An aerial photograph of a rural farm. In the center, a large, dark-roofed house is surrounded by a dense cluster of green trees. To the right of the house, a white trailer or shed is visible. The surrounding landscape is dominated by vast, green cornfields with distinct rows of crops. A dirt road or path winds through the fields on the right side of the image. The overall scene is bright and sunny, with shadows cast by the trees and the house.

TOWN OF ESSEX

Agritourism Development Strategy

March 2021

essex

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We respectfully acknowledge that this strategy was developed on land and by waters originally inhabited by Indigenous Peoples who have travelled this area since time immemorial. This territory is within the lands honoured by the Wampum Treaties, agreements between the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Leni, Lenape and allied Nations, to peacefully share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Specifically, we would like to acknowledge the presence of the Huron/Wendat Peoples, and the Three Fires Confederacy: Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi Peoples.¹

We recognize all Indigenous Peoples who were here before us, as well as those who live with us now, including all First Nations, Inuit and Métis, and the seven generations to come. As Indigenous Peoples have done for aeons, we strive to be responsible stewards and caretakers of these lands and waters and to respect the cultures, ceremonies, and traditions of all who call it home.

Through the combined efforts of several organizations, including Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada, Indigenous Culinary of Associated Nations, Indigenous Tourism Ontario, along with Indigenous tourism businesses, we are seeing Indigenous tourism and culinary tourism flourish. We look forward to seeing Indigenous culinary products and experiences elevate the tourism landscape of Ontario specifically, and Canada more broadly, in the years to come.

The *Town of Essex Agritourism Development Strategy* would not have come to fruition without the time, energy, and effort provided by the Administrative team at the Town of Essex. Special thanks go to Nelson Silveira and Alex Denonville.

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The research and development of this strategy was facilitated by a team at the Culinary Tourism Alliance, including Trevor Jonas Benson, Caroline Morrow, Nastasha Alli, Camilo Montoya-Guevara, and Valerie Keast. This report was designed by Agatha Podgorski. The Culinary Tourism Alliance is a not-for-profit industry organization dedicated to bridging the gap between the food & drink and tourism industries.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In developing the Town of Essex Agritourism Development Strategy, four (4) objectives which support the Town's Corporate Strategic Plan were identified. These include establishing a shared understanding of agritourism amongst stakeholders; evaluating challenges to agritourism development in the region; identifying the destination's strengths and opportunities within the agritourism sector; and looking at actions for growing the visitor economy through agritourism in the short- (1-2 years) and medium-term (2+ years).

Market research for this project took multiple approaches to build a richer understanding of the local agritourism environment. First, some definitions for culinary tourism (and its subset, agritourism) were provided for context. Culinary tourism includes any visitor experience where travellers interact with food & drink products that reflect the history, heritage, and culture of a place.

Agritourism, which includes experiences that highlight the production of food & drink, has varied definitions; according to the 1st World Congress on Agritourism, agritourism describes sustainable on-farm experiences that connect, complement, and diversify activities on working farms, while Ontario's *Provincial Policy Statement, 2020* takes a land-use approach and describes agritourism as a farm-related activity that promotes the enjoyment of agricultural

landscapes while learning about local farming operations. Key benefits and challenges to growing agritourism are discussed, with trends that support agritourism development outlined and placed within the post-pandemic realities of destination marketing.

Understanding market segments with the help of the Canadian Tourism Commission's Explorer Quotient types, along with visitation numbers from Ontario's Southwest (RTO1), provide context to initiatives aimed at growing the destination's visitor economy through agritourism.

An in-depth look at the profile of agritourists, from a global perspective down to agritourists in the Windsor Essex region (including wine tourists, a subset of agritourists most visible in the Town of Essex) lay the groundwork for the identification of target markets specific to the Town of Essex. These include local residents, day-trippers, overnight pleasure visitors, and visiting friends and relatives. To understand the current state of agritourism in the destination, a review of existing assets that would appeal to agritourists was conducted. These agritourism assets include the destination's wineries, including some on-site local food restaurants; small-scale fruit and vegetable farms; the John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area, which allows visitors to experience life on a

pioneer-era working farm; and events such as the Harrow Fair, the oldest country fair in Ontario. Participatory research was conducted via an online Forum on Agritourism held in February 2021. Existing agritourism operators, prospective operators, and allies and partners to agritourism development in the Town of Essex participated. Following the forum, an inventory of experiences and products currently offered in the destination was taken. Town of Essex Council Members were also surveyed for their feedback on local agritourism development.

Gaps in the offering were identified, including the absence of u-pick farms in the destination, along with a limited number of

on-farm accommodations that can cater to agritourists. Four (4) areas of opportunity were identified for agritourism development in the Town of Essex: Grow Agritourism as a Priority, Strengthen Agritourism Networks, Enhance the Agritourism Offer, and Attract Visitors. Each area of opportunity includes specific actions.

In total twelve (12) actions will guide agritourism development in the Town of Essex. These are divided into immediate term (0-12 months) and short-term (1-2 years) actions, followed by future thinking to inspire medium-term actions to guide stakeholders through ongoing strategic implementation.



PART 1

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The Town of Essex 2019-2022 Corporate Strategic Plan outlines six strategic priorities informed by extensive consultation with local citizens, stakeholders, Town of Essex staff, and Members of Council. These include Progressive and Sustainable Infrastructure, Healthy Community and Quality of Life, Financial and Economic Stewardship, Vibrant Growth and Development, Citizen and Customer Experience and Organizational Effectiveness and Resiliency.

Under the Vibrant Growth and Development strategic priority, promoting the Town of Essex as a premier tourist destination was identified a goal, with the development of a comprehensive tourism strategy alongside the development of "agri- and eco-tourism offerings" identified as specific action items.²

Adopted by the Town of Essex Council in early 2021, one of the "Community Engagement and Partnership Objectives" listed in *Climate Ready*, the Town's climate change adaptation plan, is to support opportunities for investment into adaptation-based innovation for local business. A climate action to be initiated or implemented between 2021-2022 is to "augment agritourism strategies that promote and support on-farm diversified uses". This strategy report, which aligns with the climate action implementation themes of both *process* and *communication*, was created to guide agritourism development in the immediate (0-12 months) and short-term (1-2 years).³

Four (4) objectives served to guide the strategy development process:

- **To establish a shared understanding of the agritourism landscape**
- **To uncover the agritourism development challenges and ways to address these**
- **To identify strengths and opportunities for the destination**
- **To shed light on potential actions for the medium-term.**

An accelerated strategy development process took place between January and March 2021. The research process began with secondary research, including a background

document review and market research. This was followed by primary research, including a forum on agritourism and a survey of Town of Essex Council. The integrated analysis performed on the data collected confirmed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges for the destination, and this informed the strategy for growing agritourism. Implementation planning for the first 12 months took place at the end of March 2021.

CONTEXT

Ontario's Provincial Policy Statement, which includes guidelines for appropriate development while protecting the quality of the natural and built environment, supports improved land use planning and management.⁴ Similarly, *The County of Essex Official Plan* outlines goals and policies for lands with agricultural uses that protect the long-term availability of the area's natural resources.⁵ At the same time, the Town of Essex Official Plan includes mentions of agritourism in the context of on-farm diversified uses.⁶

In 2016, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs reported 235 farms in the Town of Essex, covering 40,678 acres of land within the township's boundaries. Major fruit and vegetable crops produced include grapes, apples, peaches, tomatoes, and green and wax beans, along with oilseeds and grains. With 71% of these farms under 129 acres, and with 60% of these farms identified as operating as sole proprietorships,⁷ there is high potential to engage existing farm operators in the development of small- to medium-scale agritourism.

The Colchester and County Road 50 Community Improvement Plan (CIP) offers eligible property owners' access to municipal grants to support the establishment and maintenance of value-added, on-farm diversified and agriculture-related land use activities.⁸ With six (6) established wineries already operating within the County Road 50 Community Improvement Project Area (CIPA), this initiative strengthens the area's positioning as an agritourism destination.

