Small-scale Food Initiatives in Southwest Minnesota: Oral History Project 2012-13

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River City Eatery
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Mari Harries: River City Eatery has been in my mind for as long as I can remember and it started by my love to travel and experience new things. I’m a small town girl. I grew up in Windom, Minnesota. Like many youth in a small town, I was very excited to leave. So, growing up here, I had a great childhood. The thing about small town living is you get to experience everything that you would like to experience, whether that’s being part of the softball team or the community theater. And you got to really try everything that there was to offer and I appreciated that. It really shaped who I am today, but there was also this longing for something more: this big world out there for me to explore and experience beyond the city limits of Windom, Minnesota. So growing up here, a lot of fun, then you hit high school and you are just extremely excited to leave. You’re itching because you are almost there; you are almost to the point of getting out and getting ready to create myself, and not necessarily what the community had created of myself. So I left Windom after I graduated in 2001 and had no intentions to ever come back here, ever again. It was going to be the dust of my tracks and I left to go to the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. I had done a lot of travelling before that also. Community things had allowed me, too, to travel around the country with the band or with a community group. That was very exciting and I wanted more of that. So I left for college and I was just going to travel.

I started studying English at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. And like a lot of English majors, I spent a lot of time at coffee shops, reading and writing and taking everything in, because it was exactly where I wanted to be. It was not here in Windom, Minnesota. So, in all of my travels and in all of these little coffee shops that had inspired so much writing, and people watching, and experience beyond Windom, I started to dream my own dreams about owning my own coffee shop someday, and it was not going to be here in Windom, Minnesota. And a few years had passed. My grandfather died my sophomore year of college, and I grew up a block away from my grandfather. And suddenly, the idea of family and roots and hometown started to sink in. And that’s kind of my changing point of why I came back to live in Windom was because I realized how much my family was a part of who I am and how much I needed their support. I just wanted to be there for my family. And my brother also lives here and he was the one that was never going to leave, which I never understood, but he lives here, too, and he’s got a family here now. And they live a few blocks away from me and the Eatery.

Needless to say, I graduated from college and I came back. And I was searching for a reason I came back beyond my family. Everyone says the transition from high school to college is really hard and I don’t agree. I think the transition from college into what they call the real world is harder. You have to do a lot of soul-searching, figuring out what it was that brought you to where you are now and so, um, I spent as much time as I could in the few coffee shops around here that were inspiring and shortly after I graduated from college, I had written my business plan for what was going to be called Mari’s Degree in English Coffeehouse and Eatery. And it was kind of my humor of using this college degree to open a business. Like any smart bank would, they did not give me a loan to open a small business in a rural community. Although I was very proud of the business plan that I had written, and I think I had done my research like any potential business owner would do, it just didn’t work. There was something missing, whether it was experience, whether it was collateral, whether it was the student loans that I
needed to pay back; it just didn’t work. And it was a very hard time because you put your heart and soul into something, which at that point was my business plan, and Mari’s Degree in English Coffeehouse and Eatery. It fell flat on its face and so you start the search all over again.

So I started doing various jobs just to make it work and to get out of my parents’ house and start living on my own. I did everything from working at the local gas station to the Windom Country Club, and the connections I had made in college led me to a catering company out of Minneapolis called Prom Catering. It was a perfect job for me at the time, because it was food and it was travel. And so every weekend, I found myself at a professional golf tournament and catering to the wealthy. And it was an amazing experience. I got management skills. I managed temporary staff for weekends. You learn a lot about yourself and about other people, and it was amazing, until family and home starts to set in again. It was shortly after my first few golf tournaments that I catered, I met my now husband. And if I had talked to me about ten years prior, I would have never wanted to get married or have children or have a house or have any sort of ground and so this was shocking. And so, I was touring the United States with the catering company and home was just in the back of my mind this whole time. And I ended up coming back to Windom and getting an office job. Also something if you had asked me ten years prior would not have been in my agenda, but it worked. It was a job. And I settled down and got married and I have a son now. He’s two. And collateral.

