

I'll Trade You: Food Swap 101 The DIY Toolkit

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So, let's get swapping!

Bartering is a growing trend within the sustainable living movement. It's often a casual affair: backyard chicken keepers trade surplus eggs for other goodies, or gardeners share excess seeds or seedlings. But increasingly, bartering is also taking place in organized events, put together through sites like Food Swap Network and Backyard Barter.

At these events, strangers trade inventive homemade treats with other amateur artisans as a way of increasing the diversity of their pantry and connecting with like-minded individuals over food.

Food swaps are currently being planned across Atlantic Canada. If you are planning to attend one, or hoping to organize one yourself, this guide will help by showing the steps involved in a seamless swap.

People swap because they love food. They love experimenting with new recipes or trying their friends' techniques. For many of these folks, a good weekend is spent over a hot canner and nothing is better than sharing the bounty. Some might be strapped for cash and wanting to maximize food dollars, or perhaps some are food revolutionaries who want to step out of the industrialized food economy.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is: people all over the world are swapping.

No matter why you want to swap – the good news is that it's EASY to hold a food swap in your community. This toolkit includes all sorts of tips and ideas from the worldwide swap community for holding your own local food swap:

It includes:

- How a Food Swap Works
- Swap Nuts and Bolts
- Tips For a Successful Swap
- How To Make Sure People Show Up
- How To Build the Swap Momentum

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How a Food Swap Works

A food swap is a simple event that allows people to trade homemade, homegrown, or foraged foods. It can be a simple gathering of friends, family, or co-workers, or it can be a community-wide event that lands you on the cover of your local newspaper. There's no one way to swap.

This tip sheet includes ideas for organizing an ongoing food swap that strives to have a strong community presence. Feel free to dress yours up or down to whatever extent is appropriate in your location.

Journey with us to a successful food swap:

Arriving

When you arrive at the neighborhood community center, you see tables lining the room and people already setting out beautiful jars of jams and pickles, bags of baked goods, and produce. A swap host greets you and asks you to find space on a table for your items. She also asks you to fill out a "swap sheet" (also known as a "bid sheet") for each kind of item you bring.

Since you brought six jars of your famous spicy marsala sauce and six tubs of apricot yogurt, you fill out two swap sheets. The form asks you to identify if there are any common allergens in any of your foods, which you appreciate because you're rocking a gluten-free diet these days and you want to stay safe.

Sampling, mingling, and bidding

You put samples of your items out in front of your jars and tubs (or on the snack table) so people can try out your sauce and yogurt. After everyone has displayed his or her items on the tables, some with samples, some without, one of the swap hosts welcomes the group, celebrates all of the new swappers, and explains how the swap is going to work. Once questions have been answered, everyone begins walking around the room, checking out what everyone else has brought and beginning to make bids.

Each swap sheet works like a silent auction bid sheet, except you are not bound to swap for any items offered on your sheet. You go around and sample different foods – for those that hold interest, you write what you're willing to offer on that person's swap sheet. (For example, you taste some pretty mind-blowing gluten-free brownies and you write down that you're willing to swap a tub of apricot yogurt. Here's hoping this dude will be into your yogurt!)

Reviewing bids

After some mingling, sampling, and general oohing and ahing, a swap host transitions the group into swap mode. She explains that you should go back to your items and check out what people have offered you on your swap sheets. Once you do that, you should go and find the people who were interested in your

food or find the people whose stuff you wanted. In most cases, swaps are one-to-one – meaning that one jar of your sauce is worth one jar of that infused vinegar you tasted or one bag of foraged mushrooms.

Swapping

The group begins to swap. At first it's a little chaotic – some people are darting around with their items in their hands, searching for the people with the stuff they really want. Others are conferring with partners, and waiting for people to come to them. You do a combination of both.

Some people come to you raving about your sauce and yogurt. One person comes to you and offers a loaf of focaccia bread, and you graciously decline the swap because you don't do gluten – it turns out that saying no to a swap is totally cool.

Wrapping up and staying connected

As the swapping winds down, people begin to load their loot into bags, boxes, and baskets. You look down and see that all 12 of your jars are gone. In their place is a wild variety of items: everything from cheese to salsa to gluten-free scones to preserved lemons. You've also met a bunch of other people who are really into homegrown, homemade, and foraged food! What an amazing network of people to connect with the next time you have a fermentation disaster in your kitchen...

Swap Nuts and Bolts

How many people?

We recommend limiting the group's size to about 40. It's possible to do a larger group, but it's not for the faint of heart. When you're first getting started, consider doing a smaller group as a test run. Some swaps stay at around 10-15 attendees, and that's just fine. Any less than that and you all will probably end up with one of everything that people bring, which is still fun.

Sample agenda

You can play with the specific times, but try this on for size:

- People arrive and set up their items 15 minutes
 - Host makes announcements and gives instructions 15 minutes
 - People mingle, sample, make bids 60 minutes
 - Swap! 30 minutes
- TOTAL: 2 hours**

Sample announcements at the beginning of a swap

Here are a few suggestions for things to cover at the beginning of the swap:

- Welcome
- Ask how many people are new swappers – celebrate them
- Explain how the swap will work (talk about swap sheets, one-to-one swaps, not feeling obligated to swap and not getting feelings hurt, etc.)
- Ask people to sign up for the email list and to find the swap group on Facebook
- If appropriate, ask for donations to cover costs

Sample packing list

Some things you might want to have on hand:

- List of attendees so you can keep track of who has arrived
- Name tags
- "Swap sheets" or "bid sheets" (download samples at foodswapnetwork.com)
- Pens and markers
- Tablecloths
- Cleaning supplies
- Napkins
- Utensils (disposable or not)
- Camera
- Watch or phone to keep track of time
- Mailing list sign-up sheet
- Drinks such as lemonade, tea, or coffee
- Donation jar

Tips For a Successful Swap

Plan in advance

Yes, we said it was easy – and it is, but it does require some advance planning. If you want to pack the room with fellow foodies, you'll need to let them know well in advance. You might need to book the space a month or more in advance. Just don't be too hasty in your excitement to swap – give yourself at least six weeks, especially for your first swap.