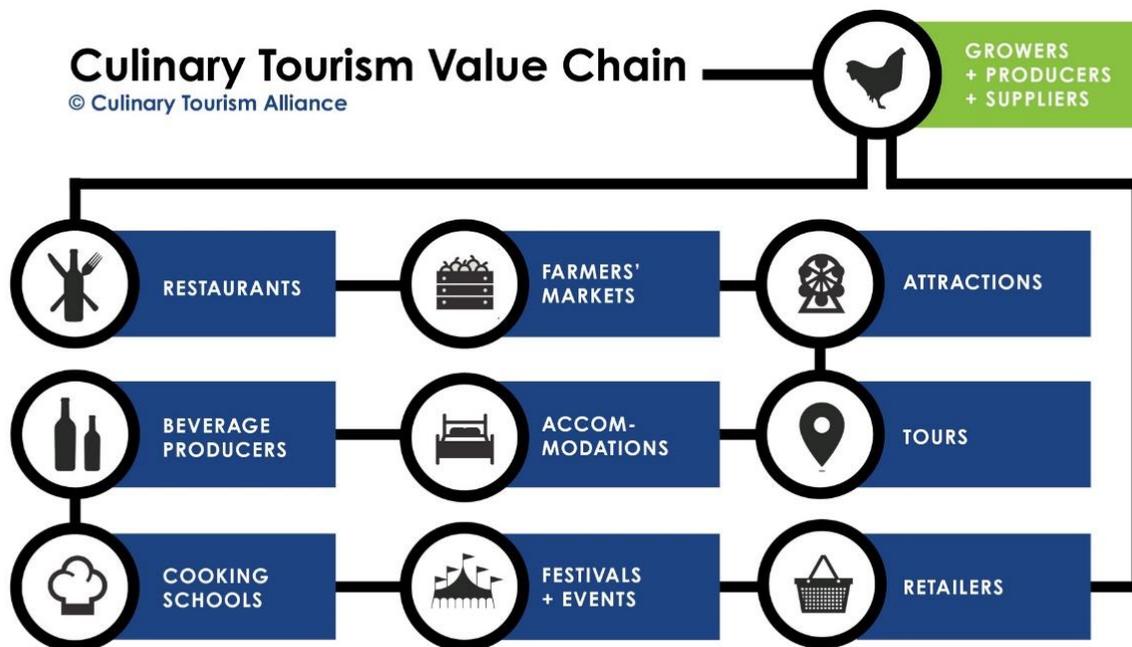
In 2018, Zoning By-law 1723,⁹ which amends the General Zoning By-law 1037,¹⁰ was passed to expand the definition of on-farm diversified uses, to align with the Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario's Prime Agricultural Areas.¹¹ Also in 2018, the Town of Essex published the Downtown Harrow Streetscape Design Guidelines, which serve to highlight the community of Harrow's rich agricultural history by incorporating design elements such as crates, water troughs, and bushel baskets, into the streetscape.

PART 2 MARKET RESEARCH

CULINARY TOURISM

Culinary tourism, which is a form of alternative tourism as opposed to mass tourism, includes any visitor experience where a person interacts with food & drink that reflects the histories, heritages, and cultures of a place. Both food tourism and gastronomy tourism are synonyms for culinary tourism.

Many other types of alternative tourism, such as rural tourism, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and outdoor tourism, are well positioned to connect with culinary tourism activities. Similarly, a diversity of tourism businesses can use food & drink to elevate their visitor experience. In fact, any tourism-related business that includes a taste of place or culinary experience as part of its offering should be considered part of the culinary tourism value chain (see [Culinary Tourism Value Chain, below](#)).



There are countless activities associated with culinary tourism that connect visitors to the food of a place, from participating in a cooking workshop to joining a Segway food tour. However, some culinary tourism activities are more focussed on food-producing peoples, space, and processes, such as harvesting berries at a u-pick farm or touring a vineyard before tasting wines from the estate. These are more appropriately categorized as agritourism (see [Agritourism, below](#)).

High integrity culinary tourism development is based on celebrating the foodways of a place; that is, the who, what, where, when, why, and how food is an integral part of the destination. All of these aspects lead back to the people of the place, and how their food cultures have shaped their landscapes, traditions, and livelihoods. The strong agricultural roots in the destination have historical ties that continue to shape the communities and people of the Town of Essex.

According to records from the Harrow Research and Development Centre, archaeological studies show that early agriculture in Essex County may have begun as early as 900 A.D. with the planting of corn, and likely beans, by Indigenous communities settled along Lake Erie.¹²

As European settlement in the area began in the 1700s, loyalist soldiers and other settlers continued to farm the land, growing wheat, tobacco, barley, rye, and oats, together with raising livestock. Today, many local families trace their heritage to German, Italian and Portuguese roots.¹³ For over 150 years, Harrow has hosted the annual Harrow Fair, which highlights the products of local farmers and is the oldest country fair in Ontario.

AGRITOURISM

Agritourism (or agri-tourism) is a subset of culinary tourism focussed on the production-side of food and drink. In some places, agritourism is known as agro-tourism or farm tourism but for the purposes of this report, the term agritourism is used throughout. Many experiences can simultaneously be categorized as culinary tourism and agritourism. In the broadest sense, agritourism is a form of “alternative tourism” because of the educational opportunities that it provides to visitors and the connections that it makes between visitors, locals, and farmers.¹⁴ Rural tourism is sometimes used as an umbrella term to encapsulate agritourism.

Although there is no universal definition of agritourism, some common characteristics include the ability to increase the breadth and diversity of the pool of tourism stakeholders, add tools for rural economic development, diversify revenue streams, and connect locals, visitors, and producers.

Through its name, it is clear that agritourism sits at the intersection of agriculture and tourism. However, the specifics around where agritourism takes place, who is involved, and what activities are included is a topic of international debate. The types of activities that qualify as agritourism depend on the regional context. Similarly, individual businesses approach agritourism in different ways.

From the outcome statement of the 1st World Congress on Agritourism held in 2018, a key characteristic of “authentic” agritourism includes having sustainable on-farm experiences that connect, complement, and diversify activities on working family farms, to produce market goods meant to generate additional agricultural income. Allowing for direct interactions that evoke a feeling of familiarity between farmers and guests, and offering tastings of foods grown, harvested and produced on the farm, also leads to memorable cultural exchanges in agritourism destinations that underline the importance of preserving local agricultural practices, traditions, and farming knowledge.¹⁵

Local and regional context is key for defining agritourism, and agritourism development should always be based on the breath and diversity of assets within a region.

This facilitates the inclusion of local cultures and traditions not involved in on-farm agricultural production but still stewarding land and involved in food harvesting and production.¹⁶ For example, in the neighbouring Municipality of Leamington, Caldwell First Nation released plans to open the world's largest Indigenous restaurant, which will accommodate up to 600 guests, as well as the first Indigenous-owned winery in Ontario. The Three Fires restaurant, which will serve “traditionally inspired” Indigenous cuisine, is slated to open as early as July 2021 in a facility the band also aims to develop as a community hub.¹⁷

Even within Ontario there are multiple definitions for agritourism. On the one hand, the 2020 Provincial Policy Statement takes a land-use focus to describes agritourism as “farm-related tourism uses, including limited accommodation such as a bed and breakfast, that promote the enjoyment, education or activities related to the farm operation.”¹⁸ On the other hand, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has used the University of California definition, describing agritourism as:

The act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education or personal involvement in the activities of the farm or operation. [...] Agri-tourism is a subset of a larger recreational industry called rural tourism that includes visits to rural settings or rural environment to participate in or experience activities, events, attractions not readily available in urbanized areas.¹⁹

While these definitions can inform an official Town of Essex definition for agritourism, it is important to work from definitions that are already in place, especially if they are already informing agritourism development. The Town of Essex Official Plan does include mentions of agritourism, but it does not include a specific definition for the term. In fact, all current references are related to permitted uses surrounding lands designated “agricultural” in Schedule A of the Official Plan.²⁰

Zoning By-law 1037 also mentions but does not define agritourism in the context of on-farm diversified uses, which are “secondary and subordinate to the principle agricultural use of the property and is limited in area” and includes “a retail or wholesale store, take-out food outlet, workshop or other home industry, an agri-tourism use and uses that produce value-added agricultural products from on farm production”.²¹ However, and importantly, the Colchester and County Road 50 Community Improvement Plan (January 2020) includes a definition for “agri-tourism uses”, being “ancillary farm related uses which promote the enjoyment, education or activities related to farm life and agricultural production and operations.”²² This definition can and should be included in both the Town of Essex Official Plan and Zoning By-law 1037 (see [Agritourism Development](#), p. 39).

Growing Agritourism

Globally, both interest in agritourism and attention to agritourism development are on the rise. Agritourism presents an opportunity for rural development, resilience, and innovation, and has the potential to drive positive environmental, social, and economic impacts. While some consider agritourism to be the “commodification of rurality”,²³ others see it as a less objectifying form of tourism because it is more community-based, with locals shaping and implementing agritourism activities.²⁴

This being said, agritourism is a serious, time-intensive business expansion decision that is by no means a cure-all for the challenges facing tourism or agriculture businesses in rural areas. Agritourism may require significant skills development in areas that may not be familiar to all farmers, such as customer service, hospitality, and online marketing, to name a few.²⁵

Context-specific realities also need to be seriously considered. For example, the average age of farmers in the Town of Essex is 57 years, with only ten farmers (from a total of 315 farmer operators) being under the age of 35.²⁶ However, fostering the development of agritourism and supporting the diversification of farm-based business can be a way of drawing young farmers into the community.

Primary benefits of agritourism include, income diversification of farm revenue, on-farm employment opportunities for community members and younger generations, and an

increase in the number of tourists visiting the region.²⁷ More specifically, agritourism can bring a reduced dependence on volatile agricultural markets by shifting some farm revenue generation towards tourism. This shift also encourages the use of farm resources that may otherwise have gone unused (e.g., lower grade land or old/vacant farm buildings), increased direct marketing activities for farmers,²⁸ and interactions between farmers and tourists.

