnesota's Tribal Advocacy Council on Energy (TACE), established during the 2023 legislative session, creates a conduit between the 11 federally recognized Tribes in the state and the Department of Commerce. This state-funded council acts as a liaison among public, state, and private interests to ensure fair dealings with Tribal Nations across Minnesota.

"My hope for this council is that eventually there is an opportunity for Tribes to create their own Tribal utility authorities, similar to electric co-ops," said Bob. "From this, I envision the creation of a Tribal utilities commission that will be able to interact with the Public Utilities Commission and facilitate more collaboration."

While Tribes operate under federal jurisdiction, they are not subject to state jurisdiction. Bob said that, consequently, opportunities to collaborate are often missed because there is not a liaison between the state government and Tribes.

"Tribes can offer a lot to democracy," said Bob. "Native people are the only people with their own government in this government. How we allow Tribes to be more participatory and leverage that sovereignty for the good of this nation is important. In regard to the energy transition, if we aren't giving Tribes the opportunity and chance to collaborate, they will never reach their potential."

The mission of TACE is to bring forward recommendations for improving Tribal energy on Reservations, adjacent territories, and ceded territories through meaningful consultation, effective collaboration, partnerships, policies, and legislation.

Michael Childs, Jr., Prairie Island Tribal Council member, will serve as TACE co-chair. He said TACE will strengthen efforts to build energy sovereignty.

"The Tribes are already creating clean energy jobs, reducing our energy costs, and enhancing our quality of life," Michael said. "Our advocacy is not simply about the power of clean energy. It is about sovereignty, self-determination, resilience, and long-term well-being."

Retiree uses CRP-TIP to help beginning farmer

By Cynthia Farmer, cynthiaf@cfra.org

Dale Tuttle is honoring his passion for conservation while helping a young, beginning farmer near Winterset, Iowa.

As one of the first in his neighborhood to implement cover crops and no-till narrow-row soybeans, Dale has demonstrated to others that preventing soil erosion and caring for the land will leave it better for future generations.

Before his recent transition into retirement, Dale owned a custom farming operation, planting and harvesting crops for landowners in the area. He relied on local help to complete each season's work. One young man ran equipment for Dale from time to time, and they established a rapport.

Their relationship sparked a unique opportunity for Dale to transition his land to that young farmer through the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program (CRP-TIP).

Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA), CRP-TIP provides two years of additional CRP payments to a landowner who sells or long-term leases their expiring CRP acres to a beginning or underserved farmer or rancher. The program brings CRP land back into agricultural production under an approved conservation plan implemented by the new operator.

Under those terms, CRP-TIP was a perfect fit for Dale and his hired hand. Dale had hoped to rent the expiring CRP acres to him even before learning of the program. He also wanted to ensure conservation measures were a priority of the new tenant, especially for this piece of land coming back into crop production, which CRP-TIP maintains.

"I don't have any family members coming back to take over the farm, so the program has been



Dale Tuttle, a farmer near Winterset, Iowa, recently retired and transitioned his land to a young farmer through the Conservation Reserve Program - Transition Incentives Program. | Photo submitted

an ideal opportunity for me," Dale said. "I've been able to rent the land to a local farmer that I've gotten to know and who takes care of the land the way I'd like him to."

After being set aside for CRP for 10 years, Dale's land needed some work. To ensure his renter was able to farm effectively and profitably, Dale used the additional payments to improve his acres coming out of CRP. They tilled the field to ensure proper drainage and have invested in other conservation practices such as terraces, no-till, and cover cropping.

"I would encourage landowners taking advantage of this program to use the extra payments to take care of the land," Dale said. "It just makes sense to invest in the land and ensure the beginning farmer has a good experience. It makes a huge difference for their overall success."

Under their conservation plan, Dale's renter has no-tilled the land since bringing it back into production and is implementing cover crops for the first time this year. These practices are helping him prevent soil erosion and increase the soil's organic matter.

Overall, the working partnership between landowner and renter has allowed Dale to transition into retirement. His renter has been purchasing equipment from Dale's custom operation, allowing him to avoid the upfront costs of purchasing new equipment.

Dale and his renter agreed they would both like to continue the partnership into the future.

"The program was easy to use and is very straightforward," Dale's renter said. "My only wish is that I had more opportunities to farm acres like this."

What you need to know: Nebraska's cottage food regulations

The 2024 expansion of cottage food law in Nebraska is a significant step toward empowering local entrepreneurs and fostering economic growth in rural communities. The law allows individuals to produce and sell certain low-risk foods from their homes without the need for a commercial kitchen, which not only provides opportunities for small-scale food producers but also supports the local economy by keeping money in the community.



Can be produced and sold:

- » Baked goods such as breads, cookies, and cakes
- » Jams, jellies, and preserves made using pectin
- » Homemade candies
- » Granola
- » Dry mixes
- » Cheesecake
- » Buttercream frosting
- » Cheese- or cream-filled pastries
- » Refrigerated sauces and salsas
- » Refrigerated pickled vegetables (not heat-sealed)



Cannot be produced and sold (examples):

- » Meat-based products
- » Raw eggs
- » Milk
- » Unpasteurized juice
- » Infused honey or oils (raw honey is permitted)
- » Sprouts
- » Low-acid canned or hermetically sealed acidified foods, including heat-sealed canned pickles
- » Tofu, tempeh, or similar meat substitutes
- » Fermented foods such as kimchi, kombucha, or sauerkraut

Requirements



Education

The producer must successfully complete one approved course.



