

Agritourism: Education, Marketing, and More

Olga Peters

Agritourism. The buzzword conjures sunny visions of hayrides and wine tastings, maybe something frivolous that working farmers may not think relates to their day-to-day hard work.

But agritourism plays two important roles. First, it educates the public about farming and their local food system. Second, it supports farmers by increasing sales opportunities and building a loyal customer base.

The term encompasses an array of on-farm attractions, events, or services. Events can take a simple – and limited – form such as participating in a state’s maple weekend. Or it can be as complex as opening a restaurant. Agritourism includes anything from school field trips, to B&Bs, to pick-your-own, and wine tastings. Sometimes fun, sometimes educational, sometimes both, the common threads are connection and experience.

According to the most recent census data from the U.S. Census of Agriculture, in 2012, 33,161 farms participated in agritourism, with \$704 million in sales.

“I love agritourism. It contains great potential for sugar makers,” says Lisa Chase, natural resources specialist at University of Vermont Extension and Director of the Vermont Tourism Research Center. Chase collaborates on projects with peers across the country. She welcomes questions from all sugar-makers, regardless of location.

Along with agritourism’s economic potential, Chase views it as a valuable

community service. A few decades ago almost everyone in the United States operated a farm or knew someone who did, she says. Now, few people interact with agriculture, their food system, or farmers.

“In a sense you’re doing a public service” by opening your farm up to visitors, she says. “In general, the population really needs to understand what’s important about their food production.” Visitors come away from a tour of a sugaring operation with a better appreciation of the effort behind that jug of syrup sitting on the kitchen table, she says. And that, in turn, can help grow sales.

Chase notes that the concept of the public visiting a farm is not a new idea. Throughout history, cultures held feasts around the agricultural calendar. Travelers stayed at farms and traded work for a dry bed and hot meal.

Modern agritourism took a formal turn in Italy. In the mid-1980s the Italian government sought to protect small rural farms left abandoned when residents moved to the city. The government responded by developing a formal definition of “agriturismo” and, in some cases, provided funding for farmers.

Chase co-authored *Food, Farms, and Community: Exploring Food Systems* with fellow UVM Extension specialist, Vern Grubinger. While agritourism can help sugar makers build their bottom lines, “it’s not for everybody,” admits Chase.

While it’s certainly more work, agritourism enterprises can take advantage

of the range of skills within a family, she says. For example, maybe some family members hate collecting sap, but they are natural teachers. They can help the business by creating an educational brochure or giving school tours.

As with any business addition, agritourism requires time, energy, and resources. Start small and move slowly, she says. "The most successful operations come from people who genuinely enjoy hosting visitors."

Before taking on an agritourism venture, Chase recommends considering a number of questions, and considering whether the answers lend themselves to the potential project.

- What is your lifestyle like? Do you have small children? Work off the farm? Is your whole family willing to take on more work?
- What do the sugarcane's financial resources look like? What size investment can you make in a new business venture?
- Do you enjoy working with the public? If so, what do you like to do? Hike? Teach? Work with children?

Starting small

Never invited visitors into your sugarcane before? Don't know where to start? Chase recommends taking advantage of either a state-run or association-sponsored event, like a maple weekend or open farm week.

Rather than starting from scratch and having to do all of the outreach and planning yourself, these annual events

provide sugarmakers a framework to work with. The sponsoring organization routinely provides a schedule, a set of expectations, and marketing. Many will also provide technical support around insurance and safety, Chase added.

In Vermont, sugarmakers who sign up for state-sponsored events can check a box on their registration and ask for technical assistance. If your state doesn't provide such a service, Chase recommends contacting the local Extension Service or sugarmakers' association.

And, best of all, the sugarcane commits for only a few days, she adds.

If it turns out hosting people at the sugarcane is not a good fit, the farm spent little time and few resources.

Another low-key option is to open to the public during the sugarcane season. Chase says many sugarmakers have success with syrup tastings or pancake breakfasts. Handing out favorite maple-centered recipes when someone purchases syrup is another suggestion.