Direct contact between farmers and visitors not only empowers farmers to tell their own stories²⁹ but helps to show off local agricultural products to a new market that may specifically seek these out once they return home.³⁰ A further benefit of agritourism is the opportunity that it creates for women specifically. Studies from New Zealand, the USA, and Italy, among others, mention the particular role that women play in maintaining and managing agritourism businesses. For example, 35% of the agritourism farms in Italy are managed by women.³¹

Along with the abovementioned incentives, there are also disadvantages and associated challenges related to agritourism development that must be considered including, navigating health and safety liabilities around having visitors on working farms, the disruption of regular farming activities in order to cater to visitors, the impact of increased traffic on neighbours and the environment, increased costs in production and packaging as well as business taxes, and the need for increased time and resource commitment to developing, enhancing, and marketing new products for tourists.³²

From a management perspective, there is the additional challenge of bringing different agritourism providers under a common platform—such as a regional website and promotional scheme—to ensure a quality visitor experience that meets legal and safety standards while delivering a broader narrative and image for the region.³³

RELEVANT TRENDS

Purposeful Travel

For a growing number of visitors, learning is a key motivation for travel. In fact, gaining new skills and engaging with communities to learn about local cultures is a goal for many travellers.³⁴ Food tourism empowers locals to share their stories while presenting opportunities for learning and connection, whether that's through cooking classes, mushroom foraging, or a farm tour. When done right, food tourism experiences can be transformative for visitors and lead to personal growth. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many consumers are reevaluating their priorities and looking for meaningful connections. Purpose-driven travel is one way to deliver this. Visitors do not need to travel

far to learn something new — an important point when considering the potential role of food tourism post-pandemic. Food tourism experiences, especially agritourism experiences, can be geared to locals and those from nearby regions, connecting people to products and experiences in their own backyards.

Food tours and cooking classes are among the top-five fastest growing tour categories on TripAdvisor and are important ways visitors pursue purposeful travel.³⁵ Food tours frequently include strong links to local landscapes and cultures, allowing participants to leave the experience feeling more connected to place. In fact, hands-on learning and experimenting are projected to be big growth areas.³⁶ Food and drink activities are some of the most popular “Airbnb experiences”, comprising nearly 30% of the platform’s bookings in 2018.³⁷ There are unnumerable creative approaches that agritourism experiences can be designed around to leverage this trend.

When thinking about agritourism development in the destination, consider how agritourism offerings can deliver locally inspired learnings to inspire purpose-driven travellers. At the business level, this means providing visitors with experiences that foster personal growth. Similarly, travellers want to feel like they are having a genuine and transformative experience, that they will leave a better person, and that they will depart the destination with a connection to the place and people. Building relationships with guests, operators can facilitate this connection.

Exploratory Travel

Travel to off-the-beaten-path destinations in search of unique, one-of-a-kind experiences is a priority for a growing number of travellers, for whom, VIP experiences are appealing. They like to feel as though they are discovering something that few others have experienced before. In developing tourism experiences for these visitors, a key step is identifying points of differentiation that tie the experience to place. In agritourism, this might be the landscape, the terroir, local crops, etc. As a business, this means thinking about what makes a given experience unique. Something as simple as eating fresh fruit at a roadside farm stand can be elevated with a great view or an engaging conversation. How can local assets be used to make a visitor understand that their experience in the Town of Essex is something that they cannot find elsewhere, something that cannot be replicated?

Canada’s Federal Tourism Growth Strategy identifies tourism in rural and remote destinations as a primary developmental pillar for 2019 to 2021.³⁸ Dispersing visitors away from areas of critical mass combats the negative effects of over-tourism, distributes economic, socio-cultural or environmental benefits, and can help restart the industry

post-pandemic. The development of agritourism and rural food tourism experiences are tools to facilitate visitor dispersion away from urban centres. Many travellers are interested in reducing over-tourism and are open to switching to similar but lesser-known destinations if they are made aware of the positive impact they can have on the environment and destination.³⁹

Sustainable Destinations

“The best food and drink experiences for [travellers] today consider environmental sustainability as well as community and economic impact.”⁴⁰ A key strategic consideration for destinations is the extent to which they incorporate sustainability into their management and marketing efforts. There is a connection between purposeful travel and an awareness of social and environmental issues. Visitors with this awareness wish to have a positive impact on destination communities through visitation.

Sustainability initiatives can take many forms, from banning single-use plastics to promoting locally owned businesses to calling out sustainable farming practices. Tucson, Arizona for example celebrates destination-wide efforts to build a stronger food system and strengthen local food heritage. By letting prospective visitors know about these initiatives, destinations can connect with prospective travellers looking to travel somewhere that aligns with their values. When presented with similar choices, sustainability is an important decision-making consideration for today's trip planners. Leaving a destination and feeling as though their visit and money will benefit the local community, people, and the environment is the goal for a growing number of travellers. In alignment with the destination's climate change adaptation plan, the Town of Essex has an opportunity to educate potential visitors on the economic and social benefits of travelling to places that are looking to increase visitation as opposed to those that are already overrun by visitors. At the business level, this means leveraging sustainable practices to attract visitors, but never green washing.

Rural Food Tourism

Rural tourism development often leans on the natural environment as a primary motivator for visitation and as a clear point of differentiation from urban areas. In these destinations, culture is a secondary asset that enables visitors to connect more deeply with place. Food and drink are important parts of a cultural tourism offering, especially experiential food tourism. Small businesses, including farms, provide an essential role in offering genuine touchpoints to local food and culture.

For rural destinations, linking food tourism to other forms of tourism, like rural tourism or ecotourism, is a common approach to destination development. By forging clear links to the land, through ingredients and traditions, food tourism more broadly and agritourism more specifically is a natural add on to other tourism offerings. For the Town of Essex, this means thinking about how rural landscapes can be leveraged as part of the visitor experience and how agritourism can be used to tell the stories of the destination.

Below are some common strategies applied by rural destinations around the world to grow food tourism, which also provide insights for approaches agritourism development, along with a case study of Prince Edward County to illustrate some of these in action.

- **Introducing food & drink products and experiences into non-food events or festivals**
- **Offering signature experiences connected to local cultural heritages and landscapes**
- **Tour operators play a key role connecting products and experiences, encouraging visitors to explore the destination and spend more at local businesses**
- **Experiences are changing, impermanent, flexible, and mobile, with products and experiences that are unique and multifunctional**
- **Growing focus on outdoor food & drink products and experiences that connect visitors to the landscapes where the ingredients were grown, such as farm-to-fork, foraging, outdoor cooking or dining, while incorporating local history as an added value**

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY, ONTARIO

POPULATION: 25,000

Prince Edward County, located in Southeastern Ontario along the shores of Lake Ontario, a 2 hour drive from Toronto. "The County", as it is known, is made up of towns, villages, and hamlets surrounded by a rural agricultural landscape. Known for its wineries, cideries, restaurants, and B&Bs, the County has gained a reputation as a gastronomy capital of Ontario because of its concentration of local culinary products and experiences. Agritourism is a key part of the region's value proposition, connecting visitors the people, places, and processes behind local food and drink products. Celebrating its rural landscape, the destination has focused on its agritourism offerings especially wine and wine tours. Like Essex County, wine tourism is a key part of the agritourism offering in Prince Edward County.

Prince Edward County offers a variety of festivals and events where food & drink are a significant part of the experience. Some of these festivals include: the Ontario Fermentation Festival, Uncork Canada, True North Beer Festival, Picton Poutine Fest and Taste Community Grown, to name a few. The destination marketing organization makes it easy to plan visits and find food tourism products and experiences through its website. Although now defunct, the destination marketing organization developed the self-guided *Taste Trail* to promote local businesses. The trail included restaurants, wineries, farms and markets, craft breweries, and distilleries.

Local tour operators offer unique food & drink experiences for individuals, couples, groups, and corporate retreats. Among others, these experiences include tastings, pairings, dinners with entertainment, farm-to-table meals, and farm tours. Additionally, many local businesses provide their own food & drink experiences such as cooking classes, u-pick, samplings, specialty food-making workshops, beeswax product making, guided estate tours, brewery tours, and distillery tours. The availability of these experiences varies by season and by business. Some experiences such as tastings, samplings, cooking classes or workshops are offered year-round, while other experiences are offered seasonally.

MARKET SEGMENTS

The Canadian Tourism Commission leveraged social values-based market research to develop customer profiles called Explorer Quotient types. Destinations and businesses can use these to enhance customer targeting, product development and marketing efforts. The three profiles that Canada is focussing on attracting Globally are: Free Spirits, Cultural Explorers, and Authentic Experiencers.⁴¹ From within Canada, four additional target markets have been identified: Personal History Explorers, No Hassle Travellers, Rejuvenators, and Gentle Explorers.

