Wegmans Spotlight
Enhancing the Local Economy and Shining the Spotlight on New York Farms

About Wegmans

Brothers Walter and John Wegmans founded the Rochester Fruit and Vegetable Company in 1916 after learning the food business at their parents’ grocery store. Walter worked in the store while John sold fresh produce from a pushcart, thus marking the inception of the now-beloved Wegmans Food Markets. From the beginning, the Wegmans family has been committed to being a pioneer in the food retail business, a generous member of the community, and one of the best places to work in America. Today, with over 45,000 employees in 85 stores throughout 6 states, Wegmans continues to be an industry leader and has been named one of Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” for 18 consecutive years, ranking 7th in 2015. From the top executives to cashiers, Wegmans is more than a grocery store; they donate about 16 million pounds of food to local food banks each year, have awarded $90 million in tuition assistance to its employees, and sponsored numerous educational initiatives that help children to become healthy, productive adults.

A Thriving Partnership

Cornell and Wegmans have partnered for over 40 years to enhance the local economy and shine the spotlight on New York farms. Together, they have developed many local and regional educational initiatives to encourage healthy eating habits in adults and children. Cornell Professor Robert Gravani has been collaborating with Wegmans since the 1980’s. “We have worked and continue to work together on a variety of important food issues,” says the Department of Food Science professor and director of the National Good Agricultural Practices Program. Gravani continues to conduct food safety workshops for Wegmans today.

And students play a big role in this special partnership as well. As one of the top food retailers in the country, Wegmans recognizes the importance of its current and future employees and offers valuable mentorship to students and young professionals. Cornell, with some of the best food
science students in the country, has teamed up with Wegmans to offer challenging and interesting internships to outstanding students. Last summer, Diane Schmitt ’15 completed an internship in which she studied bakery quality assurance. “Working at Wegmans as a summer intern was a wonderful learning experience,” says Schmitt. “The Wegmans team was very welcoming and helped me do a real project that was impactful to the company.” Martha Facer ’10 completed a merchandising internship during the summer of 2009. She had such a positive experience that after graduating with a degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a concentration in Food Industry Management, she joined Wegmans full time. Today, she serves as the company’s category merchant for bulk foods. Facer attributes her professional successes to a combination of education and experience:

The diversity of the coursework and experiences at Cornell helped to shape my passion for the Food Industry and prepared me for a long-term career at Wegmans. This diversity has proven to be very beneficial, not only as I started my career as a merchandising intern, but as I have developed into a category merchant. The coursework at Cornell taught me the business fundamentals that I use every day, and several International educational experiences broadened my horizons and helped me to have wider scope when analyzing the business I manage for Wegmans.

Cornell and Wegmans have recently enjoyed several other unique collaborations, including a three-year pilot program to develop a world-class artisan cheese industry in New York, which will be prominently featured at Wegmans locations across the state.

In the most recent chapter of the Cornell-Wegmans partnership, the family-owned grocery chain joined the CIFS Industry Partnership Program. Bill Strassburg, Vice President, Strategic Planning at Wegmans, lauded the collaboration, saying, “CIFS-IPP provides a great opportunity to enhance our ongoing efforts to promote the food industry in the Finger Lakes Region and bring together key industry stakeholders. Through CIFS we have made connections that will help us continue to develop the agriculture and food processing sector in our area.”

We recently checked in with Bill to learn how Wegmans has been utilizing CIFS-IPP so far and to hear their future plans.

**CIFS-IPP provides a number of benefits to its members. Which ones have you enjoyed so far?**

One of the biggest benefits thus far has been open conversation and collaboration with other key food systems stakeholders. Attending CIFS-IPP-sponsored events has put us in touch with other members of industry and encouraged us to identify new opportunities to collaborate. Additionally, our employees have had early opportunities to view or attend CIFS-IPP webcasts and conferences. We have easier access to Cornell expertise for specific projects, like the Artisan Cheese Program, organic seed research, organic farming training, and nutrition initiatives. And, in an exciting development, we have been able to sponsor students from Cornell to work on special projects. They bring a wealth of knowledge and energy to everything they do!

**How do you plan to utilize the program more or differently in the future?**
We will continue to make connections within the food systems community and collaborate on projects that are beneficial to our region and local communities. Additionally, we are exploring projects with Cornell to address production concerns in organic and conventional grains, including crop and rotation management and disease assessment. We will assist Cornell in obtaining funding to develop crop budgets that reflect production costs and revenue streams for organic grains.

**What would you tell other companies who are considering joining CIFS-IPP?**

Agriculture is vital to the NYS economy, and through the CIFS-IPP partnership, we have the opportunity to leverage what we do best in New York to advance the economic development of the region. We are stronger when we combine our individual talents, and the Industry Partnership Program provides the perfect pathway to becoming better together.