



FCC Knowledge Podcast

Season 5 – Episode 1

Your farm story is your marketing advantage

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Aimée Stang (AS)

Guests: Tam Andersen (TA), Yvonne Chau (YC)

00:00:02

AS: Welcome to the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadians in agriculture, real stories, and good conversations about the business of farming.

This show is brought to you by the Manage Your Farm Finances course series, and I'm your host, Aimée Stang.

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TA: When you start to see the success and you start to see that that diversified income stream is actually helping the farm's bottom line and allowing your daughter to stay on the farm, it's an easy sell.

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AS: This episode was developed in collaboration with Travel Alberta.

More and more farms are looking for new ways to diversify their business and develop alternative income streams outside traditional commercial agricultural operations.

This can be driven by a desire to expand without acquiring additional acres or quotas, or it could be to create opportunities and interest for the next generation to continue the farming legacy.

Whatever the reasons, those successfully diversifying seem to have one thing in common: opportunity.

One opportunity that's been gaining momentum in recent years is agritourism. Tourism organizations across the country are definitely noticing the opportunity and are collaborating with farmers to find and create new ways to join the tourism sector, using the farm experience to not only promote their farms, but also bridge the gap between the rural and urban landscapes, and educate consumers on where their food comes from.

This is why we've invited two experts who live and breathe agritourism in Alberta to talk about how this sector continues to grow in their province.

Yvonne Chau is a destination and commercial development manager with Travel Alberta, overseeing the southern Alberta region. Yvonne is actively collaborating with farms in her region to develop a vibrant agritourism sector and attract economic activity to rural communities.

Tam Andersen, current president of Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association, has welcomed people from around the world to Prairie Gardens, her own family farm north of Edmonton, where she is the self-proclaimed Director of Fun. Thanks to a lifetime of ag experience and a keen business sense, she's built a successful venture that contributes a predictable and steady revenue stream for the farm and is allowing the next generation to envision what's possible for the business. All the while she's providing visitors to her farm with meaningful interactions with the agriculture sector and the land in her care.

Even if you're not considering an agritourism venture, if you've ever pondered how we can better connect what we do on the farm to the end consumer or future farm employee, or if you've ever wondered what it would take for the next generation to come back to the farm, this episode is for you. You might just be surprised at what you learn. I certainly was.

Let's dive right in. Would you like to start, Yvonne?

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YC: My name is Yvonne Chau. I am the Destination Development and Commercial Manager at Travel Alberta. Travel Alberta is the destination management organization for the province.

Since 2021, our role has been expanded. We still focus on what we've been doing best in destination promotion and marketing, but we're now also much more involved in destination development. It is about better connecting what travellers are looking for with what communities and businesses can offer as well.

This is where I see agritourism fits so naturally, because it brings together visitors' interests with farmers, ranchers, and also rural communities who want to share their land, their stories, and products in ways that work for them. I often think of it as a product development pipeline. Marketing is at the end, promoting what's being produced.

My role in destination development is really at the front of the pipeline, looking at both the demand and supply side and really shaping experiences that work for travellers and the people offering them as well. That means supporting products and experiences that are authentic, financially viable, but also beneficial for local communities.

A big priority for Travel Alberta right now is really encouraging that year-round travel and really helping visitors discover more parts of the province, especially the rural and agricultural regions beyond the traditional hot spot in the summertime. One lucky thing I have working for Travel Alberta is I oversee the southern Alberta region, including the Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Southern Rockies. That includes Fort McLeod, Pincher Creek, Crowsnest Pass, where agritourism has a lot of untapped potential.

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AS: When you think about it, there's such a natural fit between tourism and economic development in our rural communities. It's great to hear that there are people behind those sorts of initiatives.

And Tam, can you introduce yourself and your business?

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TA: Hi, yes, I'm Tam Andersen and I run a farm in Sturgeon County, Alberta, and we're just outside of Edmonton in the North Central region. I grew up as a farmer's daughter and continued with the heritage of the farm and grow food for people.

We have a U-pick operation, we have a tree nursery and horticulture centre, and we're really excited to be a part of agritourism in Alberta with over 40 years of experience now. I have quite a passion for it.

I am also the president of the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association, which is going to become Agritourism Alberta.

My husband and I also farm traditional crops and we have about 3500 acres of crops like peas, canola, wheat. I have a small herd of cattle. I have a small flock of sheep.