None of the persona descriptions specifically describe agritourism as an interest, however, a potential interest in agritourism could be deduced from other interests. For example, for all three of the Global target markets, “dining at restaurants offering local ingredients” was a top-rated appealing activity. For Authentic Experiencers and Cultural Explorers, “visiting small towns and villages” was also listed as an appealing activity.

Agritourism is usually an activity undertaken by visitors exploring closer to home, so it is worthwhile looking at the EQ profiles specific to the Canadian market and their interest in food and drink related activities. The EQ profiles table (see Appendix A) shows a widespread interest in tasting local ingredients across Canadian target markets, whereas activities such as farm stays are less appealing to certain groups. Based on the type of experience offered, agritourism can appeal to broader, higher paying international markets as well but appealing to these markets is dependent upon a high-quality offering with a real “wow” factor. The EQ profiles table also shows potential activities to incorporate into agritourism, such as on-farm wildlife and bird viewing, capitalizing on the rural landscapes and interest in ecotourism activities.

VISITATION

In 2017, Regional Tourism Organization 1 Southwest Ontario received just over 14 million visitors. The age group of travellers showed a relatively even split with travellers aged 55-64 at 2.7 million visitors, followed by travellers aged 65+ and 25-34 both about 2.5 million visitors.⁴² The vast majority of visitors to RTO 1 were from elsewhere in Ontario. The same held true for Essex County specifically, where most visitors were from Southwest Ontario (~1.4 million), within Essex County (~600,000), Windsor (~465,000), Kent County (~399,000), and Toronto (~349,000).⁴³

In 2017, RTO 1 saw that travellers aged 25-34 had the highest number of overnight visits (~975,000) whereas same-day visits were led by travellers aged 55-64 (~2 million). The primary motivation for travel was visiting friends and relatives, which presents a unique

opportunity for agritourism development if agritourism can be made the go-to activity for residents showing visitors around. Total visitor-spend in RTO1 was approximately \$1.3 billion, and roughly \$1.2 billion of this spend came from Ontario residents. Overnight visitors spend more (\$163) than same-day visitors (\$67), which incentivizes efforts to turn day trips to overnight trips.

In June 2020, RTO1 conducted research into Ontarians' perception of travel in the region, following the first provincial lockdown enacted to curb the spread of COVID-19. Key takeaways from this report include how concerns about the pandemic are likely to linger, that mitigating risk for travellers is essential to increase consumer confidence, and that decisions to travel are shaped by how close the destination is to travellers' homes.⁴⁴

On the impacts of COVID-19 to travelling in Southwest Ontario, 86% of visitors said it was the time to play it safe when it comes to planning trips. Most visitors were comfortable travelling in August or September, and 70% would travel to destinations they were already familiar with.⁴⁵ 65% said they were willing to travel out-of-town, but within the region, during the summer. Most residents were comfortable enjoying outdoor activities while visiting with friends and relatives.⁴⁶

In the post-pandemic context, this sentiment positions the Town of Essex, within a 3-hr drive of major markets, to meet local tourism demand in the immediate and short-term. According to Destination Canada's *Revisiting Tourism: Canada's Visitor Economy One Year into the Global Pandemic* report, if Canadians re-allocated two-thirds of their planned spend on international leisure travel towards domestic destinations, "it will make up for the estimated \$19 billion shortfall currently facing our visitor economy—and help sustain 150,000 jobs."⁴⁷

RELEVANT MARKETS

Defining visitor segments is not a simple task. There are many ways that profiles can be broken down, whether that's through demographic data, interests, behaviours, etc. Often, there is considerable overlap between various visitor segmentation strategies. The following section outlines some of the ways that the Town of Essex can think about who to target in order to grow agritourism.

Food Tourists

Food tourists are "visitors who plan their trips partially or totally in order to taste the cuisine of a place."⁴⁸ They plan some, but not necessarily all, trips around food and drink experiences, including agritourism experiences. When food tourists travel for other

reasons, they look for ways to incorporate local tastes into their trip. For instance, a food tourist travelling on business or visiting family may stop by a craft brewery or add a day trip to an agricultural region into their itinerary. These are important behaviours to keep in mind in planning for agritourism development in the Town of Essex.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, food tourists have a “higher average expenditure, are demanding and appreciative.”⁴⁹ Food tourists are motivated by experiential travel and include visitors looking to sip local wine at a vineyard as well as those hoping to participate in a cooking class. They also want to connect meaningfully with the places they visit. While there are different types of food tourists, as described below, a key feature that sets them apart is considering food and beverage to be about more than sustenance. Instead, it is something worth investing in. Furthermore, since food tourism is a subset of cultural tourism, many food tourists are also cultural tourists.

Agritourism is a niche type of food tourism focussed on the people, places, and practices behind the production of food and drink. The profiles of those who participate in agritourism activities are broad – from parents looking to send their children loose in a pumpkin patch to honeymooners touring a winery. The below section outlines four categories of food tourists as potential markets for the agritourism experiences on offer in the destination.

Foodies

Perhaps, the best-known food tourist is the archetype “foodie”. The word often conjures images of a high-end restaurant, molecular gastronomy, and Instagram photos, but foodies are more complex than the stereotype. They can be motivated by the food itself or by the experiences surrounding it. They may plan a trip to visit a specific winery, or they travel to enjoy rural landscapes. They might also pick one accommodation over another because of the food offering. Either way, food motivates them and plays a key role in their trip planning, decision-making, and spending.

Foodies like to get to the bottom of a food story, making them a great market for agritourism. Participating in a cheese-making workshop or attending a long table dinner organized by local farmers are two agritourism activities likely to appeal to foodies.

Since they plan around food and drink, foodies are informed. They often know which experiences they want to have in a destination in advance of arrival, and book these ahead of time. When a foodie visits a restaurant, they have likely scoped out the menu in advance and identified local specialities.

When it comes to attracting food tourists, online assets should clearly articulate ties to local culture, unique culinary experiences, and any links to experiential tourism. Advertising these features makes it easy for foodies to add experiences to their itinerary.

That said, foodies also value local tips and insider recommendations, and they will change their itineraries to incorporate these while in-destination. Agritourism activities, like visiting a farm stand, are often spontaneous so word-of-mouth recommendations are important to directing visitors.

Food-connected Consumers

The 2019 Skift report, *The New Era of Food Tourism*, proposes that foodies aren't the only people interested in food tourism. The report describes the "food-connected consumer", someone who makes informed choices about their food and drink consumption, including the production processes behind it, but doesn't necessarily plan all their trips around food. This shift amplifies the potential growth that food tourism and specifically agritourism, can bring by targeting broader markets.⁵⁰

A key point is that many food tourists do not think of themselves as food tourists, and this often includes food-connected-consumers. Food and drink can motivate travel, but it can also act as an add-on that elevates a travel experience. As an example, visitors that stop by a farmers' market that their B&B host recommended, may not have sought out the experience, but it definitely added to their overall trip. The key is that most food-connected consumers likely haven't planned all of their food activities in advance, so they are a great market to attract spontaneously to agritourism businesses in the region.

Agritourists

The agritourist seeks "experiential, life-enriching vacations that involve culture, nature, the outdoors and learning."⁵¹ In her report entitled *Selling the Farm Experience*, Caroline Millar points to the market demand for agritourism from a public willing to pay for a chance to experience interaction with a farmer.⁵² Although eating and drinking are not primary motivators for participating in agritourism, food and drink can be used to enhance agritourism experiences and increase visitor interactions with agricultural spaces.

Some additional motivations for participating in agritourism include:

- **Searching for authentic experiences (e.g., participation in farm activities, traditional setting)**
- **Wanting to explore their region⁵³**
- **Seeking to engage with family, learning, and relaxing⁵⁴**
- **Seeking experiential, life-enriching vacations that involve culture, nature, the outdoors, and learning⁵⁵**
- **Valuing experiential travel (e.g., participation, eating, purchasing)⁵⁶**
- **Looking to engage with tradition and receive a rural welcome⁵⁷**

These motivations support the classification of agritourism as a contributor to the preservation of agricultural land, cultures and heritage, for sustainable tourism offerings,⁵⁸ and for the continued demand and production of local food and drink. With all this in mind, agritourism is a “priority sector for sustainable development at all levels.”⁵⁹

Since agritourism is a subset of food tourism, agritourists are a type of food tourist. However, that said, all food tourists can have an interest in agritourism activities. Meaning that foodies and food-connected consumers also enjoy agritourism activities, like berry picking, shopping farm stands, or learning from a head brewer about the local barley used in beer production.

AGRITOURISTS IN CANADA

Based on a review of relevant academic literature and leveraging key insights from the 1st World Congress on Agritourism, the agritourist in Canada is predominantly defined by the following characteristics:

- **Mostly urban, residing close to the farm visited**
- **Highly educated**
- **In their early 40’s, with a small family (average of 3 family members)**
- **Earning average national income**
- **Travelling independently instead of as part of a group**
- **Predominantly domestic travelers**
- **Cares about the environmental quality**

These characteristics are important to keep in mind. For instance, knowing that most agritourists are exploring their own backyards, can help to define target markets. It also

makes clear that, to attract national or international markets, agritourism activities need to be one-of-a-kind experiences that visitors cannot experience back home.

