



# Agritourism well done

## Asheville Farm to Table Tours

by Frances Figart

It's 9:30 a.m. on a Thursday and several cars have just arrived in the parking lot of an Asheville grocer. The dozen or so people getting out range in age from early 20s to mid 80s. All are here with a common goal: to explore agritourism in the Asheville area.

Grinning from ear-to-ear, tour operator Ann D. Stauss greets our group and launches into a lively overview of the five-hour experience ahead, during which we will visit three working farms. We eagerly accept marvelous gift bags containing customized Asheville Farm to Table Tours water bottles and scope out the immaculate 12-passenger van with everything from snacks and umbrellas to first aid supplies and coolers for our purchases from the farm stores.

Stauss couldn't be more prepared if we were setting off on a week's travel. But that's not surprising given that her culinary and food service background took her to 18 countries throughout the Americas, Europe and Asia, where she delighted in diverse cultures and savored delicious foods. She has owned and operated a food truck, provided catering for film crews in the French Quarter, West Texas and the Louisiana swamps, performed food styling for still and film photography, and co-founded Chez Nous Charcuterie, New Orleans' first carry-out cuisine and retail store.

Upon moving to Western North Carolina in 1999, the enterprising Stauss began to envision a fun adventure that could educate others about mountain foodways. "I realized

that although the farm-to-table movement was vibrant in our area, there was little opportunity to experience this movement from farmer to seed to meal," she says. "So I began reaching out to farmers to see if we could create a mutually beneficial situation." Interviewing farmers and visiting their farms, she developed the concept and opened her tour company this past May.

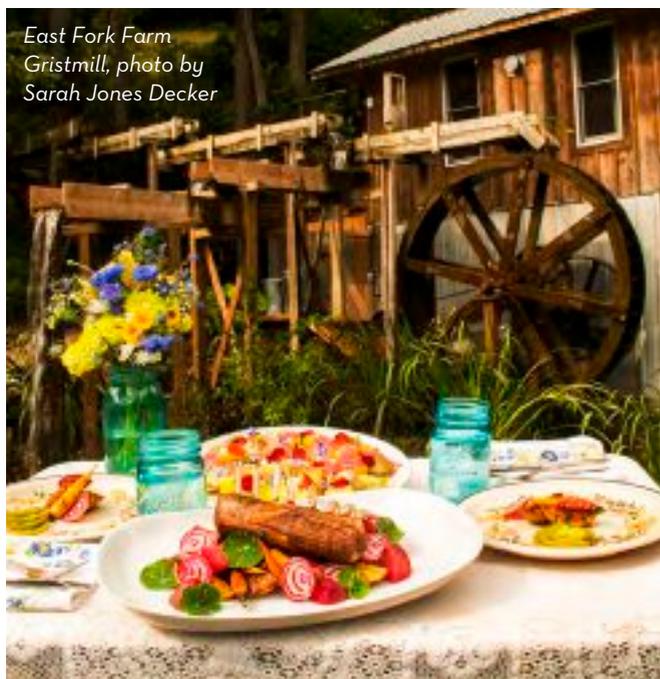
On Fridays at 10:30 a.m., the van departs Asheville for Flying Cloud Farm, Blue Ridge Mountain Creamery and Hickory Nut Gap Farm, all in Fairview. But today we are headed for East Fork Farm, Spinning Spider Creamery and The Farmer's Hands, all of Madison County.

### EAST FORK FARM

Dawn Robertson and her husband Stephen purchased the 40-acre East Fork Farm near Marshall, NC, in 1996. "Neither of us had much of a farming background so we hit the books, learning as we went and making tons of mistakes," she recalls.

The couple now raises chickens, turkeys, ducks, rabbits, pigs, sheep and cows on one of the cleanest working animal farms you'll ever see. Over the course of 20 years, they've constructed fencing to be able to practice intense rotational grazing, built barns for their baby chicks and installed a greenhouse with pasture access. "Each morning, we open the door to our greenhouse and the chickens and ducks are allowed to roam the farm with no fencing," Robertson says. "We close them in at night for their protection."

Two years ago they added a picturesque working



East Fork Farm  
Gristmill, photo by  
Sarah Jones Decker



Spinning Spider  
Creamery



The Farmer's Hands

waterwheel and water-powered gristmill so they can now grind heirloom non-GMO corn into cornmeal and grits in a gluten-free environment. Above the gristmill is a tiny adorable apartment with a cedar soaker tub on its deck, one of three cozy rental cottages the farm provides for guests.

East Fork Farm animals are raised with non-GMO feed and are grass fed or pasture raised. Meat is processed on the farm each week for sale fresh at the North Asheville Tailgate Market. Before we load up, members of our group purchase meats from the farm store to take home.