Maybe don't do it alone

The swap community has some bad-ass folks who host swaps all by themselves, but the majority of the hosts have pals to team up with. It helps to share the workload and it's more fun to dream and scheme together.

Pick a good venue

You want a space that's hospitable, convenient, and pretty clean. Some things to look for: a place that already has tables (or ample counter space) and has convenient transportation options (if you're urban) and/or parking. Check out: nonprofit organizations, food banks, community centers, faith communities, parks, farmers' markets, schools, CSAs, community gardens, private businesses, or even your home.

Get there early to set up

You want to be able to enjoy the food swap, too, so try to get everything set up and ready to go before you start the swap. You might need to spend time rearranging tables, making sure everything is clean (we're swapping food here), and making the space welcoming. That takes time – you don't want to be rushed.

Check out the legal constraints in your community

Yes, we said the word "legal" – but don't freak out. It's just that different states, provinces, counties, cities, etc., have different rules about things. Maybe you can't swap alcohol, or maybe you can't use certain locations for swaps. Just check things out in your community.

Consider asking for donations

It doesn't take a ton of resources to hold a swap, but there might be some costs here or there. Think about asking either for some cash or donations in-kind like tea, nametags, pens, napkins, tablecloths, etc. People are usually happy to help, especially since they're going to love your food swap.

Connect with other food swap hosts

Food Swaps are happening all over the world – make sure to tap into the food swap community via the Food Swap Network website, Facebook, and Twitter.

How To Make Sure People Show Up

You've planned an amazing food swap – you expect it to be epic. It's going to be a major letdown if you have no one to swap with. That's why one of the biggest swap secrets is this: focus most of your energy on making sure people show up. Here are a few tips from the swap community:

- Reach out to all the foodie, DIY, locavore groups, publications, blogs, and leaders that Google can help you find.
- Don't take a shotgun approach. Instead, be targeted in your outreach. Give the likely groups a call, send an email, DM them on Twitter, talk to them at the farmers' market; do what you can to get their attention. Let them know about the swap and ask them to help spread the word.
- Don't forget to list your swap on foodswapnetwork.com, too!
- Make it easy for other people to help you spread the word.
- Have a pre-made email written up for people to use, give them a stack of flyers, or offer to speak in front of their meeting yourself. If the burden is on the other person to explain your cool new swap concept, it might be too high a bar and they won't do it.
- Piggyback on another event that's well attended.
- Where do the foodies already hang out? If you know they're already going to be at the farmers' market or food co-op annual meeting, think about holding your swap there so that it's easy for them to attend.
- Get some media love. A story in the local paper or radio station is like gold. And it turns out that reaching out to the media is getting easier and easier. You can start by contacting reporters that you think would be into the swap concept. Who writes about food issues? Who writes restaurant reviews? Start there.
- It's often cheap to buy press lists (try easymedialist.com) and include them in your swap emails.
- Use a tool like Eventbrite.com to manage RSVPs.
- It helps pack the room when there's an easy way to RSVP and get information. As long as your event is free, there is no charge to use Eventbrite and the service allows you to easily track who's coming and send them updates about the swap. In lieu of Eventbrite, you can also create a Facebook event page or ask people to RSVP by email.

Look out – you'll probably have overwhelming interest soon.

Food swaps are gaining momentum all over the world, so chances are, your swap will become popular quickly. When it does, be sure to keep a wait list for each swap and ask people to cancel at least 48 hours in advance if necessary. And if things get really nutty, see if someone in your community wants to start another swap group!

How To Build the Swap Momentum

You held your first swap and it was awesome. You want to do it again. Here are a few tips and tricks to ensure that people keep coming back to do it again.

Make sure each swapper's first experience is a good one

Word of mouth is the best way to gain momentum, so make sure every swapper leaves your event charged up and ready to tell their networks to get involved. Greet new swappers as they arrive and make sure they understand how everything is going to work. Check in with them throughout the swap to see how things are going. Thank them for coming and urge them to come again.

Channel the swap energy into online spaces

After each swap, post photos on Facebook, tweet about it and be sure to use a unique hashtag so everyone can see and participate, make a blog recap, and shout it from the social media rooftops!

Stay in touch with your swap network

Whether it's through social media, your blog, or an email marketing tool like MailChimp, keep swapping on the minds of your network. Share tips and information, pose questions to the group, pass along news from the worldwide swap community – and make sure to give fair notice for your next swap!

Invite your swappers to share their ideas

We foodies have lots of opinions, and we like to have our feelings be heard. An exchange of ideas about how the swap could be improved increases the community's ownership over the swap, which means they're going to be coming back AND telling their friends.

Happy Swapping!

Disclaimer

While swaps are community events, participants must pre-register, which means swap events are operated as private clubs. Consult your local department of health and food code rules for operating this type of group.

In addition, be sure all swap participants adhere to an honour code of using the highest cleanliness standards in their own kitchens and gardens to prepare their swap items.

Swap participants must agree to the following terms before registering for local area swaps:

- By participating in these events, you are acknowledging that the food items being traded are not necessarily prepared in commercial kitchens or spaces inspected by any government agency.
- By participating in these events, you are acknowledging that you will use the highest standards of safety and cleanliness in food preparation.
- By participating in these events, you assume all liability; specifically, you agree to not hold liable food swap hosts, swap venue owners/providers or other swap participants.