Furthermore, Canadian agritourism market segments are primarily those looking to escape the city for family time, learning experiences, and relaxation.⁶⁰ An agritourist is often interested in discovering where their food comes from first-hand, by participating in a workshop, harvesting produce, joining a farm tour, or volunteering to stomp grapes at a winery, for example. Agritourists are interested in food production and want to learn about the people, places, and practices behind it.

In order to attract agritourists, clearly indicated operating hours are essential. Visitors need guarantees when planning trips, especially in rural areas. It is incredibly disappointing to make a long journey to a farm and then find out that it is closed for the day. Urbanites are not accustomed to “calling ahead” and strategies that may work with locals will not necessarily work for out-of-town guests. That said, there still ways to attract agritourists spontaneously such as advertising in local maps or guides, selling products roadside, or communicating offerings to local accommodations.

AGRITOURISTS IN ONTARIO

The primary markets for agritourism in Ontario are urbanites, both individuals and families, living in areas like the Greater Toronto Area, Kitchener Waterloo, Windsor, etc. Around 12 million Ontarians live in urban centres,⁶¹ making up a large potential domestic market for agritourism. This visitor base becomes even more important in the pandemic (and post-pandemic) context. Travellers who would normally book trips abroad may shift their behaviour, favouring trips closer to home.

Destination Canada reports that 80% of Canadians plan to travel once restrictions are relaxed, and according to online search data collected between January to February 2021, Canadians are predominantly searching for domestic destinations to visit within the next six months.⁶²

Ontario's agritourists look for farm stay experiences, participation in farm activities, to be exposed to idyllic countryside scenes (farm buildings, landscape), to enjoy traditional hospitality, to be near to and engage with farm animals, to taste food from the farm, and to expose themselves to living culture and the traditions of rural life.⁶³

AGRITOURISTS IN THE WINDSOR-ESSEX REGION

When it comes to agritourism in Windsor-Essex, it's obvious that there is a latent interest. For example, the Pick Your Own Guide was downloaded around 8,900 times from the

Tourism Windsor Essex website between May 2018 to December 2020, whereas the Wine Route Map was downloaded around 2,800 times in the same period.

Similarly, the WE Heart Local website, created in partnership with the Essex County Federation of Agriculture and Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island, saw 14,279 unique visitors to the site between around 31,000 page views between January 2018 to October 2020. Other content that was particularly well received by potential visitors include articles such as *How to Spend a Wine Weekend in Windsor Essex* which received around 11,700 impressions and *I Pick, U Pick: Your Autumn Apple Picking Guide* at 10,700 impressions.



WINE TOURISTS, A SUBSET OF THE AGRITOURISM MARKET

There are four wine tourist profiles to consider: the 'wine lover' who knows wines and can discuss its finer points with a wine-maker; the 'wine interested' who likes wines and has previously attended tastings and visited wineries; the 'wine curious' who has a low to moderate interest in wine, and is motivated to visit the region for other reasons; and finally the 'disinterested wine tourist' who visits wineries as part of a group, and sees it as an alternative to a bar.⁶⁴

Online search behaviour illustrates the importance of wine tourism, as a subset of agritourism in Windsor Essex. The Explore EPIC Wine Country website, which includes links to the Wine Passport, Tasting Pass, Blogs, etc. saw 20,400 views between 2018-2020. Once they are in destination, many visitors have "anchor wineries" that serve as the starting points of their touring. As cited by the British Columbia Wine Institute, when the visitor experience exceeds their expectations, visitors tend to visit more wineries than they originally planned, and subsequently purchase more local products than expected.⁶⁵

Everyone Else

And finally, there is another type of food tourist – everyone else! All tourists eat, and there is the potential for businesses and destinations to leverage this. Expanding the definition of food tourism opens opportunities to localize dollars in communities. Even if someone's primary reason for visitation is having an outdoor or rural experience, as a business, there are ways to enhance their trip and encourage local spending through food and drink.

The spaces where agritourism occurs are often more rural than other food tourism experiences. For this reason, inspiring the "everyone else" market to participate in agritourism activities involves a bit more planning on the business side. A key strategy is collaborating with in-town businesses and tourism organizations to increase word-of-mouth referrals and online presence.

TARGET MARKETS

Local Residents

Local residents are a key market for agritourism activities. Many people already engage in seasonal agritourism activities, potentially without even thinking of them as such. Participating in a corn maze, visiting a u-pick berry farm or shopping at a roadside farm stand are the kinds of agritourism activities that often resonate with local visitors. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interest in supporting local businesses and strengthening local food systems is also growing. Increasingly, people are interested in

learning where their food comes from and meeting the people behind its production. Across all market segments, including those closer to home, hands on activities like cooking classes and workshops that allow for learning are becoming increasingly popular. Focussing new product development on these kinds of activities will offer something new to local residents, help to connect them to food production spaces in their communities, while also appealing to broader visitor markets.

Day-trippers

Agritourism activities can inspire day trips for a wide range of visitor segments, from school trips to a farmers' market visit. The Town of Essex is located within driving distance of several population centres that could be inspired to take a day trip, especially if there are points of interest along the way. London, for example is 1.5h from the Town of Essex, whereas Windsor and Detroit are only minutes away. Relatedly, visitors travelling to Windsor for business, or an event might be convinced to extend their stay if they are given options for activities to do in the surrounding regions, including the Town. Making these daytrip add-ons easy to organize is essential to capitalizing on these markets. Similarly, with limited time, these visitors will be more discerning with the experiences they add to their itinerary. Offering unique, one-of-a-kind experiences tied to place will be key. Seasonal activities that might appeal to locals, such as berry picking, need to be elevated in order to also appeal to an out-of-towner.

Overnight Pleasure Visitors

By staying longer and spending more, overnight visitors bring considerably more money into communities than day-trippers. They are a market worth targeting. Moving day trippers to overnight guests can also dramatically increase visitor spend. Turning day trips into weekend getaways or encouraging an overnight stay for visitors on a longer road trip are some examples of how this can be done. The Town of Essex is located within a 3-hr drive of key potential markets in Kitchener-Waterloo and the Greater Toronto Area. Population centres across the border in Michigan also present potential markets.

Wine tourism, a subset of agritourism, can transform agricultural areas into destinations with its strong capacity to draw pleasure visitors into the region. While the primary motivations of most wine tourists are to sample and purchase wines directly from the winemaker, their secondary or peripheral motivations include both socializing and learning about wine, along with being entertained. According to a study in the Journal of Wine Research on the behaviours and motivations of wine tourists, in addition to visitors' desire to taste wines that match their personal preferences, in unique locations

such as the cellar door of a winery, shorter visits to individual wineries are favoured, with groups of two or more people visiting different wineries together being more prevalent than individuals or couples exploring a wine region on their own.⁶⁶

Visiting Friends and Relatives

Those travelling to visit friends and relatives are an important market for overnight stays across the country. By getting such visitors to stay in local accommodations, their trip spend can be increased. Similarly, by increasing familiarity amongst local residents of the agritourism experiences on offer in the Town of Essex, it becomes more likely that hosts will bring their family and friends to these activities.

PART 3

AGRITOURISM IN THE TOWN OF ESSEX

CURRENT STATE

Agritourism Assets

Located in the southernmost reaches of Ontario along the 42nd parallel (at the same latitude as northern California), the Town of Essex has mild climate through most of the year and relatively longer growing season. As importantly, within Essex County, where the destination is one of seven municipalities, 80% of the land area is classified as farmland. This means agriculture dominates the area's landscape and economy. Along with its relatively flat terrain and good quality soils, these environmental factors well position the Town of Essex to develop agritourism.⁶⁷

Wineries have long been established in the region, and they remain the most visible agritourism offering in the destination thanks to a temperate microclimate that supports a high concentration of vineyards. Local wineries have wine tastings and an on-site bottle shop, with most offering tours of the grounds. Additionally, many have expanded to include a restaurant or offer seasonal dining experiences (such as barn dinners) with a focus on local ingredients (e.g., fresh perch from Lake Erie). Bicycle tours, either at individual farms or wineries, or as part of the Wine Trail Ride, as well as the popular Windsor Essex Trolley Tours also operate in the region to bring visitors closer to the area's viticulture offerings.

The John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area, which allows visitors to experience life on a pioneer-era working farm, offers seasonal agritourism experiences not found elsewhere in the region. For example, visitors can take part in the spring planting of heirloom crops at the heritage garden, learn how to prepare traditional foods in the homestead kitchen, stop by the blacksmith shop to see how farm tools are repaired at a coal-fired forge, and peek into the smoke house where locally produced foods are preserved. Such experiences have the ability to connect people with their local environment while celebrating the area's rich cultural heritage.

