

# 1. Getting Started with Agritourism

## Introduction

There is a great deal of interest in agritourism as a niche tourism sector for farms. One reason is that people are looking for an authentic experience that might link them to their past or that teaches them something new. Visitors also want to get away from the stress of every day life and experience a seemingly simpler life. Farm visits offer a day in the country, where guests may pick berries, go for a hayride, sample some homegrown or homemade products, see animals, and learn how farms operate.

The variety of agritourism experiences that can be offered is huge - from farm lodging or farm-based recreation like hiking or hunting, to pumpkin patches, u-pick farms, farm festivals, wine tasting, farm restaurants, agri-entertainment like corn mazes and more. Visitors are willing to pay for these experiences as long as the price is reasonable and they find value in what is being offered.

Agritourism provides an additional source of revenue for farms that allows them to keep farming and increase the quality of life for their family. Many farms with large wholesale operations that have struggled with low commodity prices have turned to agritourism as a way to keep farming and earn a higher return from direct to consumer marketing. Some have reduced their acreages, growing fewer crops but capturing more consumer dollars. Agritourism allows farmers to capture both the consumer's food dollar as well as some of the money spent on entertainment and recreation each year.

Agritourism is a trend that is not likely to go away soon. The growth of wine trails and the wine industry illustrates the potential. Other types of farms are jumping on the agritourism bandwagon and doing very well. As the agritourism offerings expand, the opportunities to attract visitors increases. Collaboration

among farmers to organize farm trails, host farm open houses, and other such joint ventures will strengthen the industry and help grow new agritourism attractions to keep visitors coming back for more.

## Agritourism – Is it Right for You?

If you are considering the development of an agritourism enterprise or want to add agritourism as a new enterprise for your farm, the place to start is with a hard-core assessment of your abilities and goals, also consider those of your family members. Discuss the idea, consider the options, assess your skills and time realistically, visit other farms, and most of all, develop a plan.

Start by generating a list of all the possible types of agritourism enterprises you could realistically develop. Write down pros and cons of each including how much work it will take and the cost. Narrow the list by considering which ideas you or family members get most excited about and are most doable. Also, consider what skills and time you and family members will have to devote to developing the enterprise. Think hard about what would work best given the physical resources and location of your farm.

Once the ideas seem solidified, don't assume you and your family are the best judge of what may work or not. Run the ideas past friends and acquaintances, tourism and extension staff, visitors to the area, and business representatives. Get their honest appraisal of the ideas you have selected. Would they visit your farm to participate in activities you are considering offering?

A key point to remember is that agritourism brings people to your farm, so you must enjoy meeting people and plan activities that visitors will want to participate in, all the while managing the situation to avoid risks.

## Start with a Plan

An agritourism attraction need not be something different than what you are already doing at your farm, the difference is that you are going to show the public what you do. Many people start by planting a pumpkin crop and offer u-pick pumpkins in the fall or host a maple farm open house when boiling sap.

Once you have identified some agritourism activities that seem doable, that fit with your goals and your farm resources, and that you have time for, list all the tasks or steps to get started. Once done, have someone else review it with you – call the extension or tourism office for input, or enlist the help of a business counselor or event planner. They may identify some details you might have missed.

Develop a launch date for the activity, then work backwards and list all the resources you will need and the tasks that need to be performed to be ready for your “launch”. Make sure publicity figures prominently into your plans as it takes a lot of promotion to get the attention you will need for launching a new enterprise.

Start-up, advertising and promotion costs may outpace your returns initially so be prepared for this. If you have low numbers at first, don't sweat it. If you have organized a high quality experience, that receives favorable responses from visitors, then you will have achieved a measure of success. Remember that word of mouth is a key way to build business, so if you do it right the first time, the next visitors will not be so hard to attract.

**Plan a soft opening** – a way to get started without a big launch is to plan a small activity targeted at a select group to test your ideas. For example, offer one fall event like hayrides around the farm. Take time to get feedback from visitors about what else they might like to see, do, learn or buy at your farm. Then each year, add in another attraction. This way, you grow your level of comfort with visitors and get to know their expectations plus you don't have all the cash outlay at

once. Grow the enterprise by taking small steps, but don't forget to plan with the big picture in mind. It is important to set income goals that you would like to reach.

## Cater to Visitor Interests

Another important activity at the outset is to identify the type of the customers you hope to attract. If you know you don't want school children at your farm, that's ok. But you do need to know whom you want to attract to your farm and then develop your enterprise to cater to their interests. Be selective about your advertising in order to reach the group you want to reach. Each audience you hope to attract will have different needs and expectations and you will need to employ audience specific strategies to attract them.

If you want to attract motor coaches to come to your farm, organized tours are required. You need to plan everything from the greeting when they arrive, what they will do, see and buy, and most of all, the bathrooms. Marketing to tour groups will require a nice brochure describing your farm tour. You will want to enlist the help of your county tourism professional. They know what motor coaches come to the area and how to get them to stop at your farm.

An example of attracting a niche group of visitors is the Finger Lakes Fiber Tour. Two weekends were arranged for knitters that included lodging, food, farm tours and workshops. Where do you find knitters who will come to the Finger Lakes for such a tour? Start with ads in knitting magazines, knitters websites, and yarn stores. The weekends were both sold out. For more information about the tour, check the following website: <http://www.fingerlakesfibers.com/>.

There are many niche market opportunities that can easily be targeted if you have the right offering that caters to their interest.

### **Key Ingredients for Success with Agritourism**

- Evaluate your time and talents and those of family members who will help
- Make sure there is a point person to plan the enterprise
- Make sure there is an enthusiastic, energetic person involved that likes interacting with people
- Start with solid, well thought out ideas for activities you will offer
- Plan the activities thoroughly before opening
- Start small and get feedback
- Grow a little each year
- Know whom you want to attract and what they expect
- Tailor promotion to specific audiences
- Offer something to see, do and buy
- Set goals for income so you can measure progress and track costs vs returns
- Minimize all the potential risks, plan for emergencies
- Have fun!