Well Testing

Private wells must be tested for nitrates and bacteria.



Registration

Businesses must register with the Nebraska Department of Agriculture.



Labeling and notification

Labels must be in English and provide consumers visible notification of non-commercial kitchen.



Food handling and safety

Delivery rules apply, as well as temperature control requirements.



Read the full fact sheet in English and Spanish at cfra.org/publications.

Nebraska has benefited from the Inflation Reduction Act

By Val Ankeny, valeriea@cfra.org

The targeted investments of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have real-world impacts that are hard to ignore. Since its passage in August 2022, the IRA has been quietly bringing tangible benefits to Nebraska's farms, public schools, small businesses, and families. From energy projects to tax credits, this law is strengthening communities.

In July 2024, Nebraska's Department of Environment and Energy was awarded \$307 million in IRA funding to implement measures outlined in the state's priority action plan. These funds will assist Nebraska producers in implementing advanced livestock waste management, precision agriculture, regenerative practices, and installing solar energy systems.

The Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) which provides grants and loans for renewable energy systems and efficiency improvements, received increased funding through the IRA. In 2023, 88 REAP applications totaling \$7,008,031 were received for Nebraska, a funding request 20 times higher than the \$337,684 ultimately awarded for 26 REAP projects. The heightened interest across the nation caused applica-



Since its passage in August 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act has been quietly bringing tangible benefits to Nebraska's farms, public schools, small businesses, and families. | Center file photo

tions requesting up to a 50% grant to be paused in December. The high demand for REAP reinforces the need for this beneficial program which reduces energy costs for producers and small businesses, freeing up capital for other investments and essential expenses.

In August 2024, Sandhills Energy (SE Municipal Solar LLC) was selected to receive nearly \$30 million in Powering Affordable Clean Energy (PACE) financing which offers low interest, partially forgivable loans for energy improvements. Sandhills Energy will build eight solar generation facilities, totaling 18.72 megawatts of new electric capacity. The facilities will be located in the communities of

Alliance, Gering, Sidney, Imperial, Ansley, Pender, Crete, and Stuart.

Hastings Public Schools applied for a direct pay credit, a provision in the IRA that enables tax exempt entities to recoup a percentage of the costs of energy saving projects. The school installed a geothermal heating and cooling system which cost about \$3.6 million, with an estimated \$1.1 million eligible for direct pay. The geothermal system is anticipated to save the school between \$75,000 and \$100,000 annually.

These investments are creating stronger farms, improving local economic stability, and providing ways for schools to save money when budgets are tight. The IRA's

Advocating to legislators, continued from page 8

larly memorable communication I received during my time as a senator was a unique and creative expression of support: A singing card with a short note encouraging support for a bill. This unexpected and heartfelt gesture from a constituent underscored the power of personal advocacy.

After you have connected with a legislator, remember to follow up by thanking them for their support or encouraging them to reconsider their position. By staying engaged and persistent, the public can make a meaningful difference in the legislative process.

Surprisingly few constituents

contact their legislators, but effective communication with policy-makers is essential for a healthy democracy. Every voice matters—it shapes the policies affecting the community and ensures the people's concerns are heard.

You can find other useful resources at cfra.org/advocate.



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03/25



Family-run restaurant opens with help of the Center

Brothers offer different types of cuisine to cater to customers

Insights on advocating to legislators

By Tod Bowman, todb@cfra.org

Effective advocacy requires understanding the legislative process and employing strategic communication. Constituents can impact legislation by providing their perspective on a bill and explaining the reasoning for their position.

As a former Iowa state senator from Maquoketa, I served in the Iowa Senate from 2011 to 2019. My close engagement in the legislative process equipped me with a deep understanding of how to successfully communicate with legislators and help shape public policy.

Understanding a legislator's background, including their affiliations, priorities, and even hobbies, can lead to more effectively tailored communication, increasing the likelihood of successful mes-

saging. For example, my constituents knew I was a wrestling coach and enjoyed other sports, and we built rapport over those.

Personal meetings are the best way to build relationships with legislators. However, make sure to schedule an appointment in advance rather than simply showing up at the Capitol—scheduling a meeting prior to a visit can ensure a legislator has time to meet and is prepared to discuss a specific legislative issue. If traveling to the Capitol is difficult, consider inviting a legislator to meet at a cafe or coffee shop in your district that is convenient to your legislator.

Another avenue for engagement is to attend legislative town hall meetings or “cracker barrels,” which are open to the public. These meetings provide an opportunity to ask questions directly and hear from other constituents.

It is best to prepare a clear, concise question to ask, focusing on specific concerns or policy proposals. While town hall meetings are not the ideal setting for lengthy debates, if an answer is unsatisfactory, consider requesting a follow-up meeting to discuss the issue further.

Communicating directly with a legislator through personalized, handwritten letters can be a highly effective approach to sharing your perspective. Letters allow constituents to express their concerns and opinions directly, and they are more likely to be read and considered than generic emails or form letters. Additionally, including an address on a letter serves as a powerful indicator of a local connection, lending credibility and significance to a letter. A particu-