Events such as the Harrow Fair attract purposeful, exploratory travellers keen to take part in the community's agricultural traditions. Participating in a pie auction, strolling the midway to see the year's largest pumpkin, tasting local foods, and bringing home award-winning pastries or preserves, provides visitors a taste of rural life in a festive

setting. Established in 1909, the Harrow Research and Development Centre has grown to be one of the largest greenhouse production research facilities in North America. It also leads research in sustainable agro-ecosystems management within the Great Lakes watershed.

According to the Essex Region Conservation Authority, with its Carolinian woodlands, prairie habitat and lush wetlands, this area is one of the most biologically diverse regions in Canada. Proximity to the lake, easy access to multi-use trails, and opportunities for viewing migratory bird routes provides visitors varied experiences of the natural environment and landscapes within the Town of Essex.

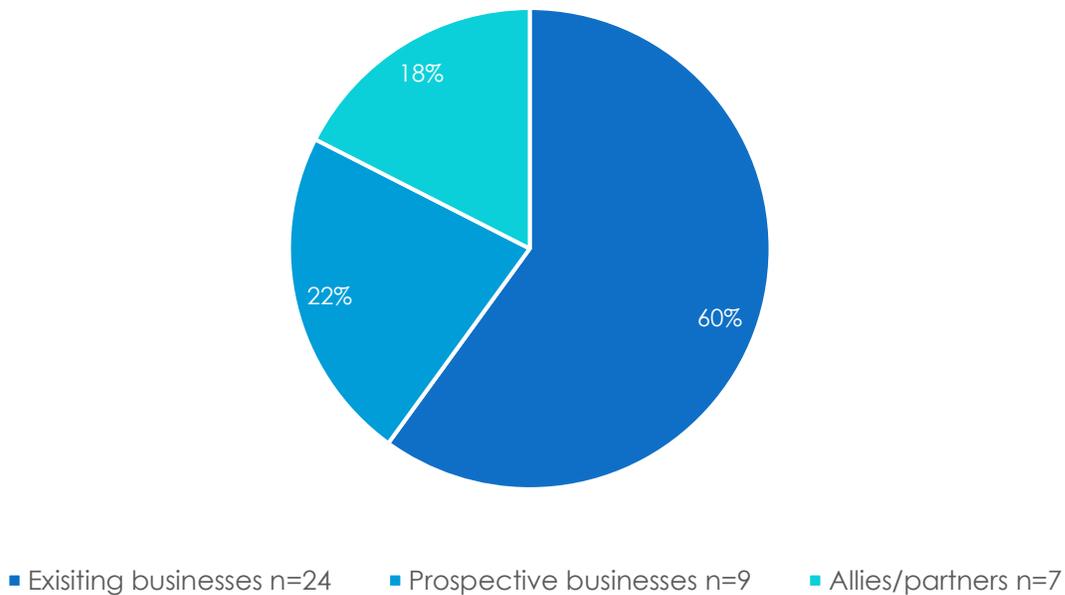
As travellers continue to seek open spaces that allow for outdoor recreation with physical distancing measures, utilizing the area's popular trail networks could allow for agritourism experiences to be developed along certain trails. For example, accessible picnic spots with agricultural views could be promoted, and paired with local fare.



Forum on Agritourism

As part of the research and engagement process, a virtual agritourism forum was held on Feb. 18, 2021 for local businesses, agritourism allies, and partners. Of the forty (n=40) representatives present, nine (n=9) were identified as prospective agritourism operators, and 24 (n=24) were identified as existing businesses that currently offer some type of agritourism activity. Seven (n=7) participants were allies/partners.

AGRITOURISM STAKEHOLDERS IN THE TOWN OF ESSEX



The session was divided into four (4) groups to have more meaningful discussions on specific themes surrounding agritourism, which included participants' understanding of agritourism, an overview of existing and potential agritourism activities in the region, identifying target markets, and how the Town of Essex can support the development of local agritourism.

Agritourism Experiences and Products

Following the forum, an inventory of experiences and products currently offered by allies/partners and existing businesses was taken, with prospective operators providing activities they plan to offer ([see Agritourism Experiences in the Town of Essex, p. 32](#)).

Visiting farms which have the space and capability to host on-farm events (n=14) and offer local food products for sale (n=11), followed by winery experiences which include a wine tasting (n=10), visiting the bottle shop (n=10), and dining at the winery's on-site restaurant (n=7) are currently the destination's top agritourism offers. Of note is that not all wineries in the Town of Essex offer a winery tour (n=5).

While roadside farm stands dot the region, within the destination there are few farm stands (n=4). There are currently no pick-your-own fruit or vegetable experiences on offer in the Town of Essex. There are also a limited number of farm tours (n=3) open to the public.

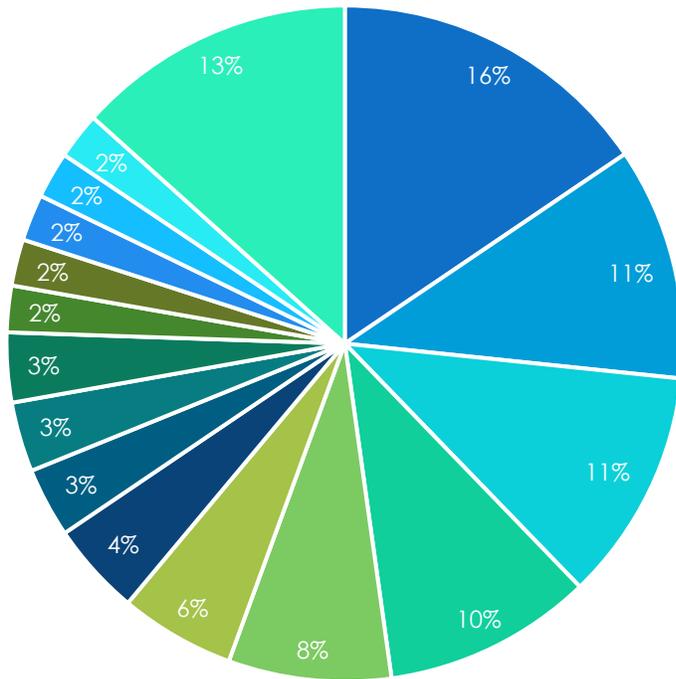
Among the region's many apple orchards, only one farm offers an apple orchard tour (n=1). Apple cider is produced on-site at this orchard. There are also two bee farms which offer honey tastings (n=2), with one that offers a tour of the apiary.

Agricultural experiences (n=3) such as sampling locally made pies at the Harrow Fair, on-farm food tastings (n=2), participating in a maple syrup boil (n=2), and taking a bike tour through a farm or winery (n=2) are also offered to visitors. On-farm accommodations (n=2) are limited in the destination.

Other types of agritourism experiences and products currently offered by individual operators include farm-to-table dinners, an on-farm cooking class, harvesting produce from a heritage garden, learning about native seeds grown locally, and visiting a livestock farm, among others.

Prospective operators have also noted potential areas of expansion to develop their planned offerings as agritourism experiences. Adding roadside farm stands, having a dedicated space for tastings, and setting up educational tours with locally known food producers were some examples provided.

AGRITOURISM EXPERIENCES IN THE TOWN OF ESSEX



- On-farm events n=14
- Wine tasting n=10
- Visit to bottle shop n=10
- Purchasing local foods n=9
- On-farm restaurant/cafe n=7
- Winery tour n=5
- Farm stands n=4
- Agricultural experiences n=3
- Outdoor experiences n=3
- Farm tours n=3
- On-farm stay (accommodation) n=2
- Maple syrup boil n=2
- Honey tasting n=2
- Bike tour n=2
- On-farm food tasting n=2
- Other n=12

RELEVANT FUNDING AND SUPPORT

The County Road 50 Community Improvement Project Area (CIPA), under the Colchester and County Road 50 Community Improvement Plan (CIP), continues to provide financial assistance supporting the establishment and maintenance of value-added, on-farm diversified and agriculture-related land use activities for eligible property owners along County Road 50.

As effects of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many local businesses, including existing agritourism operators, to swiftly adapt their operations, two business support initiatives led by the Town of Essex were launched in the summer of 2020.

In partnership with the WindsorEssex Small Business Centre and the Essex Centre Business Improvement Area, the Town launched a Digital Growth Grant to assist local businesses in expanding their online presence, providing IT/digital training for staff, and improving their online marketing and sales strategies. Funding for up to \$1,000 was made available for 20 eligible business owners in the Town.

The Business Relaunch Grant program, which covered up to \$500 of the costs associated with implementing measures to minimize the risk of virus transmission (such as physical barriers and protective shielding), was launched with support from Council during a special meeting in June 2020.

A listing of funding and resources to support prospective agritourism operators at the provincial and federal levels was also compiled ([see Appendix B](#)).

WHAT WE HEARD

Insights from the Forum on Agritourism

Among existing and potential operators present at the forum, there's a notable difference in participants' understanding of agritourism. Existing operators, for example, described agritourism as "growing and producing directly on farms", "pick-your-own farms", "a working farm with farmer interaction" and "vineyard tours". Prospective operators, on the other hand, shared a more experience-focussed definition of agritourism, describing it as "spending time with family", "where people experience retreat", the ability to "offer off-grid nature escapes" and "getaways on a farm", and as a way to "bridge the disconnect between farmers and urbanites."