So I revisited my business plan that I had written five or six years prior and I did the necessary work that needed to be done to it and created River City Eatery and got the courage to back to the bank, the same bank that had denied me before. I was courageous enough to set my business plan down in front of him and he was kind enough to say, “You’re crazy,” again. And so I packed up my business plan and I went to the next bank. And I said, “You’ve got to be crazy not to loan me this tiny amount of money to start something that this small rural community really needs.” At the time there was not much for local food besides your big-box McDonalds and Subways and Hardees. Not much local flavor here in Windom, so I thought my business plan was perfect for many reasons, not only myself, but for this small rural community. And they were kind enough to write me a letter that said no. And so I saved that letter and I went to the third bank and they were kind enough to say, “Maybe, but you have to have this, this and this.” And I didn’t have any of that.

My parents were kind enough to believe in me and believe in my business plan and believe in this community that they could support something like this. So, they helped me a lot and it’s kind of ironic that something that brought me back here is also supporting my dream. And, um, so I…after the third bank had so kindly gave me ultimatums that I didn’t have, I was kind of searching for more options between grants, between anything out there to help small businesses get started. And through some other networking in the community, I discovered the Southwest Initiative Foundation, which is a very gracious foundation that helps small businesses get started. It is a very lengthy project. It is not by any means an easy process to take on—filling out paperwork and making sure they knew their money was going to be in good hands. But it worked, it worked. With the help of the WADC, which is the Windom Area Development Committee, they also helped with financing to buy this building and make the necessary renovations. Without them, it wouldn’t exist either. It was nice to have other community members support something that they thought was much needed in the community and believed
in my business plan as well. So with their help, we are here at River City Eatery in Windom, Minnesota. And it’s my dream come true and it still is after many months of long hours and just making things work, how my business plan said that they would. So that is kind of the boring part of it.

The exciting part is that we’re in business and it’s even bigger than I had imagined in my head in those tiny coffee shops and in the books that I had written my thoughts in. It’s very surreal to be sitting here, in downtown Windom as a business owner. And um, that’s where I’m at.

**Peter Shea:** Let’s go back to the degree in English. Has that been of any use to you?

**Mari:** Yeah, it’s come in. I’ve always loved to write. I’ve always loved reading. I’ve always been inspired by books and things that are whimsical, I guess. So it only felt right to get a degree in English. Of course, there’s many things…you have this idea in the back of your mind of opening a business someday, but a business degree was not in my plan at all. I hate numbers. I didn’t open a restaurant because I like to do accounting. It just didn’t seem or feel right to get a business degree. I played with other things too, whether that was art, but that didn’t really seem logical for myself. So, they always told me that with a degree in English, you could do whatever you wanted to do, because it’s a very broad, broad subject. It’s a broad category and it’s helped me in a lot of ways. It helped me write a business plan, as literal as it sounds. It helps me, not that I’m doing that very well right now, but it helps me get out what I’m thinking and what I was dreaming at the time. To really write that on paper and be able to express that. My degree in English, it still to this day, it doesn’t seem logical that I have one, but it has helped me in so many ways. It’s helped me get to the point that I am now and it’s helped me get what I want. You can do anything with an English degree.

**Peter:** You start out talking about writing in little coffee shops in Milwaukee. Can you talk about the evolution of your idea of what a coffee shop should be? What sort of pieces came together as you tried out different places and thought about what you wanted to do?

**Mari:** I knew that River City Eatery or Mari’s Degree in English Coffee Shop and Eatery was going to be pieces of every little coffee shop that I had found, whether it was in Milwaukee, whether it was in the surrounding area, whether it was in Europe. I wanted to take those aspects that I enjoyed that were kind of quirky and different and kind of combine all of those things. And I think everyone in business knows that just because your doors are open, doesn’t mean that you are going to get customers, but you really have to create an experience. And that’s what I was trying to do when I wrote my business plan; I was trying to get the experience written in the business plan. It’s not just about the food, it’s not just about the service, and it’s about the whole experience. And that’s really what’s going to make something successful. And that’s what’s going to get people to keep coming back. And that’s what’s going to spread the word to get other people to come. And so I kind of took bits and pieces of all of these cafés and restaurants and coffee shops that I had been to that had inspired me and combined them into what River City Eatery is now, whether that’s getting a latté or a glass of wine to getting spaghetti and meatballs to just something like pesto hummus. There’s a variety of things that River City Eatery offers and I would like to think that there’s something for everyone, whether that’s the world traveler or that’s just the farmer in southwestern Minnesota can come in and
enjoy River City Eatery. That was the hardest part about creating a business plan was trying to make sure that my market was going to be a lot of people. I knew that the Windom community couldn’t support it. It needs support from the travelers coming in on highways 60 and 71. It needs support from all markets. From our high school students who have lots of money to spend. So that was my goal was to really take all of those elements that I enjoy and really combine them so that lots of other markets can enjoy them as well.