Protecting your customers, and yourself

"Yes, you need insurance," Chase says.

Whether hosting a weekend event, giving horse-drawn sleigh rides through the sugarcane, or opening a restaurant, Chase stressed that sugarmakers must ensure they have the right insurance. Safety is non-negotiable. Depending on the local municipality,

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zoning permits or special town licenses may also come into play, she added.

“It shouldn’t be scary,” she says. “Because it’s all solvable.” Extension Services will help. Chase says insurance carriers are also good resources.

Don’t forget the local fire or EMS department, she added. Most departments will provide a safety walk. This serves two purposes: the emergency responder can point out safety problems and offer solutions. The walk-through also helps the responder better understand a sugarhouse’s layout. In an emergency, this knowledge can reduce their response time, Chase says.

Never underestimate the power of signage, she adds. Some visitors hold idealistic visions of sugarmaking. They don’t understand that the steam could burn them, or see the uneven floor. When in doubt, put up a sign explaining the hazards.

For example, if sugarmakers want to keep visitors out of specific area of the building, put up a sign that says “staff only,” says Chase. Signs should also remind parents that children must be supervised at all times.

Chase adds that using images on signs in addition to words is useful to communicate to young children or visitors who speak a language other than English.

To find additional information on safety or to download free checklists and signs, visit: <https://www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism/?Page=safety-and-risk-management.html>

Preparing for visitors

“Put the junk pile in the back and make it off limits,” Chase half-jokes.

“Any farm open to visitors must be aware that the public has a different lens.”

A dairy farmer recently told Chase that she loves hosting visitors because it forces her to keep the farm tidy. In other words, imagine the cleaning frenzy that happens when the neighbors or in-laws are due to visit.

Cleaning a sugar operation represents a combination of meeting visitors’ expectations and safety, Chase says. Visitors expect a level of cleanliness, especially around food production. Take the time to see the operation through guests’ eyes, she suggests. It helps present a professional operation.

Safety is aided in this process as well, Chase adds. Seeing the farm through another’s point of view can help a sugarmaker spot uneven walking places or broken equipment that normally go unnoticed.

Everyone can enjoy visiting a sugarmaker, but not all activities are appropriate to all age groups or abilities, Chase says. A sugarmaker’s website is a great place to communicate any expectations to visitors. For example, whether activities are suitable for children. On a side note, she wishes more sugarmakers were ADA compliant. People with different abilities are underserved when it comes to agritourism, she says.

Chase recommends creating an educational display or video explaining how syrup is made. These items are useful for when the sap isn’t running.

Since agritourism focuses on connecting farmers to members of the public, sugarmakers should consider the type of relationships they want to build with visitors, a.k.a. potential customers,

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Chase says.

“Once you connect with a visitor,” she says. “That visitor is more likely to continue buying from you when they have a relationship.”

Before opening a sugar operation to the public include, think about:

- What part of the sugar operation do you most want to share?
- Where will you market your activities or special events?
- Are the areas open to the public clean, and are appropriate signs posted?
- Have you thought through parking, paths, and other access issues?

No one-size-fits-all

Sugarmakers’ forays into agritourism vary as much as their sugaring operations.

Jacques and Pauline Couture of Couture’s Maple Shop and Bed & Breakfast diversified their dairy farm in Westfield, VT over several decades.

Jacques says the family expanded the farm’s offerings after a conversation with an expert from the UVM Extension service. A video on the farm’s website serves as a marketing tool, and prepares people to visit the farm. In the video, Jacques details how the farm operates, invites visitors to stay at the B&B, notes that the family ships its maple products, and gives a quick tutorial on making maple syrup. To view

the video, visit: <http://www.maplesyrupvermont.com>

Alisha Powell is the granddaughter of Stuart Adams, one of the founders of Stuart & John’s Sugar House. She says her family’s mission is to “let our family serve your family.”