When asked why someone would come to the Town of Essex, wineries were mentioned multiple times. Connected to this seasonal offering were comments that people going to or from Colchester Beach often stopped in the Town. Prior to the pandemic, one

participant noted that locally organized bus tours brought new visitors into the region. Another noted that if they imagined how today's agritourism initiatives might evolve in the next ten years, there would be "an emphasis on farms, better transportation with hop-on/hop-off tours, and more/different accommodations," citing the current lack of transportation options for prospective visitors who don't have a private vehicle but are interested in stopping by multiple wineries in the destination.

Existing operators also shared ideas on infrastructure-related supports the Town of Essex could provide to further develop agritourism. These include better signage and wayfinding for farms and promoting an iconic place in the Town (which ideally features elements of the destination's agricultural heritage, e.g., downtown Harrow), for visitors to take photos and "tag" themselves in for sharing to social media.

The interest in pursuing agritourism for prospective operators stems from various reasons. One participant shared that establishing a B&B was their initial motivation, but that "we need to give people a reason to come out to the county, and (the) agritourism connection seems like a good fit," adding that "we're interested in partnering with farmers to create that experience." Another shared that "agritourism connects education, healing, and well-being," while another said that agritourism operations with a strong educational component, e.g. around planting crops that are not native to the area, would allow "newcomers with a farming background to keep (their) cultural connections."

When asked what prevents their expansion into agritourism, one prospective operator shared that "permits with the township, getting the property rezoned from agricultural to residential, and adding residential units to a farm" were some perceived challenges, while another prospective operator added that "the grants process is daunting, and you need someone to help you through it."

Allies and partners present at the forum, including representatives from the Harrow Agricultural Society, Essex County Federation of Agriculture, and Essex Region Conservation Authority, agreed that agritourism is a strategic direction for the destination, and that it's "absolutely the right time, to move forward after the pandemic." When asked how they associate agritourism with the Town of Essex, annual trips to the Harrow Fair were mentioned, and one representative shared "(our) local events get people feeling as though they're going back in time in Essex, and also connecting with the seasons."

Insights from Town of Essex Council Members

Council Members from the Town of Essex were surveyed in March 2021 to gain a better understanding of councillor perspectives on agritourism development in the destination.

Councillors' definition of agritourism included "farms that grow/produce a product," operations that are "inclusive of on-farm retail and experiential programs," "any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm," and as a way to "encourage people to spend money in rural parts of our community."

When asked if agritourism is a strategic way to grow for the Town, one councillor shared that "certainly, and the more stops, experiences, cultural activities and hands-on programs we have, the more we are apt to reap a share of this 'staycation' income stream." Another said that "once travel is permitted, we can use these attractions for out-of-town visitors to Essex County."

With regard to Council's role in supporting agritourism, the need to ensure agritourism-related infrastructure is "adequate, with proper zoning in place," approve by-laws that "allow for businesses to bypass red tape," and "create educational opportunities around business planning and marketing" were shared, with one councillor noting that "I have heard criticism from developing in non-commercial areas (and) we need to maintain focus on downtown cores, as well as allow rural businesses to make money."

GAPS IN THE OFFERING

While the destination has established agritourism operators, there are significant gaps in the existing offering to address.

Currently, there are no u-pick farms located in the destination. Local apple and peach farms are prime candidates for this type of agritourism development, with a low barrier to entry for prospective operators. While the Fruit Wagon along County Road 50 offers seasonal dinners in the orchard, no other fruit farms in the Town of Essex provide orchard experiences for visitors.

In the Town, there is a limited number of on-farm accommodations; however, there is a potential for this issue to be considered in the upcoming review of regulations impacting short-term rental accommodations.

Beyond the EPIC Wine Country Passport and the WE Trolley Tours which incentivize regional travel, specifically to wineries, there is only one other agritourism product that connects multiple farms and farm-based experiences in the region. Previously created as a downloadable map from the WE Heart Local website, the Buy Local map (which lists

producers, farmers markets, local retail, restaurants and public greenways in the townships of Amherstburg, Essex, Kingsville, Lakeshore, LaSalle, Leamington, Tecumseh and Windsor) is currently transitioning into a digital pass, which will serve to connect the region's farms, wineries, breweries, markets and other attractions with consumers via their digital devices. Considering that the local food system is not fixed to jurisdictional boundaries, it is also important not to limit agritourism to a set geographical place, as visitors do not pay attention to such boundaries, and any efforts to bridge urban-rural connections is worthwhile. This includes growing collaborations between Town of Essex farms and agritourism stakeholders in adjacent municipalities.

Connecting the destination's geographical positioning in the 42nd parallel with local agricultural production is something to celebrate. This presents an opportunity to promote the diversity of crops (and their derivative products) grown in the destination, which thrive in the region's microclimate and tell a story about how the Town of Essex is connected to other agritourism destinations.

There is also a weak connection between existing drivers of visitation to the area, e.g., birding, and agritourism. As outdoor experiences like birdwatching attract new audiences looking for open spaces and continue to draw dedicated birders around the region's migratory bird routes, there is a potential to make local agritourism experiences attractive to these enthusiasts, for example by encouraging visitors to purchase take-away meals or picnic baskets with locally produced foods from an agritourism operator in the Town of Essex.

Finally, there is a need to better celebrate local foodways and the region's signature products. While award-winning pies, jams, and pickles made for the Harrow Fair may not be easily available to visitors beyond the Labour Day weekend, an awareness of who produces these foods and where these foods may be purchased in the Town will be attractive to food tourists. At the John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area, one-off programs such as the Locavore Lunch and Maple Syrup Days have the potential to be expanded into seasonal agritourism experiences.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND CHALLENGES

Strengths

- A high concentration of wineries already delivering visitor experiences
- County Road 50 is a popular tourist route that connects wineries. The Colchester Community Improvement Plan (CIP), under which the County Road 50 Community Improvement Project Area launched in 2017, is a key initiative that aligns with agritourism development, with grants available for eligible property owners (six of these may be applied to agritourism-related ventures)
- Zoning by-laws (regarding On-farm diversified use) were amended in 2018 to expand agritourism-related definitions
- Agritourism development aligns with Climate Ready: A Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the Town of Essex, 2021-2026
- Strong industry interest in developing agritourism
- Diversity of existing trail networks in the region
- Attractive and varied rural landscape, which includes views of Lake Erie
- A mild climate and long agricultural growing season
- Proximity to key travel markets, including the US
- Highly accessible from major roadways
- Region is known for its high biodiversity and as a migratory bird habitat
- Region has strong agricultural heritage

Weaknesses

- Lack of u-pick farms in the destination
- Limited signage and wayfinding
- Limited diversity of agritourism activity types
- Limited options for getting around without a personal vehicle (including if you are visiting wineries)
- Confusion by operators around regulations associated with agritourism development
- Discrepancies between the Colchester CIP area and other areas within the Town of Essex that might be interested in agritourism development
- Perception by operators of limited accommodation options in the destination, for groups of four or more visitors travelling together
- Lack of community-approved definition of agritourism

Opportunities

- Identify and expand the region's key food products and producers
- Attract wine tourists from nearby regions
- Convert day-trippers to overnight/weekend travellers
- Attract more visitors under 35 from Ontario and Quebec, following their increased visibility in the region following COVID-19
- Support the identification and development of iconic places to take photos that feature the destination's agricultural heritage
- Facilitate cross-promotion amongst operators on existing agritourism offerings to recommend
- Improve signage for local agritourism operators as part of Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island's regional signage strategy
- Collaborate with allies and partners to develop future agritourism offerings (e.g., expanding the Essex County Federation of Agriculture's autumn Fall Hiker tour)
- Leverage natural landscapes to combine agritourism with ecotourism based on EQ profile interests
- Provide farms with digital marketing tools to improve their websites and build an online presence to match that of local wineries

Challenges

- Without the right supports, existing and potential operators interested in developing agritourism in the Town of Essex may have difficulty with understanding the criteria for Agriculture-Related versus On-Farm Diversified Uses (to qualify for grants)
- Ensuring the quality and authenticity of agritourism experiences across destination
- Not all businesses have the time, capacity, and skills to develop agritourism
- Some visitors have existing and unrealistic perceptions of what a farm should be
- Harnessing momentum around agritourism to move from talking to doing
- Perception of red tape, specifically zoning restrictions, by-laws and permitting are preventing prospective businesses from exploring agritourism offerings
- COVID-19 realities and the US border closure

PART 4

AGRITOURISM DEVELOPMENT

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

Four areas of opportunity for agritourism development in the Town of Essex have been identified. These are: growing agritourism as a priority, strengthening agritourism networks, enhancing the agritourism offer, and attracting visitors. Each area of opportunity is paired with related actions to guide agritourism development in the Town of Essex. The actions are divided into immediate term (0-12 months) and short-term (1-2 years). This is followed by future thinking to inspire medium-term action and provide direction beyond the implementation of this strategy.