Peter: So what’s distinctive about this place?

Mari: I think what’s distinctive about this place is not only its location because it’s in a small southwestern, very rural farming community and to find some of the things you find on my menu, it’s definitely not something that you would normally find in southwestern Minnesota, but the thing about it is I try to offer very familiar things, but with a twist—so that makes the experience. Our special, our very popular special on Saturdays, is a meatball commercial. And a lot of people will come in and have no idea what a commercial is, and it’s a very classic southwestern Minnesota dish. It’s literally bread, mashed potatoes, gravy, and beef or turkey or your meat of choice. And I did not want to serve that at all. And if you would have asked me, even when I was writing my business plan, the new one, if I was going to have some sort of commercial, I would have said, “No way,” because that’s what you would have gotten at the truck stop and not that there’s anything bad about that, it just wasn’t what I was thinking in my mind, but when you start to explore your markets and who you are trying to get in the door, it only seemed right to have a commercial and so I twisted it. I used things that I already had and that’s another key part about the business plan was the low food inventory, using ingredients that are very versatile. So, I have a low inventory, but can do many things with them. Meatballs was one of them and thanks to the guys in my life, those meatballs are on our menu. I’m trying to create very familiar things to southwest Minnesota, but doing them with a twist, so that you get that experience and it’s distinctive. It’s not something you can get somewhere else necessarily. I have lots of ingredients that I like to play with that I think go really well with those world travelers and palettes that have tasted many things and trying to get the people who might not necessarily try those, to try them. For example, basil pesto is a very standard ingredient that I like to use and it can be used very many ways. A lot of people that come into River City Eatery have never had it, believe it or not, but when you introduce it in small ways—it’s in a mayo on a sandwich, it’s in a pasta—then they start to change their mind a little bit. That’s, I guess, my goal when I opened this as well, was to not only give that experience, but kind of get people thinking outside of the box, just a little bit. I think that’s what makes River City Eatery distinctive.

Service is huge. I wanted people to feel the community of Windom as I felt it growing up. Very friendly. Everybody knows everybody. I wanted it to be that third place in our community that was lacking. That third place of people being able to gather, figure out the local news, find out what’s going on in town, find out social networks. If you move to a town, it’s nice to have a place to go to meet the local people outside of work or your home. It’s that third place where people celebrate together. I think with the experience of River City Eatery, all of my favorite memories of traveling or being in these coffee shops or being with family have been around food. It’s just a common ground for a lot of people. Being around good food with good drinks, you have the opportunity to make memories yourself, not necessarily of the place that you’re at,
but the people that you’re with and the food that you’re enjoying. That’s what I wanted to share with the world. That’s what I wanted River City Eatery to be—that place where people make memories together and make memories in the community that I grew up in, that I didn’t necessarily love growing up, but have an appreciation beyond appreciation for, because it really shaped who I am today. I took that for granted growing up.

**Peter:** Where did you get your food education?

**Mari:** That’s a good question.

**Peter:** Or how, not where, but how? You have a very particular perspective on food, strong views on what’s good. Just a correction, a commercial is not food; a commercial is a piece of sculpture…that you eat. If you think of it that way, it’s just fine. You have a very distinctive perspective on food and I wonder, what are the sources of that?