Stuart & John’s started 40 years ago. The two best friends – Stuart Adams and John Matthews - started with 200 taps. They had a lot of extra syrup, and so thought “may as well make pancakes,” she says.

The pancake house helped use and sell the extra syrup, says Powell. Four decades later, the family-operated restaurant and ice cream parlor serves approximately 400 customers each weekend. The business employs approximately 20 part-time employees. Seafood dinners are offered in the summer. Stuart & John’s hosts summer cruise nights for classic car enthusiasts. Recently, the Westmoreland, NH location became a favorite landing (and eating) spot for light aircraft pilots.

“It’s been a long, slow process over 40 years,” Powell says.

The restaurant started serving eggs with its pancakes in approximately 2006. In the past few years it invested in a dishwasher and switched from paper plates to dinnerware. Recently, padded chairs replaced the folding chairs the restaurant used for years.

Powell says the restaurant supports the sugar operation. Originally, the restaurant opened when the sap ran. The family saw a positive boost in sales when they decided to open the restaurant for 10 months.

The restaurant employs – and trains

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– local teens. And family members found places in the business that fit them. Powell prefers working the sugaring side of the operation. Her mother Robyn, manages the restaurant. One of Powell's brothers manages the kitchen.

"He is a wonderful cook," says Powell. "This is an amazing place for him to work and develop his skills in the kitchen."

Powell says Stuart & John's is as kid-friendly as possible. Tables have placemats with a picture and crayons for coloring. Every sugaring season, kids can enter a contest to guess how many gallons of syrup the family will make.

"We really enjoy the educational part of it too; showing people the process and having them develop an appreciation for the process goes a long way to maintain a customer base and

just in general give people an understanding of why buying locally made products like our syrup are worth it," Powell says. "It's so great to see people who have never had the real stuff taste it and realize what they've been missing."

The sugarhouse and restaurant support each other, she says.

"With the restaurant on the weekends when there isn't much sap, we have to make the sacrifice sometimes of boiling raw or lightly RO'd sap to make it last throughout the hours that the restaurant is open," wrote Powell in an email. "It's not as efficient as far as production goes, but we look at it as the two aspects of the business (syrup production and restaurant) being symbiotic."

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she continued. "If they see steam, they stop to see the boiling and to eat."

Powell recommends sugarmakers prepare for, and commit to, customer service. "Be ready for that complaint," she says. Most customers love their experience, but managing customers' expectations is challenging. Powell commits time to checking social media for complaints. She sees it as a necessary part of customer service.

Powell suggests fellow sugarmakers consider the scale of their new agritourism venture. Will they need to hire staff? How much time will it take to meet regulations? What is their customer service plan?

"Overall we try to find ways to engage people and their families and kids to make it fun for all of them to visit," she says.

More information about Stuart &

John's is at: <http://stuartandjohns.com>

Lisa Chase encourages sugar makers to contact her. She will answer their question or put them in contact with the person who can.

"Agritourism seems like too much sometimes," Chase says. "But it's really doable, and fun, and can bring in income."

Contact Chase at lisa.chase@wom.edu or 802-257-7967.

The Vermont Tourism Collaborative publishes guides, checklists, and best practices for agritourism. Downloadable publications include "Assessing Your Agritourism Potential," and materials on communications, finances, insurance, zoning, and welcoming visitors. The materials are free and available at <http://www.wom.edu/vtagritourism/>

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NAMSC has launched mapleresearch.org, a new online resource for the maple industry. The site is a curated collection of research papers, articles, videos, and tools, representing the most current and scientifically accurate information for maple production, to help all producers make the best products possible using the most current and most sustainable practices.

From *Maple Syrup Digest* articles, to producers' manuals, to how-to videos, the site includes a collection of

the best resources available online about all aspects of maple syrup production, at no cost. The site is searchable, and resources can be downloaded and printed.

The site was built in collaboration with the University of Vermont's Proctor Maple Research Center, and funding was provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service.