IMMEDIATE AND SHORT-TERM ACTIONS

Growing Agritourism as a Priority

1. CONTINUE TO FOSTER AN ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Continuing to foster an enabling policy environment for agritourism development in the Town of Essex is essential to future agritourism growth. Key to this, is developing a shared understanding of agritourism amongst officials and stakeholders. An important step it is considering how agritourism is represented across diverse policy documents and establishing alignments where possible to support its prioritization. For example, this review process might include adding a definition for agritourism into the Town of Essex Zoning By-law, outlining permitted uses such as on-farm accommodations for the travelling public.

2. BUILD AWARENESS AROUND RULES AND REGULATIONS RELATED TO AGRITOURISM DEVELOPMENT

It is important to build awareness around agritourism, and relevant rules and regulations (e.g., building code, zoning, health and safety) amongst Town of Essex staff, existing agritourism business, and prospective agritourism businesses. Industry will be more likely to incorporate agritourism into their operations if they have a clear understanding of the permitting processes. There are many ways to build this awareness including webinars, meetings, business coaching, infographics of permitting processes, etc.

3. COLLECT STORIES ON FOODWAYS RELEVANT TO AGRITOURISM

Foodways are the foundation of agritourism development. For the Town of Essex to build an agritourism offering connected to place it is important that it be based on the diverse cultures, traditions, and livelihoods of the community. Foodways should inform agritourism product development and add value to marketing campaigns. Stories can be collected via archival research, oral histories, public-facing data collection portal, etc.

Strengthening Agritourism Networks

4. FOSTER NETWORKING AT THE OPERATOR-LEVEL

A connected industry shares learnings and challenges to grow agritourism. Industry networking is also precursor to innovative product development and partnership, especially across business types (e.g., between a farm and beverage producer). Ways to foster operator-level networking include hosting meet-and-greets or creating an online operator-facing database of existing and potential agritourism businesses. Of course, networks can also include national and international partners as important resources for knowledge-sharing.

5. USE CULINARY TOURISM ASSETS TO DRIVE TRAFFIC TO AGRITOURISM BUSINESSES

Many culinary tourists have an interest in agritourism activities. The Town of Essex can leverage culinary tourism touchpoints like restaurants, farmers' markets, retail stores, or attractions to drive traffic to agritourism businesses. This might be through mapping local producers and the restaurants that serve their products, or it could involve training visitor-facing staff to recommend other local businesses. A restaurateur serving local food might suggest that a visitor stop by a winery to pick up a bottle of the wine they had enjoyed with dinner (and vice versa).

6. CREATE AN AGRITOURISM AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Ambassador programs take many shapes, but most have a common goal- to drive traffic to local businesses. Both operator-facing and resident-facing ambassador programs can achieve this goal. For example, local residents who are exposed to agritourism activities through special programs and incentives will be more likely to bring their visiting friends and relatives to agritourism businesses. Ambassador programs can increase visitor awareness of the food and agritourism offerings available in the Town of Essex.

Enhancing the Agritourism Offer

7. EMPOWER BUSINESSES TO IMPROVE THEIR ONLINE PRESENCE

There is a disconnect between the strong online presence of wineries (which have active social media accounts and customer-facing websites that are easy to navigate) and farms, which are at various levels of online readiness. Providing cross-promotional training, digital marketing resources and webinars for agritourism operators (specifically farmers) can help ensure the destination's agritourism products are incorporated into visitor itineraries.

8. HELP EXISTING AGRITOURISM BUSINESSES ENHANCE THEIR CURRENT OFFERING

There are many ways that businesses can be supported to enhance their visitor offerings. Capacity-building might involve the development of tools and resources, offering group trainings online or in person, or through one-on-one business coaching. Specific skills will vary based on the business, but some common topics include experience development, storytelling, and partnerships.

9. ENCOURAGE MORE BUSINESSES TO GET INVOLVED IN AGRITOURISM

There is a need to support and inspire a wide range of prospective agritourism operators, including businesses that are introducing new products to market such as world crops or value-added products. Creating a new municipal-wide grant program to assist agritourism operators with starting or expanding agritourism businesses in the Town of Essex should be considered in the short term. From discovering the benefits of agritourism, to providing the tools needed to develop innovative agritourism experiences, an increase in local operators leads, over time, to increased visitation.

Attracting Visitors

10. POSITION TOWN OF ESSEX AS AN AGRITOURISM DESTINATION

Located within driving distance of key markets in Detroit, Kitchener-Waterloo, London, and the Greater Toronto Area, the Town of Essex is well-positioned as a weekend destination for travellers looking to relax and enjoy a variety of on-farm local food and drink experiences. In the post-pandemic context, promoting the Town as an alternative to similar destinations (e.g., the Niagara wine region) with consistently high tourist numbers, could have a strong appeal for visitors.

11. CELEBRATE POINTS OF DIFFERENTIATION

A stronger awareness of the destination's unique food, drink, and other cultural assets is needed to set this agritourism destination apart from others in the region. This includes a celebration of crops that thrive in the area's microclimate (thanks to geographic positioning on the 42nd parallel) and highlighting the Lake Erie North Shore VQA appellation for locally produced wines.

12. AMPLIFY DESTINATION IMAGE THROUGH MARKETING PARTNERSHIPS

The Town's agritourism marketing efforts should be linked to those in the wider region to promote collaboration across organizations, including the Southwest Ontario Tourism Corporation (RTO1). For example, as part of Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island's regional signage strategy in partnership with Essex County, an increase and improvement to existing signage for agritourism businesses in the Town of Essex should be considered. As well, listings for farms and wineries on the Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island, WE Heart Local, Wine Country Ontario, and EPIC wineries websites should provide reliable, updated information for all existing and new agritourism experiences in the Town of Essex.

STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY	IMMEDIATE TERM (0-12 months)	SHORT TERM (1-2 years)
Growing Agritourism as a Priority	Continue to foster an enabling policy environment	Collect stories on foodways relevant to agritourism
	Build awareness around rules and regulations related to agritourism development	
Strengthening Agritourism Networks	Foster networking at the operator-level	Use culinary tourism assets to drive traffic to agritourism businesses
		Create an agritourism ambassador program
Enhancing The Agritourism Offer	Empower businesses to improve their online presence	Encourage more businesses to get involved in agritourism
	Help existing agritourism businesses enhance their current offering	
Attracting Visitors	Position Town of Essex as an agritourism destination	
	Celebrate points of differentiation	
	Amplify destination image through marketing partnerships	

FUTURE THINKING: MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS

Once a critical mass of businesses is involved in agritourism, a next step will be to support businesses in diversifying the types of experiences that they offer to elevate the overall agritourism offering of the destination. This will likely involve moving from low impact agritourism activities, like farm stands and tours, to more hands-on offerings such as workshops, tastings and “behind the cellar door” experiences. For example, farms that already have a roadside stand may consider offering on-site preserving classes, adding value to the experience of purchasing direct from a farm. A diverse product offering not only makes the Town of Essex appealing to visitors, but also helps foster partnerships and collaboration amongst existing agritourism operators.

Capacity-building can support businesses with this kind of experience development. By seeing successful operations in action, exposures to good practices in agritourism from both near and far can inspire business operators to enhance their visitor offerings. One way to organize these exposures is to connect with national and international agritourism partners, potentially through an exchange program or familiarization tour. Once the Town of Essex has a diverse array of agritourism experiences on offer to visitors at its many agritourism businesses, there may be an opportunity to link these experiences into a destination-level product, such as a tour or trail. In doing so, the destination can simplify the trip planning process for visitors, celebrate local points of differentiation, and inspire visitation.

Finally, as agritourism grows in the Town of Essex, there will come a time when it makes sense to review the definition of agritourism, to see if the current version still makes sense or if it needs to be updated to meet new contexts related to the businesses involved in agritourism or the places where agritourism occurs. This might involve broadening the definition to include farmers' markets or lake-based fisheries, for example. Reviewing the definition of agritourism periodically helps to ensure that it does not limit entrepreneurship or access to funding.

PART 5 IMPLEMENTATION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, travellers will be seeking meaningful and multisensory experiences that are safe, secure, and close to home. With its rich agricultural history, beautiful landscapes, and tourism foundation, the Town of Essex is well-positioned to deliver a breadth and diversity of agritourism experiences to locals and visitors alike. As agritourism develops in the Town of Essex, the visitor economy will grow, and the destination will become stronger.

Continued collaboration amongst municipal, regional, and industry stakeholders will determine what success looks like for agritourism development. The Town of Essex has prepared and will be following a highly detailed and itemized plan for implementing an agritourism development strategy (see [Appendix C](#)). The implementation plan details the Who, What, Where, When, and How behind the twelve (12) actions identified, with the Why being covered in this strategy report. It also includes relevant information on responsible parties, supporting organizations, inputs, intended outputs and outcomes, along specific timeframes.

NOTES

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