**Mari:** You know, that’s a good question and I don’t know if I can actually pinpoint where my love for these foods came from. I did grow up in a household that we tried to eat dinner together as much as we could, but it was your classic meat and potatoes. Very southwestern Minnesota. I myself, when I travel, I want to experience it, everything that I can. I like to try new things. Summertime is one of my favorite times to cook because you have all this lovely produce and fresh herbs. For me, there is something to be said for just cooking fresh and using all of those fresh ingredients to create new things. I think that it’s funny that you were mentioning sculpture because I really think of it as art. Food is art—in how it tastes, in how it looks, in how it’s presented to you. You eat with your eyes before it’s even in your mouth. It was just for me creating something and I love to create things. I guess I am an artist at heart, too. Being able to create things and introducing my art to people is the exciting part for me. So my food education—I really have none. I’ve been collecting recipes for years. From when I started writing my business plan until when we opened, I’ve been constantly playing with flavors, playing with recipes to make them my own. I didn’t want to copy what was on the paper or someone else’s idea, but trying to take a base recipe and changing it to suit my tastes and then of course the tastes of my family, what they would eat. Trying it out on family and friends and just playing with it and having fun with food and not necessarily taking it so seriously. My employees laugh at me because I never measure anything. I measure with my eyes, which makes it impossible to train anybody to be able to take a day off and have somebody else duplicate what you’re doing. I think that’s where my passion comes from—creating new things, whether that’s from food or its presentation. So that’s the exciting part. I have new specials every day. That’s another part of the business plan was to have a very limited menu, where I have my core menu, but all of those ingredients I can play with. So I have a new daily special every single day, except for the specials that have just kind of boomed and people love. I won’t take those away. It’s fun just having fun with these ingredients.

**Peter:** I’m curious about your successes and failures in terms of introducing food to this community. Some things have taken off. Other things, I presume, have bombed. Can you share any of that with us?
Mari: One of the hardest things to do was to create that core menu. Coming from all of these things that I was experimenting with and creating all of these new recipes, I had to create the core menu. That was really hard to do because there were a lot of things on there that I really loved, but I would go to my family and friends and I wouldn’t get the same reaction from them. It was editing it and putting new things in and taking things out. So that was definitely the hardest part. Creating my core menu that had something on it for every age, for every gender, for every palate basically. I think that has been one of the successes—doing all of that research because there isn’t anything on my menu that I’m going to throw out. I sell every thing, every day. So that’s been one of the successes and I’m really glad it has been, because it’s been a lot of work. There have been some daily specials that I thought were crazy for southwestern Minnesota, and maybe I’m selling ourselves short by stereotyping southwestern Minnesota, but things like fish tacos, I didn’t think they were going to be a hit, but they were a hit in southwestern Minnesota. That’s just one example of something you need to take your chances on and see what bites. That’s kind of been the fun part too, especially being a new business. The failures, or maybe I should change the failures to frustrations, are the people who come in and think the menu is just a suggestion. This is not a suggestion, you know. There’s a reason all of these ingredients are together on a sandwich or are together in pasta or whatever it might be. I understand there are very picky eaters because I am married to one. They’re kind of frustrating at times because you put your heart and soul into a dish; for them to take something that’s so important off of it is like gut-wrenching sometimes. I’ve gotten better at handling that and dealing with that, as someone who put their heart and soul and a lot of research into it. We just kind of laugh about it now. It’s interesting, for sure.

The other interesting thing is that I wanted to have home baked goodies and home baked desserts. One of our biggest sellers is our homemade pie. It’s hard to find homemade pies these days. We make our crust from scratch and we try to do as much as we can that’s just homemade and I think that’s part of the experience. It’s something that makes us distinct from everybody else. You’ll get some farmer’s wives and older women who have been doing it for many years that will criticize what you do, and I love them for it, because I’m hoping someday I will do that, too. After all of my food experience, to be able to have people say, “No, it wasn’t as good as Mari’s.” It’s just been interesting because a lot of things that I thought were going to be successes or failures didn’t go that way at all. It’s kind of refreshing. Actually, it’s very refreshing. Every day is a new day. Is something crazy going to happen? As far as the Eatery being open now, those successes and failures are easier to handle than it was when I was trying to get a place open. The successes and failures of trying to open a business, especially a food business, are excruciating. I felt like I was in the boxing ring most of the time. Knockout, every single time. The hardest part for me was convincing people that this was going to work, that my heart and soul were in this. When your heart and soul are in something, it’s not about the money or the amount of work that it took to do it, but it’s about knowing that you put everything on the line to make it work. To me, that’s instant success right there. To convince people about that was really hard and exhausting. Now that I’m open and doing well, that it’s going to be a successful business here in a rural community, feels good. It feels like I’ve taken it back and all of those knockouts that I did have mean that much more now. So, it’s good.

