



Agritourism in Specialty Crop Regions

*Duncan Hilchey, New Leaf Publishing and Consulting
duncan@newleafnet.com or 607.342.0259*

What Is Agritourism?

Agritourism is *a commercial enterprise conducted for the enjoyment of visitors that takes advantage of underutilized assets on a farm and generates supplemental income for the owner.* Agritourism has numerous synonyms, including “agri-tourism,” “agri-tainment,” “farm tourism” and others. These are all pretty much referring to similar kinds of operations: farm bed and breakfasts, farm petting zoos, farm tours, farm stays, horseback riding, etc. It can even include recreational access like fee hunting or fee fishing. Allied tourism services include bicycle and moped rentals, and airplane or balloon rides, and hospitality such as restaurants and B&Bs that serve signature cuisine using local ingredients. Some people include direct marketing in their definition of agritourism.

Agritourism has a long history in the United States, with roots in the Gilded Age of the late 1800s when some gentleman farmers with large land holdings would invite business associates and neighboring families out to the farm to enjoy fresh air activities such as trail riding, swimming and picnicking. However, it was after the Great Depression and World War II that a pent-up torrent of recreational demand was unleashed, as the middle class burgeoned with the nation’s increased wealth and mobility.

The farm crisis of the 1980s led to tremendous interest among farmers in sideline income; tapping the quality of life on farms seemed like a profitable idea. Today many direct marketers (such as roadside stand operators and pick-your-own operators) have found that consumers who visit farms want more than just fresh produce; they want an “immersion” experience, however brief, that connects them to the farmer and the land. Tourists are increasingly interested in knowing more about the life of farmers, and how food is produced and brought to their table. Generally, we find that most people are looking for anecdotes they can share with friends and family when they bring back a sample of something special.

Farmers, food processors, and even agribusinesses in specialty crop regions all have something special to offer visitors. Following are a couple examples of agritourism enterprises that could create a successful tourism destination in a specialty crop region.

Farm Tours and Factory Tours

Tours of farms and factories are one of the best ways to educate consumers about our industry. These can be free or fee-based, guided or unguided, long or short. However, a key to their success is deciding in advance whether they are intended to be profitable, philanthropic, or a “loss leader” (the tours themselves are not profitable, but they lead to

sales in the shop or winery that are). Farm tours tend to be seasonal: summers generally attract vacationing families; spring and fall are less crowded and tend to attract seniors. Strategies might include working with the motor coach industry to bring in bus tours, and marketing the educational aspects of the farm or factory to the local school district in order to bring school children for educational programs. Specialty crop and local heritage groups could work with farmers and processors to establish tours and tasting rooms similar to what wineries have been doing for years. Food manufacturing companies large and small all over the United States open their doors to consumers who want to learn about where their food comes from. Liability and cost issues must be taken into



Meadowbrooke Gourds in Carlisle, Penn., gives tours of its high-end decorated gourd factory.

Photo copyright © 2008 by Duncan Hilchey

account, and many businesses just do not want any perceived interference. But for the intrepid agripreneur, these issues can be overcome through careful planning and support from local groups and agencies. See <http://factorytoursusa.com> for ideas and inspiration. And check out Oregon's Wine and Farm Tour (www.oregonwineandfarmtour.com) for examples of how farm and factory tours can be coordinated.

Farm B&Bs

Farm-based bed and breakfasts can provide a home base for tourists visiting a specialty crop region. Along with other hospitality providers in the region, B&B owners can offer recommendations to tourism businesses, tell stories, and provide a taste of place. Farm-based B&Bs can be ideal for tourists looking for a more romantic experience. If managed well, bed and breakfasts can be profitable and fun. Among the advantages of these alternative enterprises are that they take advantage of underutilized assets (such as extra rooms or perhaps a barn). They may also reduce the capital cost of a farm through additional tax deductions. Some farmers report that having guests stay with them can reduce their sense of isolation. But families need to be prepared for the reduced privacy and additional liability that comes with bringing pay visitors into their home.

Complementary Tourism Businesses and Auxiliary Tourism Services

There are lots of related tourism businesses and profitable sideline enterprises that would serve farm tourists and foodie visitors, including bike and moped rentals, horseback riding, sailing and fishing charters, historic home tours, and nature guides. Of course don't forget the specialty foods that tourists *expect* to find in a tourism region: jams, jellies, pie filling, juices, wine, and the like, which make the trip special and provide the real *goût de terroir* — taste of place.

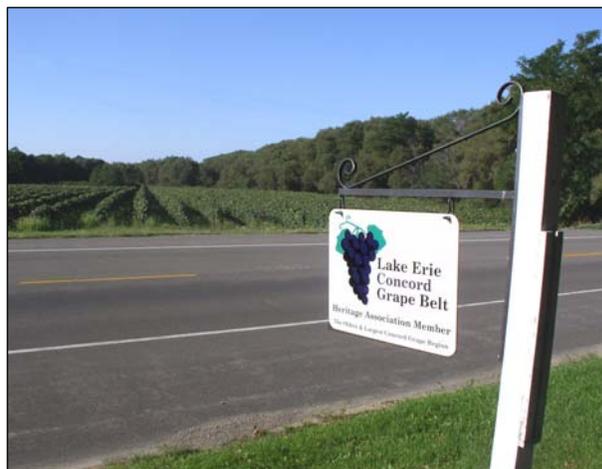
Agritourism Is Not for Everyone

An agritourism operation requires a unique set of skills and resources in order to be successful. It is not always in the nature of farmers or food manufacturers to be accepting of consumers and tourists. That's typically the business of retailers, after all! However, there are some folks who just seem to have a knack for working with customers and strangers, and actually see outsiders as a welcome change from the daily routine of farming. In addition to the right disposition, it is helpful to have a scenic landscape and fairly easy access from major highways. There is the issue of liability to be concerned about, but due diligence and a good insurance underwriter are typically all that are needed. As always, a business needs to be in reasonably good financial shape before diversifying into an alternative enterprise such as agritourism.

How Can Local Agencies and Organizations Help To Develop Agritourism?

Collaborating with county and regional tourism agencies is the key to identifying and encourage “agripreneurs.” Cooperative Extension can work with local Small Business Development Centers to provide education and training. Local tourism agencies can help package and promote regional activities. Schools, historic societies, and other civic organizations can help gather facts and history on the region that can be used in promotional literature. Here are a few other ideas:

- Develop tourism packages marketing them to motor coach companies;
- Establish relationships with existing tourism magnets in the region;
- Work with farmers with particularly nice views of the specialty crop region to establish roadside pull-offs (waysides);
- Work with municipal and state authorities to address signage issues;
- Identify youth programs that might be interested in fundraising activities like selling value-added specialty products;
- Recruit restaurants to join a regional farm and cuisine promotion program; or
- Collaborate with other tourism operators to promote the entire region.



Attractive signage identifies members of the Lake Erie Concord Grape Belt Heritage Association — both member farms and retail outlets.

Photo copyright © 2008 by Duncan Hilchey

Finally, consider forming an “agrcluster” in which the various facets of a regional specialty crop agritourism program can come together and be coordinated. This collaborative approach makes grant applications much more competitive.