But the most exciting thing about agritourism I find is that I understand in the visitor economy that my story and our experiences here on the farm have equal value to all of the products that we actually grow. So that is a really amazing diversification for us on the farm and it stabilizes our income and makes it so that we're sustainable. Whether it be on a 25-acre plot or a 3,500-acre plot, we make the same revenues. We're pretty excited that agritourism is one of our diverse income streams.

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AS: When did you come to this realization that this was so?

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TA: Since I've been at this for 40 years, it's been a work in progress. Certainly, in the last few years, the shift in demand for local food and for people wanting to learn about how their food is grown and how to connect with a local farmer and experience something on a farm has really changed. We've really seen our profitability rise in the last few years.

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AS Getting into agritourism as a business stream, how is that received by farmers and ranchers, Yvonne?

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YC: Some farmers and ranchers are already engaged in agritourism, so they tend to really understand the value of tourism. For others, it's a much harder concept to wrap their heads around. A lot of producers don't immediately see what they do. It's really something worth sharing. And storytelling can feel uncomfortable or even unnecessary. That's one of the biggest barriers, in my opinion. Many don't see themselves as first storytellers and also think that what they do is just normal. But in reality, for visitors, it's completely fascinating.

That isn't a one-and-done conversation, but it usually takes multiple visits, a lot of listening, and meeting people where they are at. Over the years, I've learned that those initial conversations are really important. You can usually get a sense pretty quickly of whether someone has good stories, whether they enjoy sharing their experiences, as well as whether or not they are curious about exploring agritourism at all. When that interest is there, we start talking about how travellers today are actually seeking these kinds of experiences—the authentic, hands-on, real connection with the land and the people behind it.

I also share examples of other producers who have successfully launched agritourism offerings, often by starting small and building on what they were already doing. It doesn't mean changing who they are or reinventing their operation. It's really about adding value to what already exists. Sometimes when I talk to the right operators, you see that light bulb actually go on. It can be incredibly empowering.

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AS: Do you approach producers yourself, or do they come to you?

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YC: Both ways. Sometimes if I hear from conversations with others about, hey, so-and-so farmers, ranchers are interested in doing this, or they've been getting a lot of interest, I will do that connection first. But sometimes it could be them coming to us because they've been hearing about our organization.

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AS: And Tam, how do you see things with your fellow ag producers? You're starting an agritourism organization. How are you finding the reception to those types of activities?

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TA: Farm gate sales is usually where it begins. Somebody has a U-pick strawberry patch and they open their gates so that people can come onto the land and pick their own strawberries. With canola and peas and with cattle, we find many producers open a small store or they just have online orders and they're selling their beef from the farm or their lamb—could be honey. There's such a wide range of different types of farm operations.

TA: I know with my husband being a more traditional mindset in farming. He's quite content to bale straw for me, but he himself is not particularly interested in getting out of the tractor to do tours.

And we find that women are always early adopters when it comes to welcoming connections on the farm and sharing our farm stories. And typically in our organization with the Alberta Farm Fresh producers, it's almost always women that start the conversation about where we can make some more money and diversify ourselves, especially in these days of uncertainty. It just adds a level of comfort knowing that you've stabilized your income, you've got some diverse income streams, and your bottom line at the end of the day is good.

We're really quite pleased that our daughter is interested in taking up the family farm behind us. And with the significant startup costs in agriculture, traditionally, agritourism does create a niche where entry-level farmers can get involved. And whether that's through a community-supported agriculture program or whether it's a flower farm, it gives that opportunity for young people to be farmers.

We're always hearing about the barriers to entry for young farmers, and this is definitely a means to that end, to get the people that are interested in the sector to be involved in more creative ways.

When we look at the future of small family farms across the province of Alberta, we see that youth is where that opportunity lies, and small family farms that engage with agritourism or diversify direct income streams from the consumer are more likely to survive. This is a way for us to preserve our way of life out in rural Alberta.

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AS: Does Travel Alberta provide market research to agritourism operators?

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YC: We share visitor demand research to really help farmers and ranchers to understand what visitors today are actively seeking and whether that aligns with what they might want to offer as well. What the data is telling us very clearly is that the demand for authentic, immersive agritourism experiences in Alberta is growing. And that interest is coming from both domestic and international markets.