Peter: Can you tell us a bit about your workday?
Mari: My workday doesn’t really end, but I love it. I love being able to get up in the morning and I come here. I live a block away. This is really our kitchen, too. I haven’t turned our stove or oven on at home in over a year. It should just be another family room actually. My workday starts early. It’s getting a lot better now that I have awesome employees. I couldn’t do this without my family. My mom works for me. My dad unofficially works for me. My husband is maintenance. My dad is maintenance. I don’t know what I would do without them. I wouldn’t be able to do this without them. While my workday usually starts early and you get here and prepare for lunch, on Saturday mornings we added breakfast (I don’t know why I did that to myself, but it’s going well), so we get ready for lunch. I make a lot of things from scratch. My soup everyday is homemade. Just figuring out what you’re going to do for soup. I don’t know most of the time until 10:00 that day. You just try to gather ingredients and figure out what works. You play with it again and play with recipes. Hopefully we just have a crazy lunch. Lunchtimes are really crazy because people are on their lunch breaks so they don’t have a lot of time. You’re trying to get as much food out of the door—quality food that looks great, that tastes good—in a shorter amount of time. Then it’s kind of a lull and I try to do some more baking between lunch and dinner and get a quick bite myself. Then I usually pick up my son from daycare at about this time, before dinnertime. Then I start to get the night crew ready for dinner. I love dinner because people are relaxed. People aren’t moving as fast. It’s interesting to see how the restaurant goes from quick chaos to just a relaxing dinner. People come in for pie and coffee. You know, they have dessert at dinner. Then to have people come in for a cup of coffee with a group of friends just to talk in the evenings (we’re open until 10:00). By the time you get everything wrapped up, by the time you get everything cleaned up and somewhat ready to go for the next day, it’s midnight. Then you go home and crash and think about all this other stuff like bookwork and payroll and taxes. Those things that you didn’t think you’d have to think about when you were opening a business, because I was just doing it for the experience and the food and all those fun things, but then you have to think about the non-fun things. So, accounting and taxes. Finding time for all of that has really been interesting. As time goes on, you find a balance and you find a balance between what you love to do, which is being in the kitchen and mingling with the customers, to doing all of the accounting work and keeping up on that and being a mom and being a wife. My day is always crammed full. I love it because I need to be busy. It’s just the person that I am. I have to always have stuff to think about and worry about because then I know I’m living. It’s fun and kind of going on that, it’s one of the burdens. When I started this, I had a very young son. He was about five months old when I brought it up to my husband that this was what I wanted to do. I kind of made it sound like he had an opinion about it, but he really didn’t. I was going to do this whether he wanted me to or not, because it needed to come out. It was just wrestling in there. After many discussions, some of them arguments, some of them happiness, we got to this point. The great thing about it is that he has embraced it with everything. My son runs around. He loves this place. He loves it because he gets to see his grandparents all the time. He loves it because he gets to sit out front and eat his breakfast in the summertime. He gets to play with his trucks on the sidewalk and he gets to watch the big trucks go by on the street. This is going to be his life. That was a hard feeling for me, too. Feeling like you had something that needed to get out, but also trying to be a wife and a mother and a friend at the same time. It’s a balancing act of a day. I get to wear many hats. It’s exciting. Sometimes things don’t always go the way you planned, but you work through them. You always have to be optimistic when you’re a business owner.
Peter: So I’m guessing 14-15 hours a day?

Mari: That’s a good day. I have easily put in 18-19 hour days. That was toward the beginning. Now they are getting much better. They’re about 12-14 hours. It’s also hard to train a staff when you yourself don’t know what you’re doing and every day is new. So that was one of the challenges of opening a business, especially a restaurant business. In your business plan, you were talking about how important service is and creating an atmosphere and having your customers enjoy the experience beyond the food. Training staff when I wasn’t really sure how great things were going. The first couple weeks were a very steep learning curve. You had to learn quickly, and if something didn’t work, you had to change it now. Every person who comes in that door is going to decide whether or not they come back or is going to decide what they tell other people about your business. The first day we opened, it was literally “let’s try this and see how it goes.” By dinnertime, we had made a complete 180. That’s the way the whole first couple weeks, maybe even months, went. This wasn’t working, so we had to change it. This is working well; let’s see if we can work with that. That was when I was putting in a lot of hours. I was trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together now that it was actually happening. I talked my mother into quitting the full-time job that she had and working for me full-time. Now that I have that, it has been so much easier. The days aren’t as long. You feel like you have time to breathe. The first few months were exhausting and some of them still are. You’re dealing with new issues every single day that you would have never thought would happen. Until I’ve got a few years of experience under my belt, I think that’s just the way it’s going to be.

