

Ag-what? Tourism Officials Turn Agricultural into Tourism

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Lovey and Lady, one of six breeding pairs of emus at Sugar Maple Farm in Brodhead, WI - Dan Lassiter

BRODHEAD, WI — They call it “ag tourism.” Local farmers call it “doing business.”

On March 30-31, the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association is holding a “LUV-R-AG” summit in Wisconsin Dells. The two-day event will feature experts in ag, marketing, ag-tourism business owners and others who will showcase “opportunities for and partnerships in the ag-tourism industry.”

But what exactly is ag tourism? Around here, agriculture is synonymous with work.

Based on the description the ag tourism's website, visitdairyland.com, ag tourism can be anything from eating lunch at a CSA (community-supported agriculture) to touring a pheasant farm to a trip to a pick-your-own pumpkin patch.

It also includes corn mazes, opportunities to meet dairy goats or llamas, strawberry patches, apple orchards and a variety of other activities many southcentral Wisconsin residents don't think are that unusual.

“We take it for granted because we have easy access to it,” said Christine Rebout, executive director of the Janesville Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Around here, we're probably only one or two generations away from the farm.”

In the suburbs of Chicago, people are more likely to be between two and four generations away from the farm. Agriculture, it seems, is a novelty for those folks. "People in northern Illinois love the idea of a farm experience," Rebout said. "It's really exciting to them."

Joylene Reavis, owner of Sugar Maple Emu Farm in Brodhead, said she has repeat customers from Illinois who make the trip each summer simply because they enjoy the drive. Along with the usual line-up of school groups, Reavis has given tours to Christian motorcycle groups, antique car clubs and Red Hat ladies. Reavis agreed that people are further away from the land than they used to be. "There used to be a time on the weekends when people packed up and went back to the farm to visit," she said.

Reavis and her husband, Michael, started the emu farm in 1995. The couple saw tours as a way to promote the farm's products.

That's also the case for Dela and Tony Ends. The Ends family has been running Scotch Hill Farm in Brodhead since 1994. Even in those early days, the Ends have encouraged people to visit the farm and help in the chores. But Dela Ends said farm tours and other "ag tourism" events have gotten more popular since 2000.

The local chamber of commerce puts on a farm tour and the Ends have hosted classes. More recently, the family has been participating in "farm to table" events, where people come to the farm for lunch made from the farm's bounty. From July 31 to Aug. 2, Scotch Hill will be part of the "Soil Sisters" event, which is being billed as a "celebration of Wisconsin farms and rural life." The three-day event features classes, farm tours and meals on farms and at restaurants featuring locally sourced food. Ends thinks consumers are more interested in buying local goods, and that they crave a connection to the producer. "It's putting a face on it," Ends said. "When you buy anything, if you know who made it and where it comes from, it means more." The Soil Sisters event this year is supported by a tourism grant, which is helping to get the word out.

Steve Peterson, executive director of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association, said there has been an "explosion" of ag tourism in the state. Wisconsin Act 269, which provides liability protection for ag tourism-related activities, has helped tremendously, he said.

At the summit in Wisconsin Dells, the ag tourism association will announce its "Field Trips" initiative to promote touring coach visits to ag-tourism destinations in Wisconsin. "The idea is based on those field trips adults fondly remember from grade school," Peterson wrote in a news release.

Rebout, who grew up on a farm near Edgerton and now farms with her husband Doug's family, said the landscape and people we take for granted are part the attraction. "The red barns, the black and white cows in the green fields—it's really welcoming to people," she said.

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