According to Canada's National Tourism Organization, Destination Canada's Global Travelers Research Program, in 2024, an estimated 2.9 million overseas travellers, as well as 2.5 million U.S. travellers, are interested in exploring rural Alberta over the next two years. That is a significant opportunity for the province because of those international and U.S. travellers, as we all know, are more likely to stay longer and spend more money while they are here.

From an economic perspective, providing those kinds of experiences they're looking for, like agritourism, is key to growing the visitor economy, the visitor spend, and really supporting the rural economies as well.

We're also backing that demand with our own tourism investment. In our fiscal year of 2023-24, Travel Alberta invested \$970,000 in agritourism's businesses and operators. And that increased to 1.7 million in agritourism investments in our fiscal year of 2024-25. That growth reflects both rising visitor interest, but really also the increasing momentum amongst agritourism operators across the province.

Ultimately, our goal is to make sure agritourism operators can make informed decisions about whether agritourism makes sense for their operations and how to really position their experiences for the right markets.

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AS: Can you provide some examples? What kinds of investments are we talking about?

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YC: A lot of our tourism investments grant funding programs. We look into product development, but also events and festivals. Within product development, we're really looking for producers, how they cannot just diversify their products, but also really looking into what kinds of stories that they're going to be able to produce as well as part of that creation of new products.

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AS: Can you provide an example of how existing farms are getting into story production?

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YC: One of the examples that we have is a multi-generational operating ranch. What the younger generations are looking for, beyond the traditional ranching operation, is something that's slightly different so that they can still stay on the land and continue that legacy of the family operation.

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YC: One of the things that they have really converted to is some of the unused infrastructure. For example, the unused grain storage bins have now gotten turned into accommodation for guests to stay overnight.

A lot of storytelling is not just from the farmers and ranchers, but really the visitors. After they've left that experience, they continue talking about it and sharing their stories on the farms with their friends, relatives, families, and so forth. Looking at where investing in it, the economic impact coming out from our investments is great because it creates jobs. It generates revenue back to the farm operations. Better yet, a bigger impact on overall local communities.

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AS: Tam, how do you see these agritourism experiences playing out in your business?

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TA: We find that agritourists are high value travellers in that they're willing to not only invest in the experience and buy our products when they're at the farm, they're very likely to volunteer or they're very likely to actively seek out a farm because they want to support the farm and they want to give us the money so that we can continue doing what I do. And oftentimes, if I have folks out and we do a farm tour and we visit the greenhouse where the heritage tomatoes are growing and they have a farm dinner right from less than 20 feet from where it was harvested, they come and thank me for being a farmer. And that is really gratifying and rewarding.

What we find with farms is once they start to invest in agritourism, they can start to see their revenues climb. And this speaks well to what Yvonne was saying, from anywhere from \$25,000 in a new diversified income stream to over a million, and new dollars in rural communities. And it's considered new money because it's not just a circulating economy, it really makes a huge ripple effect difference.

It does create jobs, especially for youth, but not necessarily all beginner jobs. It can also give jobs to chefs and tour operators, and connects us with local bus companies that are offering tours.

There is that opportunity to engage the public, and wherever and whatever level they'd like to engage at. I know we had a family from Denver, Colorado just for a day. They wanted to come and have a farm dinner in the forest on our farm so they literally flew all the way from Denver to Edmonton, had their experience, spent a few nights in Edmonton and then went home. But we were the drivers of the entire performance and experience.

We know that, with purposeful travel in mind, 92% of travellers are more likely to rebook their hotel rooms and come again for another meaningful experience if they feel they've been transformed in some way and they can't stop talking and thinking about it when they get home. The authentic immersive experience is where we really focused on our farm and we offer farm-to-table dinners where they walk through the gardens and taste and nibble and sniff and be able to sample an edible flower, learn about honey and bees and pollination, or they learn about indigenous and cultural experiences and land-based experiences in a way of knowing that's a good way. And they also would really be interested in any kind of animal experience. So whether it's a baby goat or whether they're on an alpaca farm, it's all interesting to people.

And we're so far removed from our farms now in urban centres. 40 years ago, you might still have a grandma or grandpa on a farm that you could go visit. But those farms are few and far between now. We find the second generation of people on the

farm have no farms to connect to anymore. This is a great way for them to actually remember and be nostalgic about how it was done in the old days or even how it's done new days because we introduce new crops like Haskap, which is very popular with people as a U-pick and something not ever tried before. So there are lots of opportunities for people to have direct engagement with food and farming in Alberta.