Peter: So just to get my head around this: somewhere between 12-19 hours a day, 6 days a week?

Mari: Yes.

Peter: Who are your colleagues? I mean, who do you exchange horror stories with or go to for advice? Are there other restaurant people? Business people? Where’s your support network?

Mari: Definitely my family. There are some other business owners in town. There are a few that understand, because they too have business themselves or they had a business at one point. My family is the biggest piece of the puzzle and probably the reason that I’m not in the corner, in the fetal position sucking my thumb right now. They do whatever they can to make sure that those 19-hour days don’t happen. There aren’t really any other local restaurants that I feel close to that I would be able to share stories with. The restaurant business in general is pretty brutal. I’ve been hearing that since the day the words came out of my mouth that I wanted to own a restaurant. That’s usually the first response you get from people. Why would you want to do that? That’s just insane because it’s brutal! It will be your life. That’s what I wanted. I was okay with that. I was okay with it being my life because it was something that I believed in. I don’t know what I would do without this place. It’s like a child. It’s like becoming a mother all over again. You don’t know what you were like without that child. I literally eat, sleep, and breathe River City Eatery. It wouldn’t work if I didn’t. I don’t think any small business would work without the person who created it. It wouldn’t be the same.
Peter: Tell me a bit about your suppliers, where you get your food from.

Mari: The majority of my food comes from food distributors like Reinhart. Reinhart is a smaller food distributor. I also get some from Sysco, which is a bigger food distributor, one of the biggest in the United States. I also appreciate local. I try and get as much as I can local, but that’s also a hard market. You really have to weigh what you’re getting and the prices. There are all sorts of factors that come in when you’re thinking about suppliers. You have to think about numerous things and they all have to match. I obviously want quality since that’s part of the River City standard and price and who my market is. When all of those things don’t come together, it’s not going to work. I try to get as much as I can local. I get my eggs from a local farmer. Now that it’s summertime, I get a lot of my herbs from locals. I’ve got my fresh basil back there. I use that. I believe that is very important to be as local as possible, but you also have to think about the cost and all of those factors go together.

Peter: I was just wondering about the time issue. I wasn’t finding any shopping time in that account you were giving. If you are going to buy local, you’ve got to be able to go out and look at the broccoli.

Mari: That usually would be done between lunch and dinner. That’s the other thing, too, is I don’t have a lot of time to do that. What I do do locally is because we have very ambitious farmers that come to me and that helps a lot. I’ll say that to anybody who really wants or needs something from me, whether that’s a donation or a farmer who wants my business, it’s so much easier if you just come to me. I most likely won’t return phone calls or e-mails or letters because there’s just not time to do that. The amount that you get in a day is crazy. Most of the time when you come to me with your product, it’s a big sell for me because you’ve taken the time to do that.

Peter: There’s a lot of sad news about small towns in Minnesota. I’ve met a lot of sad people who love their towns and can’t see how they can be made to work. You obviously have voted with your life that Windom can be made to work. Can you say a little bit about your hope for this town? I mean there has to be a town around the eatery or the eatery doesn’t happen. Talk about that.

