Essex County Agri-Tourism: Exploring Regional and Farm-Level Diversification

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Outline

1. Context
2. Knowledge Gaps
3. Research Aim
4. Methods
5. Results
6. Implications
Agricultural Restructuring

“The Canadian agricultural sector continues to restructure as many farms expand in scale of operation, consolidate, draw on technological innovations to enhance productivity, and augment their sales”

- Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Agriculture
Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Agriculture, 1921 to 2011
Rural Restructuring

Trends in rural regions:
- Declining reliance on agriculture
- Growing presence of (ex)urban actors
- Changing expectations of rural space

Rural character has become a marketable asset
Agri-Tourism

“The act of visiting a **working farm** or any agricultural, horticultural, or agribusiness operation for the purpose of **enjoyment**, **education**, or **active involvement** in the activities of the farm or operation” (Che, 2005)
Knowledge Gaps

1. There is a lack of consensus about the rationales and processes behind diversification into agri-tourism

2. More needs to be understood about agri-tourism farms within the context of culinary and wine tourism

3. In general, the Canadian context is under-represented
Research Aim

To document and understand the **evolving role of agri-tourism** as both a **feature of the regional brand** and a **form of farm-level diversification** in Essex County, Ontario.
Essex County, ON

- Greenhouse Vegetables: $579.1
- Soybeans: $79.3
- Floriculture, Nursery & Sod: $38.9
- Field Vegetables: $36.5
- Corn: $34.8
- Mushrooms: $27.2

$ Millions
Lake Erie North Shore

Source: VQA Ontario
Methods & Stakeholders

Methods:
1. Background research
2. Farm/winery level interviews
   - 8 farms
   - 6 wineries
3. Data analysis

Stakeholders:
  Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island;
  winery owners, agri-tourism farm owners
Results: Organization Level

- Culinary & Beverage Promotion
  - Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island
  - Primary Actor
- Farm-Focused Promotion
  - Essex County Federation of Agriculture
  - Windsor Essex Economic Development Corporation
- Top-down implementation
“Fully ripened and bursting with flavour, a local tomato can be on your dinner plate the same day it was picked!”

– Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island
Results: Farm Level

Agri-Tourism Farm Categories

Experience Focused
Reconnection to: agriculture & rural places
Activities: on-farm market, pick-you-own, corn mazes, petting zoo, etc.

Food Focused
Reconnection to: agriculture & food
Activities: on-farm market, culinary events
Results: Pathways

- Pathways to agri-tourism varied:
  - Retirement project
  - Supplemental income
  - Opportunity to sell weather-damaged crops

- Additional income was not the only driver
Results: Farms & Tourism

“Tourists... we don’t really want ‘em!
– Experience-Focused Farm Owner

 “[Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island] said we needed to up our game... So she suggested and we did it, we hosted a dinner in the orchard last year.”
– Food-Focused Farm Owner
Results: Winery Level

Singular focus: attract more visitors and share more wine

Finding niche through:
- Unique cuisine
- Event spaces
- Tasting Opportunities
“It’s very cooperative... with a lot of fun, good people that... loan equipment back and forth and give you good advice and stuff like that, which makes it more of a community.”

– Winery Owner
Results: Tourism & EPIC

Source: EPIC Wineries
Food & Beverage Alignment

- Farms and wineries that contribute to the food & beverage branding move in-step with Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island
- Unclear if strategic direction has industry buy-in
- Some agri-tourism farms may not benefit from increased visitation
Collaboration & Networking

- Having an active member group enables:
  - Cost sharing
  - Peer-to-peer learning
  - Greater tourism presence
  - An avenue for engagement
Implications for Rural Ontario

- Destination Marketing Organizations hold power in creating a rural narrative
- Presents opportunities and threats to farmers:
  - Opportunity – Engage in Tourism
  - Threat – Exclusion & Changing Rural Perceptions
- Engagement with farmers as stakeholders