

Berry production in Alberta: Accessing the market through agritourism

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Aleksandra Tymczak studies the berry industry – an expanding industry in Alberta’s agricultural system. Here, she highlights the growing agritourism industry in relation to the opportunities presented to berry producers

On average, it takes two years to get one’s product to market, and the hardest part of getting the product on the shelf is actually distribution. The costs of distribution are a significant challenge because the product must be brought into a warehouse, and producers must conduct distribution themselves until they have scaled up to a particular size. As a result, this restricts producers from selling only within their local areas, following the farmers’ market model. However, producers willing to expand may lack sufficient manpower or energy to sell at multiple farmers’ markets. Once a producer has scaled up beyond the farmers’ market model, they have to determine the product scale and number of retail stores they need. A producer needs to pursue a reasonable market in proportion to their scaling-up capabilities to avoid underachieving once in the retail market.

A growing market access opportunity: The agritourism industry

The expansion of the agritourism industry has been identified as a critical transition in Alberta’s agricultural system, supporting local operations and providing an outlet to address the barriers faced by these operations when scaling up and selling their produce on the market. An increasing number of berry producers in Alberta are transitioning their operations to become more involved in the agritourism industry and incorporating tours, tastings, and classes in an attempt to navigate business sustainability, financial security, and succession planning. Agritourism has evolved into a supplemental alternative farm enterprise that involves developing new business operations and incorporating them into existing farm production operations (Ainley & Smale, 2010).

U-picks and other practices within the agritourism industry

Conducting a U-pick operation is a good stepping stone into entering the agritourism industry and scaling one’s operation from just selling produce to selling experiences. The U-pick model is simple in nature. Consumers come onto the farm and pick berries by pound. Some consumers are described as ‘hardcore,’ being able to pick five to ten pounds of berries, while other consumers come more for the experience.

There is an appreciation for new Canadians coming out, learning about the produce that grows in Alberta, and tasting a certain berry for the first time. Other consumers, particularly European consumers, have a dedication to coming out to U-picks and producing their own products, such as preserves. Overall, U-pick operations are another means for producers to enter the market and sell their products to consumers outside of the retail market space.

There is a consensus among berry producers in Alberta that the main purpose of conducting a U-pick operation is to help with the harvesting of berries – a required process to sell at retail markets. Berry harvesting is labor-intensive, and not all growers have the appropriate equipment or infrastructure to harvest all of their crops and process them (i.e., freezing, etc.) to sell wholesale. Depending on the proximity of the farm to urban centers and the population density, a grower may be able to sell all of their berries by U-pick or fresh without even needing to process it.

Entering the experience economy within the agricultural system has led some producers to other aspects of agritourism, such as food service on the farm, farm dinners, on-farm cafes, company picnics, and farm weddings. This is why it is important to note that a significant component of agritourism within the agricultural system is culinary tourism. For example, some berry producers initially started with a U-pick operation, which later led to scaling up their operations to include a storefront and cafe. They also expanded to support other local producers within their storefronts and cafes, such as other produce (potatoes, etc.), dairy products, or value-added products. Other berry producers are conducting farm dinners, collaborating with local chefs to highlight their berries on their menus, and incorporating their personal experiences and culinary cultures. Thus, agritourism also provides an opportunity within the agricultural system to sell experiences.

Current and future implications

There is evidence that political actors are supporting the agricultural system through agritourism with the launch of provincial programs, such as Alberta Open Farm Days, municipal organizations such as Explore Edmonton, which is a destination management and marketing organization, and provincial organizations, such as Travel Alberta, which is a destination management organization of the Government of Alberta. Some of the producers belong to an organization called the North American Farm Direct Marketers Association, which represents agritourism farms across North America.

The organization provides opportunities for growers to attend workshops and farm tours and see what others are doing within the agricultural system. They call it advanced learning retreats, where interested growers are able to delve into every aspect of what they're doing and how their income streams are working in their business models.

In addition, policies/regulations and programs play a pivotal role in supporting berry producers to participate in the agritourism industry within Alberta and to scale into the market system. There is also potential for policies/regulations and programs to alleviate

barriers that make it too complicated for berry producers to set up their farms and operations for agritourism. This includes policies/ regulations and programs that could help with:

- Navigating through insurance protocols and other regulations and bylaws
- Acquiring expertise in event management and site planning
- Developing partnerships with businesses within local communities
- Incorporating aspects of entrepreneurialism and niche marketing, in addition to innovative business models that increase farm revenue generation
- Incorporating the value-added industry in leveraging access to primary products in Alberta and tapping into the local food movement, requiring additional skills and connections
- Alleviating the risk of being reprimanded by respective counties regarding agritourism as a permitted land use

References

1. Ainley, S. and Smale, B. (2010). 'A profile of Canadian agritourists and the benefits they seek.' *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 5 (1), Special Issue: Rural Tourism in Canada.
2. Tymczak, A. (2024). Exploring the current agricultural system in Alberta [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Alberta.

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