

AGENDA PRIORITIES

10. Establish Michigan as “the place to be” for culturally based good food that is locally grown, processed, prepared and consumed.

CULINARY TOURISM BRINGS MICHIGAN’S GREAT FOOD AND FARMERS TO THE WORLD

Before retiring, Barbara Jenness had experienced great food in many places beyond her Michigan home of Byron Center, near Grand Rapids. She’d explored Vermont by way of its “cheese trail,” visiting small farms producing artisanal products. She’d enjoyed the great variety of specialty cheeses in California “all made at small creameries nearby,” she says.

Jenness began to question why Michigan, a major Midwest dairy producing state, did not also have a wide selection of specialty, locally-made cheeses. “I couldn’t understand why Michigan didn’t have many small creameries,” Jenness said.

She decided she would try it. Jenness started Dancing Goat Creamery in 2007. Milking about 35 goats, she makes goat cheese, or chevre, the old-fashioned way: fresh every day; hand carried, hand stirred, and hand scooped. She also makes small batches of cows’ milk cheeses, like Camembert. Dancing Goat Creamery is profitable and a significant part of Jenness’ retirement income. Restaurants are her biggest customers. All of them are looking for great tastes produced nearby.

“People want to know who their food producer is, so they like to know they’re buying goat cheese from a small farmer who’s milking 35 goats and they know their name,” Jenness said. “They don’t want cheese that’s shipped from all over the country.”

Dancing Goat Creamery is also among the first in a new generation of Michigan creameries, which are growing along with demand for what those in the tourism industry call FLOSS or “fresh, local, organic, seasonal, and sustainable.”

In early 2011, the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) noted increases among on-farm cheese makers in the state and reported 25 licensed facilities. A year later, the MDARD recorded another increase, to 33 on-farm cheese makers.

“I didn’t realize the interest in it,” Jenness said. “Pretty much from the first day I opened I’ve sold every bit of cheese I could make.”

Jenness and other specialty creameries recently formed the Michigan Cheese Makers Cooperative. They’re also involved in the new Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance, which is working with restaurants, hotels, wineries, farms and more to increase the amount of time people spend in Michigan and the amount of money they spend. “If you can get someone to stay overnight and do a variety of activities, it jacks up the economic impact tremendously,” said Linda Jones, executive director of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council.



Photo courtesy of Dancing Goat Creamery

Need

Incredible, high-quality food and distinctive regional tastes and cultural flavors are all possible for Michigan. It's here. But most people in the country, let alone Michigan residents, do not know it. Michigan is just starting to recognize and nurture its local food heritage and future. Michigan must do more, both for tourists and residents, rich and poor. Great tastes are part of the exceptional quality of life Michigan must build to strengthen its future health and wealth. It's part of the daily fabric the state must improve to both enrich existing neighborhoods and attract new investment, tourism, and residents.

Opportunity

Michigan has the opportunity to develop strong markets for its producers of fruits, vegetables, and many other specialty crops, like dairy, by capitalizing on the growing consumer trend of appreciating regional wine and food travel experiences. According to the Travel Industry Association (TIA), culinary tourism is a growing travel trend. Many other states and regions of the world are actively developing and promoting culinary tourism.

Research and policy development activities in the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in recent years indicate that wine and food tourism can make greater contributions to the state's economy and provide opportunities for producers. This supports the economic development, job creation, and community betterment that encourage people and businesses to invest in Michigan's future.

Action

Supporting culinary tourism in Michigan is an important part of growing the number and types of specialty products and culturally appropriate foods available to Michigan residents and visitors. Local and state leaders can help Michigan become "the place to be" for culturally based good food that is locally grown, processed, prepared and consumed by taking the following steps:

- *Develop and coordinate promotional messages and trip planning tools for consumers, such as "foodie trails" that culinary tourism promoters have put together with Travel Michigan. More at michigan.org.*
- *Provide technical and business planning assistance for farms, food entrepreneurs, and communities to help them maximize their opportunity with such "trails."*
- *Increase Pure Michigan attention to and branding support for local food and farm products, particularly the criteria and guidance needed to ensure that products labeled Pure Michigan have a significant amount of Michigan in them.*
- *Continue and increase technical assistance support to value-added food makers in Michigan, such as "kitchen incubators" for new and growing food product makers.*

1-2-3 Go!

Check out the initial set of Foodie Trails under "Road Trips" at Travel Michigan, michigan.org. Is your community on the trail? Can you promote this trail or improve it? Get together with local farmers and others in your community to highlight local food attractions and feature them in agri-tourism and culinary tourism promotions.