### SPINNING SPIDER CREAMERY

Less than a mile away, our next stop is Spinning Spider Creamery, a quaint mountain property featuring one of the largest Franklin trees I've ever seen. Here we learn in-depth about the intricacies of the cheese making process from owner Chris Owen, who spends a high percentage of her waking hours inside a small, cool room devoted to artisan cheeses. Everyone on our tour is delighted to interact with some endearing goats, and several even hold the newborn kids.

The cheese tasting here allows us to try a handful of delectable varieties of aged cheese, fresh goat chevre and bloomy goat cheese. Like many of our group, I make a purchase: Though tempted by Pepperberry, featuring jalapenos and strawberry preserves, I end up with Stackhouse, and award-winning ashed rind.

"Our family mission is to maintain a lifestyle that incorporates the cycles of the seasons with our love of animals, our craft of cheese making and our family unity," says Chris Owen, Spinning Spider's owner along with her three children.

### THE FARMER'S HANDS

By the time we reach The Farmer's Hands just outside Mars Hill, we are ready to focus on food in a big way. Here,

a three-gabled, pre-1900s farmhouse is home to Ariel Dixon-Zijp and Dutch-born Sebastiaan Zijp (pronounced Zipe), who honed his skills in some of New York City's best restaurants, including Gramercy Tavern, Bar Blanc Bistro and Bouley.

After touring the flower gardens, raised vegetable beds, chicken and duck coop, rabbit hutch, hoop house, grape arbor and small-plot irrigated fields, we wander through the house—tastefully decorated with artwork, musical instruments, antiques and jars of the season's produce—then settle at the long picnic table under a large white tent.

"Ann's tours are really great for us," says Zijp. "A big part of what we do here at The Farmer's Hands is share our experience and knowledge, and we love to show people that you are able to create an amazing homestead on a small piece of land."

The couple also loves to share the food they grow here, and we are ready to devour tomato salad with Spinning Spider Feta, red cabbage slaw with Spinning Spider Garlic and Herb Chevre, roasted potatoes and garlic, corn bread from East Fork Farm, and lamb and beef meatballs in a fresh tomato sauce with basil.

Our enthusiasm is magnified when we taste the food that truly connects us to the farms we just visited. Stauss says she is most inspired when folks on her tours gain "an in-depth understanding of where food really comes from. They will never see their grocery purchases the same way again!"

Learn more at [ashevillefarmtotabletours.com](http://ashevillefarmtotabletours.com) or by calling 828.606.9553. Look for Asheville Farm to Table tours on Facebook and Instagram. 

**"Although the farm-to-table movement was vibrant in our area, there was little opportunity to experience this movement from farmer to seed to meal."**

~Ann D. Stauss, tour operator

*Frances Figart is the former magazine editor for the National Tour Association, where her publication told the stories of tour operators, tour suppliers (like farms, restaurants and hotels) and destination marketing organizations.*



Sebastiaan Zijp at  
The Farmer's Hands



Spinning  
Spider  
Creamery

# Events, tours and education

**15 – Apple Harvest Festival:** Celebrate all things apple at the 28<sup>th</sup> annual apple festival. Enjoy apple spice kettle corn, apple butter and other bounties of the harvest at the event featuring 150 booths packed with local artisan food and crafts. The festival runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Waynesville, NC, free, haywoodapplefest.com

**15 – Oktoberfest:** Sierra Nevada Brewing pays homage to German tradition with an afternoon festival at their brewery from 5-10 p.m. Sierra Nevada collaborated with a brewer in Bamberg, Germany to craft this year's signature beer. There will be a German feast, musical performances, dancing and live glassblowing demonstrations. Mills River, NC, \$45, sierranevada.com

**15 – CiderFest:** Enjoy brilliant fall foliage while sipping a variety of hard ciders, meads and apple wines from more than 20 cider makers. The event runs from 1-5 p.m. and will feature live music, cider making workshops and a kid's zone at the riverside venue. Salvage Station, Asheville, \$30, ciderfest.wncgbc.org

**20 – Pint Night at Yee-Haw:** Support Appalachian Sustainable Development while enjoying a night of live music from Bill & The Belles. The show begins at 4 p.m. and ASD receives a dollar for every pint poured. Johnson City, TN, free, asdevelop.org

**22 – The Southern Appalachians During the Ice Age:** Dan Lazar discusses animals and plants found in the Appalachians some 20,000 years ago at this talk hosted by Pacolet Area Conservancy and featuring images of ice age species still surviving in our region today. Walnut Creek Preserve's Anne Elizabeth Suratt Nature Center near Lake Lure, free, pacolet.org

**28-30 – Southeastern Animal Fiber Fair:** Come out to the WNC Agricultural Center for an exciting event featuring knitting, weaving, felting and more. Browse beautiful, handmade apparel and designs from a spread of vendors on Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Fletcher, NC, \$5 daily admission, free for youth, saffsite.org

**29 – Flavors of the Foothills:** Celebrate autumn's bounty and support conservation in the Blue Ridge Mountains at the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Flavors of the Foothills Fall Harvest Benefit dinner and auction for the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina from 5:30-9 p.m. Morganton, NC, \$50, foothillsconservancy.org

