

## Features

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# The Farm-to-Table Movement

*John Kennedy*



On a crisp Saturday evening in October, we arrived at Bedner's Farm & Greenhouse in McDonald, Pennsylvania, to enjoy a wonderful "Fields to Fork" dinner with our amazing farm friends Russ and Melanie Bedner.

Souny and I have been blessed to have known the Bedner family, including their two daughters, parents and pets, for nearly five years. We met at a Fall Event for The Garden Center Group and connected right away. Over the years, we've witnessed the "butterfly growth" of a garden center and grower emerging into a world-class agritourism destination.

They're the perfect example of an innovative, restless farmer and creative, resourceful farmer's wife joining forces to build a remarkable business empire that spans multiple categories in the garden center and agritourism industries. They both, along with their family, have woven together all the perfect profitable pieces into one quintessential quilt of success ... one idea, one innovation and one bold decision at a time.

## Starting on the Farm

Their humble beginnings, like most folks in the green industry, began growing up on a farm. The hard work and solid, salt-of-the-earth ethics, along with faith and family, crafted a well-known family destination in the Pittsburgh suburbs for plants, trees and shrubs. Also, like many folks in the green industry, there came a time to transition from one generation to the next.

Bob and Suzi Bedner began to relinquish the reigns, and let their son Russ hop on the saddle and steer the business from a nicely-paced walk to a trot to a cantor and now full-on gallop into the future of the agritourism blended model. Bedner's Farm and Greenhouse has hit its stride and is off to the races in revenue, relevance and relationships.

## Expanding Into Experience

Those trails now include a winery, Passiflora Springs; a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) called the "Bedner Bag Program;" a farmers market that spotlights local brands—including their own branded products—and homegrown produce program that supplies farm-fresh veggies from mid-June through early January (yes, in the dead of a Pittsburgh winter!).



On this fall evening, we were invited to saddle up for their new endeavor, “Fields to Fork,” where they fuse the fresh produce grown on the farm with a local chef, a local beef farmer and Russ’s very own Passiflora Springs Winery to create a masterful event of fellowship, fun and flavor.

Russ perfectly paired each course of the dinner, crafted by Chef Tyler England of DiAnoia’s Eatery, with a glass of the appropriate wine, and with practiced notes in hand, invited each of the nearly two dozen guests, to savor the moment, the meal and the miracle of community. Humility and humor found company and companionship with this diverse group of guests of all ages, backgrounds and beliefs.

*Pictured: Melanie and Russ Bedner.*

Added to the menu were delightful dishes of homemade sausage and perfectly prepared free-range chicken from the Coyne Family Farm nearby ... and we were honored to be guests at the Bedner and Coyne families’

table.

The evening was enhanced by a scenic wagon tour of the farm; a young, talented classical guitar player, Ben Meyer (wearing no gloves or socks ... brrrrr) and a roaring fire pit that kept our frigid frozen fingers from falling off.

And for those who are naturally wondering the amount someone would pay to have such a special, intimate evening on the farm, a few dozen folks happily invested nearly \$150 each to have an exquisite lakeside experience they will never forget. As Doug Joyer mentioned in the previous article, people will drive farther and pay more for an experience. Souny and I drove four hours and would do it again in a heartbeat! (Our invitation was generously offered complimentary, and we thank Russ and Melanie again for your overt act of kindness!)

## Bringing Customers Back

The Bedner’s both agree, “Agritourism has become the common thread that stitches our many businesses together. It creates more opportunities for our customers and guests to revisit the farm and greenhouse. Not just in the spring and fall like the old days, but monthly through events, farmers market, workshops, the winery, our fresh produce CSA and our new edition in 2021—Our Community Market where we have many local vendors come to our farm and offer their wares to our awaiting customers. A win for everyone.”



*Pictured: The setting of a recent five-course “Field to Fork” dinner at Bedner’s Farm & Greenhouse.*

As for the future of the Bedner’s emerging butterfly, Russ states: “No more ‘one-and-done’ shopping with us during the spring season. We have an amazing staff that creates and promotes all of our events and gets those one-time spring shoppers back in the door again for some healthy

vegetables from the farm to an educational class or sipping a glass of wine while they explore our community market and everything in between. It is a lot of work, but the reward is even greater! We take pride in serving our



community by our offerings and services ... connecting them back to mother nature. Something that I think everyone doesn't take enough time to do."

I have only two words for you, Russ and Melanie—GIDDY UP!

Bedner's sees the road in the windshield ahead and has been paving their own highway to heaven on Earth for years now. They've created an agritourism and growing enterprise business that's built to last.

Give them a look and a follow at [bednersgreenhouse.com](https://bednersgreenhouse.com) and [@bednersgreenhouse](https://twitter.com/bednersgreenhouse). Even better yet, corral your team and gallop on over to McDonald for your very own field trip ... and tell 'em John and Souny sent ya!

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## Fast Facts on Agritourism

Picking up from last month's initial article, here are some fun facts about agritourism over the last decade or so:

From 2002 to 2017, the agritourism industry sales tripled and that's prior to the pandemic! The pandemic did two things to most agriculture businesses—it amplified and accelerated their enterprises, either revealing cracks or reinforcing cultures ... or both!

**Amplified:** If you had a poor team going in to the pandemic, you had a worse team in the peak of it. If you had a good team going into the pandemic, your team galvanized in the peak and outperformed most coming out of it. (I personally and professionally know examples of both.)

**Accelerated:** If you didn't have improved technology like online ticketing, an online purchasing process, a robust POS system or curbside pick-up going into the pandemic, you absolutely accelerated your decision-making and invested in these "convenience economy" tools that make it easier for your customers to engage and buy from you.

And if you didn't have agritourism as a menu item up until now, you would be wise to put it in the appetizers or desserts area of your garden center as of today.

Agritourism.Life offers a benchmarking platform for businesses to compare and contrast each other in categories that are relevant to their mix (farmers market, festivals and events, u-pick, bakery and brewery are just a few examples), and those who participated in our 2019-2021 Agri-Benchmarking program saw a dramatic lift in their sales, attendance and average per-cap.

Sales jumped 61%, attendance jumped over 30% and the amount someone spent on agritourism increased by 24% in the three-year trend.

The data suggests that this isn't a fad or a "COVID Bounce" that other green industry businesses have enjoyed over the last two years. This has been a growing movement at a faster pace than the garden center industry for nearly 20 years. And as garden centers begin to contemplate their transition and succession plan for the next five years, they have a choice: either look through the large windshield of the road ahead or continue to glance in the rearview mirror of the past. The roads of the garden center and agritourism intersect just down the road, and we would be wise to yield—and then accelerate.

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*John Kennedy is the co-founder of Agritourism.Life and a service provider for The Garden Center Group. He and his wife Souny have created a robust platform that promotes, engages and benchmarks farms, garden centers and wineries in North America. Their magazine, digital solutions and search engine are dedicated to celebrate and accelerate the growing momentum and movement of agritourism world-wide. Visit [www.agritourism.life](https://www.agritourism.life) or [www.yourfarm.space](https://www.yourfarm.space) for more information.*



### **In the Next Issue**

Next month, we'll look at another agritourism trend that's gaining ground—the farm wedding. Many garden centers are already seeing market growth in this offering and we'll interview a northeast garden center that's an early ag-daptor.