Do Some Research:

Market & Feasibility Studies

As a general rule, you'll want to figure out if you're going to make any money pursuing whatever venture you choose. Take a stroll around the farmers markets located near you to see if anyone else is selling the items that you've identified. Visit other farmers markets across Iowa or in neighboring states. Notice the quality of the product, its pricing, who is purchasing it, and what kind of marketing is in place. Take some photos. Take some notes. Try to calculate the costs of production, including time. Analyze this data to decide if this is still an opportunity worth pursuing. Consider reaching out to a credible business advisor—such as a Small Business Development Center near you—that can help with your business plan.

Study Food Trends

You—as a small business owner—can make changes to your offerings very quickly and seamlessly. As a result, you're uniquely positioned to take advantage of ever-changing food trends. When planning for the next season, simply do a web search of “Food Trends.” There are many online resources guessing at what will be hot in the food world in the upcoming year. Tahini energy bars may be out of reach, but others are more feasible. Maybe purple vegetables. Or perhaps edible flowers. You just want to be the one who has the product when it hits Pinterest and everybody wants it. Cha-ching!

Local Burrito’s Success Story

In 2009, Kyle Sieck saw that no one was selling hot prepared food at the Iowa City Farmers Market and seized the opportunity to start Local Burrito. He sourced ingredients from area farmers, acquired a food license, and opened for business. Today, Local Burrito is his full-time job and a market mainstay—with a dozen other prepared food vendors joining him on Washington Street each Saturday. Kyle also does food truck events and sells his Heartland Burritos in stores across Iowa.

Whether you’re a seasoned vendor looking for a new enterprise or fledgling vendor curious about opportunities, there are strategies to give you an edge. Do research both online and in-person at area markets. Look for the gaps in available product and pay attention to quality, pricing, and marketing. You want to be in the right place at the right time with the best product.

“Anything that is an imported item in the grocery aisle is a business opportunity.” - Kyle Sieck
Fresh Opportunities for You at the Farmers Market

1) Cut Flowers for Small Growers
At the farmers market, single cut stems can fetch a couple of dollars each. Add value by putting them in a bouquet—you’ll be able to charge a premium while flexing your creativity. A cut flower business can be started with field production on a relatively small land base, but in Iowa, certain varieties will do much better in high tunnels or greenhouses.

2) Healthy Food Choices and Trends
Products like bone broth and wheatgrass have arrived on the scene. Keep an eye out for developing trends. If no one else is selling a product that you believe in, the farmers market is a low-risk space to test that product and establish a customer base.

3) Crafts and Basketry
Look around the landscape on your farm. If you see lots of evergreen, wild grape, willow, or honeysuckle, you may be looking at materials for your new crafting business. Woven baskets, wreaths, and otherwise ornamental accoutrements could be a big seller at certain markets. Pottery, handcrafted wood items, and furniture are also potential opportunities.

4) Value-Added Products
Jams, jellies, baked goods, and sauces are darlings of the value-added product world. Potential also exists for dehydrated foods like sun-dried tomatoes, apple chips, and dried mushrooms.

5) Grass-Fed/Pastured Meat, Dairy, and Eggs
These products are far from new, but there is a growing demand for animal products that are raised in a system founded on humane treatment and ecological benefit (open air, clean water, fresh grass, and plenty of space to move). Many consumers are also keen on the health benefits that come from animals eating mostly or exclusively grass, as opposed to a grain-based diet. Products raised in this model fetch a significant premium, though there can be a need for consumer education depending on the market.

6) Season Extension
With a high tunnel or greenhouse, you can bring produce items to market before and after those who are only doing field production—making you competitive and allowing you to set the price. As of Fall 2019, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) managed by your local NRCS office offers financial assistance to purchase a high tunnel.

7) Wild and Cultivated Mushrooms
Either as a complementary or primary enterprise, mushrooms could be a boon to your business. Outdoor and indoor production methods exist for a variety of edible mushrooms—some easier to produce than others. Because of health benefits and meat-substitution qualities, this is a corner of the market that’s expanding.

8) Prepared Foods and Drinks
Do you fancy yourself a chef? Most markets have opportunities to sell prepared foods, but many small- to medium-sized markets don’t have any prepared food vendors. Since a lot of markets take place in the morning, you’ll likely want to cater to the breakfast crowd. Consider both traditional American food as well as international cuisine.

9) Natural Cosmetics and Medicines
Tinctures, soaps, salves, tea mixes—items like these can be produced with medicinal plants grown in a modestly-sized home garden. You can also purchase ingredients—for example, buying base ingredients like beeswax. Before you get too deep, reach out to local public health entities to make sure anything you’re producing is properly licensed.

10) Certifications
Take a look around the market. Is anyone certified organic, animal welfare approved, certified naturally-grown, or otherwise certified? If not, it could be an opportunity for you to set your business apart. More and more consumers prefer this check-off to be confident in the foods they’re eating.