

# Concord Grape Belt Heritage Association Newsletter

## SPECIAL EDITION

### Making More Money in the Concord Grape Belt by Adding Value and Diversifying: AGRITOURISM

(Part 2 of a Series)

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Part 1 of this series of articles (printed in the Summer newsletter issue) briefly outlined some sideline enterprises that involve Concord grapes. This second article will discuss agritourism opportunities for grape producers and processors in the Concord Grape Belt. I hope these ideas get your creative (grape) juices flowing. But first, a story...

I sat next to a tourism professional at our annual meeting in November. During our conversation she expressed doubt about the idea that we could establish a serious tourism destination in the Concord Grape Belt. I told her what I thought were the strengths of the region and she asked me what I would do if I were a visitor to the area. Here's what I said (with some added embellishment to provide more ideas):

*Someday I want to bring my family for a weekend retreat in the Grape Belt. When we arrive at our B&B on late Friday afternoon, we'd enjoy dinner on the deck and watch the sun set over the grapes or the lake. We'd eat pork loin with Concord/meat juice reduction drizzled over the top, salad with Concord grape vinaigrette, and a warm slice of grape pie a la mode. All dishes need not contain Concord grapes, but hints incorporated into the meal would give me the gout de terroir—the taste of place. A nice local Cab Franc would accompany the meal. Saturday morning we'd head out for horseback riding or Panama Rocks with the kids. A stop by the CGB Heritage Center would yield a map and tips on where to visit. We'd drive along the Concord Grape Belt Interpretive Trail, visiting the kiosks and taking in some of the recommended farm and processor factory tours and a vineyard or two. We'd see one of the world's first commercial grape-picking machines in Ripley. We might buy some vintage grape packing labels and chocolate-covered seedless Concord grape raisins at one of the shops in North East. In the afternoon I'd take my boys on a chartered fishing trip out of Dunkirk while my wife shopped. After dinner we'd head for the Fredonia Opera House for a play or chamber music, after which we'd have a sweet treat in a local café. On Sunday morning we'd either take a walk at the*

*Luensman Overlook Park or, if we were really adventurous, drop into a local airport for a 30-minute flight over the Concord Grape Belt. Sunday afternoon we'd rent bicycles at one of the vineyards and go for a leisurely ride on the scenic back roads in Portland.*

*Afterwards we'd head down to one of the beaches for a dip in Lake Erie. On the way out of town, we'd buy a couple of bottles of something special at one of the wineries, thus ending a memorable trip to the Concord Grape Belt.*

A few seconds into my dream itinerary, my colleague began taking notes, even asking me for the grape iced tea recipe I'd been playing with. She finally began to see the possibilities of a Concord Grape Belt destination package.

#### **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," "agritainment," and "farm tourism." These terms generally refer to the same thing, including farm bed and breakfasts, farm petting zoos, farm tours, farm stays, and horseback riding. 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. Any of these have potential in the Concord Grape Belt.

Agritourism traces its roots to the Gilded Age of the late 1800s, when 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. After the Great Depression and World War II, 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 in sideline income among farmers, and tapping the quality of life on farms seemed like a profitable idea. Today many direct marketers (such as roadside stand operators) have found that consumers who visit farms want more than just fresh produce; they want an "immersion" experience 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. People are looking for anecdotes they can share with friends and family when they bring back a sample of something special.

Grape growers in the Concord Grape Belt have something special to offer visitors. The following examples of agritourism enterprises will be essential to creating a successful tourism destination of the Concord Grape Belt.

### ***Farm or Factory Tours***

Tours of farms and factories are one of the best ways to educate consumers about the industry. These can be free or fee, 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). There tends to be a seasonality to farm tours: summers generally attract vacationing families; spring and fall are less crowded and 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 to bring school children for educational programs. The CGB Heritage Association could work with grape farmers and processors to establish tours and tasting rooms similar to wineries.

Food manufacturing companies all over America open their doors to consumers who wish to learn about where their food comes from. Liability and cost issues must be taken into account, and many businesses just do not want to offer tours. But for the intrepid agripreneurs, these issues can be overcome through careful planning and support from the CGB Heritage Association. See <http://factorytoursusa.com> for ideas and inspiration and check out Oregon's Wine and Farm Tour (<http://www.oregonwineandfarmtour.com>) for examples of how farm and factory tours can be coordinated.

### ***Farm Bed & Breakfasts***

Farm-based B&Bs can provide a base for tourists traveling around the Concord Grape Belt. B&B owners and other hospitality providers can offer recommendations, tell stories, and provide local flavor. Farm-based B&Bs can be ideal for those looking for a romantic experience. If managed well, bed and breakfasts can be profitable and fun and can take advantage of underutilized assets (such as extra rooms or a barn). The capital cost of a farm may be reduced through additional tax deductions and some farmers report that having guests stay with them reduces their sense of isolation. Families do need to be prepared for the reduced privacy and additional liability that comes with bringing paying visitors into their home. A number of B&Bs already exist in the Concord Grape Belt, and as we develop our destination there will be opportunities for expansion.

### ***Complementary Tourism Businesses & Auxiliary Tourism Services***

As I alluded in my dream itinerary, there are lots of related tourism businesses and profitable sideline enterprises which would serve Concord Grape Belt visitors, including bike and moped rentals, horseback riding, sailing and fishing charters, historic home tours, and nature guides. There are also specialty foods that tourists expect to find: jams, jellies, pie filling, juices, wine, and the like, which make the trip memorable.

### ***Agritourism Challenges***

Agritourism requires a unique set of skills and resources to be successful. It is not always in the nature of farmers or food manufacturers to be accepting of tourists. However, some folks seem to have a knack for working with customers, 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, but 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 the CGB Heritage Association Help Develop Agritourism?***

The Association is taking steps toward developing our tourism destination. Collaboration with county and regional tourism agencies has led to progress on our interpretive trail. A Heritage Education Center is planned. Many ideas have been discussed, including identifying and encouraging "agripreneurs" and holding workshops focusing on the development of ideas and business plans.

Other ideas include: developing tourism packages and marketing them to motor coach companies, establishing a link with the Chautauqua Institution, working with farmers to establish roadside pull-offs, working on signage issues, recruiting restaurants to join the culinary bounty program, and collaborating with other tourism operators to promote the entire region.

Now that the Concord Grape Belt has been designated New York State Heritage Area status, the Association has been given guidelines for developing a management plan — of which agritourism development will be a core strategy.

As always...think big and be practical, and e-mail me or give me a call if you have any agritourism business ideas you'd like to chat about. I can be reached via e-mail at [dlh3@cornell.edu](mailto:dlh3@cornell.edu) or via phone at (607) 255-4413.