**29 – Bookwalter Binge Gran Fondo:** Join the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy at 8:30 a.m. for a challenging ride to benefit their conservation projects. The 30-, 62- or 83-mile ride begins at Pisgah Brewing with marked stops and timed mountain climbing sections for those interested. Black Mountain, tickets vary based on ride length, bookwalterbinge.com

## NOVEMBER

**5 – The Secret Lives of Snails:** Learn about one of the most overlooked animals in the forest at this talk by Denise Furr of the Schiele Museum of Natural History hosted by Pacolet Area Conservancy. Walnut Creek Preserve's Anne Elizabeth Suratt Nature Center near Lake Lure, free, pacolet.org

**5 – Thunderstruck Partnership Hike:** Explore Waterrock Knob on the Blue Ridge Parkway with the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. The hike begins at 10 a.m. and travels through the Plott Balsam Preserve with views of Thunderstruck Ridge ending the 5 mile hike. Blue Ridge Parkway, free for SAHC members, \$10 for non-members, appalachian.org

**10-13 – Sustainable Poultry Network National Conference:** Join a group of sustainable poultry experts to learn everything you need to know to grow your own flock. Expert instructors will lead sessions on breeding, veterinarians lead classes on standard-bred birds and a large-scale poultry workshop invites all who are interested in raising poultry to get involved. Holiday Inn Asheville, \$459 purchase tickets at spnusa.com

**12 – Table Rock Geology Hike:** Explore Table Rock Mountain with the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina as geologist Steve Gurley leads a hike to the mountain's summit. In addition to examining the rock types and compositions, this moderate to strenuous hike offers unparalleled views of the Linville Gorge. Upper Creek, NC, Free, RSVP by emailing [bwillardpatton@foothillsconservancy.org](mailto:bwillardpatton@foothillsconservancy.org)

**12 – Fall Hike at Cedar Creek:** Explore the Webb Conservation Easement on this moderate hike led by the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. The hike begins at 11 a.m. and will venture through red oak forests and rhododendron archways, stopping for lunch atop Laura's Rock, an outcrop hosting spectacular fall views. Jackson County, NC, free for SAHC members, \$10 for non-members, appalachian.org

**13 – Whole Farm Planning Workshop:** Learn farm planning skills at this afternoon workshop hosted by the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy community farm. Workshops are from 2-6 p.m. and focus on base mapping, site analysis and schematic design. Alexander, NC, free, appalachian.org

**17 – A Taste of Asheville:** Sample foods from local favorites at the Asheville Independent Restaurant Association's Taste of Asheville. From curries to cajun, brews to beajolais and truffles to tapas, you will experience the work of the chefs and brewers who established Asheville as a culinary destination. Asheville, VIP tickets \$100, general admission \$75, airasheville.org

**20 – Farm Heritage Trail Thanksgiving Holiday Event:** Support local farms with a scenic tour of the Farm Heritage Trail, a route that features Franny's Farm, Sandy Hollar Farm and Addison Farms Vineyard, among other stops. Purchase a heritage turkey, choose your own Christmas tree or attend a wine tasting while enjoying scenic mountain farm views. Tours run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Leicester, NC, farmheritagetrail.org

## DECEMBER

**1 – Brews for Views:** Enjoy delicious food and beer at the Granite Falls Brewing winter membership drive benefiting Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina from 5-9 p.m. Granite Falls, Free, foothillsconservancy.org

**3 – Blue Ridge Food Ventures Holiday Marketplace:** Support local vendors at a holiday market hosted by Blue Ridge Food Ventures. The marketplace is open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and will include a variety of local foods. Candler, blueridgefoodventures.org

**3 – A Handcrafted Christmas:** Discover unique gifts and artwork from local vendors at the fourth annual holiday market at Addison Farms Vineyard. From noon to 5 p.m. the market will feature handmade designs of eight local artists including jewelry, candles, fine art and ironwork. For every \$10 donation to Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Addison Farms Vineyard will provide a complimentary wine tasting. Leicester, NC, free, addisonfarms.net

## MULTI-DATE

**Asheville Farm-To-Table Tours:** Explore three sustainable family farms on a personally guided agri-tour followed by a fresh farm-to-table meal prepared with ingredients from the farms visited. The tour includes transportation and occurs Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. \$89, Tours begin around 10:30 a.m. Purchase tickets at [ashevillefarmtotabletours.com](http://ashevillefarmtotabletours.com)

**Fall Farms and Artisans Tour:** Through November 13, the Asheville Bed and Breakfast Association provides guests the chance to visit working farms and delight in the comfort of local B&B destinations. ABBA is partnering with four local farms, Addison Farms Vineyard and five artisans for this historic journey complete with gourmet breakfasts, picnic lunches and wine tastings. For more, visit [ashevillebba.com](http://ashevillebba.com)