

Strengthening Local Food Systems in Iowa through the Choose Iowa Program

As part of a national effort to bolster regional food procurement and distribution, NASDA members across the U.S. are advancing innovative programs that connect agricultural producers with communities. In Iowa, the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship developed Choose Iowa, a signature branding and marketing initiative that highlights the diversity, quality and economic importance of food and beverage products grown, made and raised in Iowa.

Overview of the Choose Iowa Program

Launched in 2023, the **Choose Iowa** program helps build stronger connections between Iowa consumers and local agricultural producers. The program supports a wide range of activities from farmer networking to retail visibility and encompasses a statewide membership network, a value-added grant program and public engagement through marketing and events.

At its core, Choose Iowa is designed to:

- Promote Iowa-grown, made and raised agricultural products
- Support producers and businesses in identifying and accessing new markets
- Foster collaboration within the local food economy
- Strengthen rural communities through economic development
- Encourage consumer investment in locally produced food and beverages

Since its launch, the program has grown to nearly **340 members** across 89 of Iowa's **99 counties**, serving as a robust platform for cross-sector collaboration and consumer education. In 2025, the program expanded to include horticulture products.

Program Impact: Collaborative Success Stories

[Chef Suman and HoQ Restaurant: Local Ingredients on the State's Biggest Stages](#)



Chef Suman of HoQ Restaurant in Des Moines exemplifies the impact of Choose Iowa on both producers and culinary professionals. Committed to sourcing local ingredients, Chef Suman participates in both the Choose Iowa membership and grant programs. His menu uses Iowa-grown products, many sourced directly from fellow Choose Iowa members.

A notable example includes his collaboration with **Sexton Sheep**, which now provides all lamb used in HoQ's menu offerings. These connections, facilitated by Choose Iowa, strengthened the local supply chain and enhanced Chef Suman's culinary identity.

Key milestones for Chef Suman since joining the program include:

- Opening a second restaurant location (Flora)
- Serving as a featured vendor at RAGBRAI and the 2025 Iowa State Fair
- Earning a semi-finalist spot in the 2025 Iowa State Fair's Best New Food Competition for his HoQ Lamb Wrap, made with Sexton Sheep lamb and locally milled naan flour from Early Morning Harvest
- Receiving a Choose Iowa Value-Added Grant to expand his Iowa-sourced hot sauce product line

Through Choose Iowa, Chef Suman not only elevated his business profile but also expanded market opportunities for local agricultural producers.

[Cortum Farm and Co: Revitalizing a Historic Farm into a Community Hub](#)



Cortum Farm and Co, operated by Mekenze Cortum, represents another success story made possible through Choose Iowa. With a long-held vision of creating a community-centered farm, Cortum leveraged the Choose Iowa Value-Added Grant to transform a century-old barn into a retail and event space that now showcases products from her farm and other Choose Iowa producers.

“The grant provided exactly the type of support we needed to take our vision from concept to reality,” Cortum said. “We turned the idea of a historical barn into a community hub.”

Beyond infrastructure, the program opened new marketing and collaboration opportunities. The barn now serves as a local aggregation point for Choose Iowa products. Additionally, the farm hosted demonstrations at the 2024 Iowa State Fair, where Cortum connected with Chef Anthony Nace during a Choose Iowa Kitchen presentation. This connection resulted in a weekly delivery partnership, with Chef Nace now exclusively sourcing select ingredients from Cortum Farm and nearby Choose Iowa members.

Looking ahead, Cortum Farm and Co will participate in the Choose Iowa Passport Program and upcoming Farm Open House events, further embedding the farm in the regional food economy.

Conclusion

The Choose Iowa program demonstrates the essential role state departments of agriculture can play in developing resilient, community-based food systems. By connecting farmers, consumers, chefs and educators, Choose Iowa is helping to expand market access for local producers, foster regional collaboration, increase the visibility and value of Iowa agricultural products, and build a stronger local food economy that benefits both urban and rural communities.

As the program continues to grow, its success serves as a model for how strategic investments, branding and stakeholder engagement can transform local food systems and create lasting economic and cultural value.

As part of NASDA's quarterly content focus, this series highlights regional food procurement and distribution, one of NASDA's policy priorities. State departments of agriculture sit at the nexus of the food supply chain, connecting farms, food processors and institutions that serve local communities. NASDA supports an increase in federal policies and investments that strengthen regional food systems through resilient infrastructure, flexible state-led food purchasing programs, and expanded institutional procurement of local and regional foods.