Mari: I’m glad you brought that up because before I knew that I was for sure going to do this in the very near future, I started a blog because I was a writer and it felt natural to get my feelings out on paper, or in this case the computer. I started a blog that was called “Finding Windom.” It was meant for me to talk about all of the wonderful things that I was taking for granted and that I thought the community was taking for granted because Windom is really a wonderful town, a wonderful community. We have things here that not everybody has. I started this blog talking not only about what we had, but what we could be. It kind of snowballed. We are now a non-profit organization. We meet once a month and we basically help the city of Windom, the city office, the chamber of commerce, local groups and organizations. We guide them as far as the community is looking for, for quality of life. We really are dedicated to Windom and the nostalgia of it and the experience of it. We have a courthouse square, which is kind of unheard of these days. There aren’t very many of them left. Most cities have main streets and we have a whole square. My idea for Windom is much more than it is now, but I
love everything that there is here now. We have the Internet, which is also unheard of for a rural area. We have our own broadband system that has capabilities beyond what the originators even planned. It’s one of the best ideas we’ve ever had. We are also dedicated to teaching our youngsters that rural life is not bad. Growing up here, like I said before, there’s almost this underlying tone to a lot of people that we send our youngsters out in the world to succeed. There’s nothing in a rural area or Windom for you. If you want to succeed, then you have to go out into the world. You have to go to a city to find that. I think a lot of our youngsters have that idea growing up and that’s what happens. I talk to a lot of people, whether they’re my peers that live out of town now that would love to come back but just can’t because they would feel like a failure. Even when I moved back to Windom, I had a lot of people saying, “Why did you move back here?” Actually, the first time I applied for a job, I gave them my résumé and they said, “You seem like a very successful young woman, why are you here?” I have something to offer you because this is where I want to be. I guess it’s not an underlying tone. People would flat out say, “Why are you here?” I don’t want that to happen. If we continue to do that, we’re not going to have a community left. The blog was kind of dedicated to making sure our rural life was thriving. We really have a quality of life that is outstanding and we shouldn’t be selling ourselves short of that at all. We have what a lot of people are looking for, but we aren’t selling it. Our self-confidence in our community is definitely not what it should be. It’s almost trying to work on a confidence boost for the city of Windom. There are so many great aspects that I grew up with that I want my own son to have. So that’s another piece of the puzzle, too. I want this community to shape my son just the way it shaped me. I hope that’s by giving back to the community, whatever community that is. It’s actually a broad subject and I could probably talk about how wonderful Windom is and all of my visions of Windom for a really long time and I have been for about two years now on my blog. I also feel like River City Eatery is something that Windom was missing, and it’s kind of my way of giving back to the community. It needs it. It needs as many small businesses as it can handle. It needs supportive community members. That’s what’s exciting. There are so many possibilities for Windom beyond what it already is.

**Peter:** I think it’s hard for people who can make it in the cities who have jobs to imagine just at minimum, what could we do out there? I mean, that’s a level of the problem. What do we do out there after we’ve looked at the cornfields and watched the sunsets?

**Mari:** I think that’s exactly why Windom is selling itself short, because a lot of people don’t necessarily think of things to do. There’s so much to do here, but we have to tell people that. We have to tell people what there is here. It’s not the same thing as you would find in the city. You’re not going to find a movie theater or your options for nightlife or things like that. There’s not going to be as many of those, but there are opportunities like county parks, the outdoors. We have amazing hunting here. People come to hunt or fish. We have snowmobile trails, walking trails. If you love the outdoors, this is where you want to be. There are quirky things like every morning at 7:00 a.m., the courthouse bells play the Star Spangled Banner. I can hear that when I’m sometimes lying in bed and I smile because I love it. The things don’t necessarily come at you like they do in the city. There are so many things to do. We have the Jeffers Petroglyphs. We have the historical society if you’re a history buff. There’s tons of history in southwestern Minnesota. There’s things you just have to think outside the box with,
and that’s where we’re selling ourselves short. It’s not necessarily the mall or shopping, but there are things.

**Peter:** Well, quickly just at the end, I sincerely hope that some people who encounter this will come try your restaurant. Can you give us a couple of recommendations?

**Mari:** Recommendations for River City Eatery?

**Peter:** Yeah.

**Mari:** I would have to say that you have to try the Chicken Dance Sandwich and you have to order it with the dried cranberries because otherwise it’s just not the Chicken Dance Sandwich. And those come with it already. It’s an apricot honey mustard and garlic chicken and provolone cheese and mustard cheese grilled on a ciabatta bun. It’s a little bit of everything. It’s a little bit of kick and a little bit of sweet. You have to try the spaghetti and meatballs. It’s my homemade marinara. It probably took me about five recipes to master, but I think it’s a good one and it’s a good one for everybody’s palate. It’s not too hot; it’s not too bland. I think you should try the Pesto Party Pasta. It’s not bland. It’s not a bold flavor. It’s just perfect. There are some roasted red peppers in there. They are probably one of my favorite things to work with because they give a little bit of distinct flavor to a lot of things. You definitely have to try one of our coffees. All of our coffees are made with natural ingredients. We make out own syrups here and they’ll taste a lot different than you’re used to because they’re real. You definitely have to try our homemade pie. I’ve been told that they’re better than grandma’s and that’s the best compliment I could have ever gotten.

**Peter:** Thank you.

**Mari:** Thank you.