

MarketMaker is an online tool, with an in-depth database that features a diverse community of food-related businesses: buyers, farmers/ranchers, fisheries, farmers markets, processors/packers, wineries, restaurants and more. MarketMaker's search tools can connect with others across the production and distribution chain.

The interactive mapping system locates farmers markets, agritourism ventures and much more. MarketMaker provides information to connect the consumer to the producer. Information is entered into a data base by people who fit the following categories: agritourism, farmer, buyer, eating & drinking place, farmers market, fishery, food retailer, processor, or winery. This step is quick and easy and only takes five minutes. The entry can include information on your business, your website, up to five pictures, and the forms of social media you use.

Here's how it works. Indicate that you want to explore "agritourism" within Louisiana or within a 50- mile area of a town or zip code and a list of possibilities appears. Each entry includes important facts about the operation, time of operation, location, best times to visit, etc. These links can also take you to websites, Facebook fan pages or Twitter pages to learn more.

A farmers market is the perfect destination for the shopper who wants to know where his food comes from. One can locate a farmers' market nearby using MarketMaker. Patrons of farmers markets can talk directly to the farmer and learn more about how the produce was grown. Some vendors even provide recipes for their produce.

For fun, take the farmers market challenge. Don't come looking for ingredients for your favorite recipe; instead come to explore the foods available and create your menu while you shop. If free range chickens are available, start with that as your protein serving and build your menu from there. This type of shopping is popular in the French Market in New Orleans and is gaining in popularity across our state. Planning a meal around what is fresh in the market is a healthy and satisfying choice.

How about serving rice? Last week I purchased rice from a vendor in the French Market in New Orleans. The rice was brown jasmine rice and it tasted so good.

Not a cook, but want to eat locally grown foods? MarketMaker can guide you to restaurants in the area that showcase locally grown produce. One click and you can narrow your choices to a zip code, community or the entire state.

Want to know what fruits and vegetables are in season? MarketMaker provides that information on the home page and hyperlinks each entry to a producer who sells the produce. How easy is that? In just one click you can find such a farmer.

Planning a special meal and need a festive drink? Check out the listings for wineries. There are several wineries conveniently located in our area. They offer tours and wine for sale and some even offer entertainment for a great value.

If it's fun, food or entertainment, MarketMaker is sure to have the answer. For more information visit: <http://la.foodmarketmaker.com/> or call your local LSU AgCenter office.