

Agritourism: defined by a lack of definition

There is little value in addressing the agricultural tourism sector unless we first know what it is we're dealing with. You see, across the country there seems to be little consensus on just what constitutes an agritourism activity. Attempted definitions range from the broad - "any supplemental farm activity" or "any farm activity direct to the consumer" – to the narrow - "farm tours" or "overnight boarding at farms". Tied closely to "rural tourism", many feel the terms are interchangeable.

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Generally speaking, agritourism activities run the gamut from u-pick farms, horseback rides, farm tours, rural rambles, corn mazes, dude ranches, roadside vendors, farmer's markets, harvest festivals... basically any activity tying agriculture with leisure. The sector is so broad, and encompasses so many activities that definitions should be left at the door... along with your rubber boots.

Richard Buck is the founder of Agri-Tours Canada, a strictly agricultural-based travel and tour company; one of only a handful in Canada. With 22 years of experience the self-professed "Agritourism Man" can speak at length on the ins and outs of this curious business.

"Over the years I have seen agritourism grow," he says. He explains that as more and more farmers look for ways to diversify in an effort become more economically stable, the popularity of agritourism has increased: "More rural tourism marketing areas are putting this on their radar. Farmers don't usually think of themselves as being 'in tourism' so it has been slow in developing."

Buck continues: "In increasing numbers nowadays, people are starting to think about where their food comes from. Who is going to explain this? Grocers and books can only do so much. It's the farmers themselves who can show people first-hand how their food is grown. But you can't just jump right in," Buck warns. "Farmers often know as much about tourism as most people know about farming, so the lingo, laws and research take some time to learn." Considerations over washrooms facilities in the field, the quality of drinking water, the classification of food service, tax status and insurance coverage all must be addressed before that inaugural hayride.

Agritourism is not without its risk, but with creativity and hard work it can offer a year round income and a steady base of customers. "You can make money," says John Downey of Downey's Farm near Brampton, Ontario, but you can lose it twice as fast." Downey estimates that 75,000 people grace the front gate of his winery, market and u-pick facility in a good year, but when Mother Nature doesn't co-operate, things can go downhill very quickly. "This year with the strawberries, things were looking good, ripening just in time. But when they were ready to pick we got a long stretch of 30-plus degree heat. Who's going to pick berries in weather like that?" he asks.

Downey, who looked to agritourism because he got "sick and tired of milking cows" started into the business as a small side project but within two years had committed to the industry, letting his son take over the "farm" side of things. He still works seven days a week, with very few days off, but every once in a while he can spare a day or two. The operation stays busy from Easter celebrations to start the year, through the Canada Day festivities, Thanksgiving and Halloween events in the fall. The operations close shortly after Christmas although the market and winery are

open on weekends for those folks who "have to pick up some honey or frozen berries."

On the opposite end of the agritourism spectrum sits the Duke of York Cranberry Farm (and Farmhouse), owned and operated by "retirees" Claire and Hubert Doyle. Their goal was to restore the old turn-of-the-century cranberry farm into a small hobby project for retirement – part time. The land came with the farmhouse, into which they intended to move at one point, but things just didn't turn out the way they expected.

"Cranberries just took off," explains Claire, referring to a jump in their market value, "so we ended up expanding and restoring it to an active farm." Located on a small island off the Nova Scotia coast, the couple reports that tourism only accounts for 1% of the economy in the area; "Not a whole lot of people come our way," she adds. "We do offer tours of the farm and rent out the farmhouse in the summer months for people from the city who want some rest and relaxation. It's pretty rustic but they tell me I would have a 3-star rating for cleanliness." The upkeep is minimal, and it doesn't cause a great deal of extra work for the couple because visitors are responsible for their own housekeeping during their stays. The farmhouse is currently booked for the majority of August, and while it may not make them rich, it does provide the couple with a sideline and gives them a chance to share the wonders of their heritage farm.

Making the decision to open your farm to the public is a hard one. Whether motivated by a love for farming, an economic reality or a lifestyle change, agritourism is as diverse a sector as any in tourism. Whether you get 75 visitors or 75,000, agricultural tourism is what you make of it - so, get growing!

A good growing season

Temperamental weather is one thing to the tourism industry, and another completely to those in agriculture. One man's (or woman's) rain may be the other's reward – perhaps the saving grace of Canada's wacky weather patterns. To those in agricultural tourism hot weather may be bad for crops but good for business, and vice-versa. So, considering the fickle state of Canada's weather, just what is growing in Canada's agritourism industry?

The Canadian Farm Business Management Council (CFBMC), with the help of Statistics Canada, states the number of farms has been decreasing steadily (as of 2001 census), with the only increases being recorded in larger operations, leaving the small farmers looking for ways to stay afloat. *Cultivating Agritourism: Tools and Techniques for Building Success* is the bible of agricultural tourism in Canada. Published in 2004 by the CFBMC, the 230-page book provides a breakdown of the sector across the country, and, a wealth of knowledge for those operations that may be debating the merits of opening their farms to inquisitive tourists. Many small-town farms look to diversification in order to compete with industrial operations and agritourism could provide a solution.

Statistics specific to agritourism are hard to come by, but *Cultivating Tourism* states that BC's agritourism industry employed 4,400 people in 2003, 25% in full-time year round positions, and 29% in full-time seasonal posts. The average operator generated revenue of \$98,000; a worthwhile undertaking. Farmers Markets Ontario estimates that 27,000 people work in that sector alone, generating \$596 million in sales and a \$1.8 billion impact on the provincial economy.

Lang Research prepared a *Travel Activities and Motivators Survey*, or TAMS report, for the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Recreation in May 2001. The report defines a number of experiences as "agritourism" including farmers' markets, u-pick farms, guest ranches, working farms or farmers' fairs. Key points include:

- Both the US and Canada show an equal interest in agritourism.
- 7.3% of respondents indicate a "high interest" in agritourism experiences.
- 33% of respondents had partaken in an agritourism experience in the last two years.
- In the domestic market, the highest interest was shown in New Brunswick, Alberta and PEI; lowest in Quebec.
- Women were 51% more likely to show interest in agritourism than men.
- Young singles show the least interest in agritourism.
- Interest in agritourism increases with household income.

Although not purely a domestic travel activity, there is a definite proclivity towards participating in agricultural activities while on a domestic vacation. Perhaps international visitors are more interested in the "icons" while shorter, more locally-based travellers are looking for an authentic farm activity. Domestic travellers are 107% more likely to have participated in two or more agricultural activities, and 72% more likely to have partaken of one such activity.

Outdoor activities seem to align well with agritourism products from a marketing standpoint. Those respondents with a "high interest" in agritourism listed team sports, hiking, biking, sunbathing and water sports as other key vacation interests. Exploration, sports and learning, and socializing are the most sought after general vacation experiences among agritourists. City, country and wine tours are common as agritourists are shown to travel primarily by car. Roughly 50% of the total respondents (in 2001) do use the internet to carry out general research. About 20% of the total respondents have booked a trip online.

The CFBMC has a good deal of information on the agritourism business, and readily admits that it may not be for everyone. Farmers are concerned over public safety, a loss of identity or privacy, and while these are all valid concerns, agritourism can be what you make of it. From roadside stands to corn mazes and country fairs, Canada has its own unique farm culture that extends far beyond what you see on the grocer's shelves