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AS: We don't realize in the ag industry how fascinating our work is to other people. And you think, "I just go to work every day," or "I live on a farm, that's not that big of a deal." But it is a big deal for someone, and there's so much opportunity built into that.

Your husband, who'd rather be on his tractor, was this a hard sell for him to make this leap into this space?

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TA: It's a very different mindset and the first thing that always comes to mind is the liability of it and inviting people onto your working farm. The very first caveat was you have to have a good liability insurance policy so that you protect our family farm and don't put it at risk. And that is one of the things that the province and our association are currently working on is introducing perhaps something like an Agritourism Growth Act, where we do protect farms from liability. Ontario is the first province to do this in Canada with the introduction of Bill 186, which is the Growing Agritourism Act. And it just limits inherent risk at farms. So that's something my husband was excited to hear about.

From that, it's such an incremental growth thing. You do start small and it's not that you're welcoming 1000 guests to your farm. It's those intimate experiences where people bring their families and then it progresses to you'll have a school come out and they'll want to learn where their food comes from. And you make those connections and then you start to build an internal capacity to work with people on your farm. And think about it in a different way with safety as your first concern. And then secondly, how to actively engage people and immerse them. It's a shift in thinking and it's a shift in incomes.

But when you start to see the success and you start to see that that diversified income stream is actually helping the farm's bottom line and allowing your daughter to stay on the farm, it's an easy sell.

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AS: Whether you're diversifying your income streams or wanting to better understand your current ones, Manage Your Farm Finances is a free online course series designed to help Canadian agricultural producers become more confident in the financial side of their business. Master your financial statements, get to know your cash flow, and learn how to use budgets, all at your own pace and when it's convenient for you. Visit fcc.ca/managefarmfinances to learn more and enroll.

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AS: Yvonne, would you say that the agritourism sector is growing, and if so, what's driving that growth?

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YC: We're seeing especially strong interest from urban travellers who are looking for experiences that really create emotional and educational connections. When people meet the producer, such as Tam here and her husband, walk the land, or see the process first-hand. Learning about food production becomes emotional and educational and is no longer transactional. It really sticks with them. That desire for connections is what is really pushing agritourism forward.

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AS: Tam, how are you seeing growth in this sector in your own business and in your own community?

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TA: Particularly after COVID and now with all of the things that are happening in the globe, people are kind of worried about supply chain and they want to have a farmer as a best friend. So oftentimes we'll have visitors through Open Farm Days as their first excursion out of the city and into the countryside surrounding Edmonton. They're used to being able in their home countries to find food from farmers. But in our food society and our food ecosystems, in especially urban areas, you go to a box store and nothing is said about where it is growing. They're so thrilled to find a farm that actually produces the food. And it's like, "You're who we've been looking for. We can come here and pick our own potatoes."

You've never seen wonder on a child's face until you've seen them lift some potatoes out of the earth. It's an experience that never gets old to us and it's so intrinsic to just being a food grower that you don't even think of it as a farmer as a possible

experience. But honestly, when they pull the plants out of the ground and they see these gems of food coming up out of the earth, it's that look of wonder and excitement in their faces and they're like, "Mom, look what I found!" It might as well be gold.

When they discover a place and they get that sense of the place, they get the taste of the place, they learn a little bit and pick up some artisanal knowledge and they're just outdoors and having fun and the sun is on their shoulders and you could smell the earth and you could taste the strawberries and their juice is dribbling down your chin.

People arrive as strangers but leave as *family*, we call it. We are embracing people and getting hugs from people we hardly know just because they love the experience so much. And they go home and tell their friends, and then they actively start recruiting friends to come with them.

We just had a women's event the other day where it was a farm-to-table lunch. We got huge hugs and tears were in everybody's corner of their eyes when they heard the stories of the land and the stories of the farm.

There's a whole wellness piece in here as well. People are very interested in plants as medicine and herbology, and eating well and eating better and having their families get away from the digital world and screen time for their kids.

In our organization, as the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Group, we've seen already almost a doubling in interest. We've started a program where we're reaching out to every region across Alberta. And every region has between 10 and 70 agritourism farms that already offer experiences. They just don't call it agritourism. They call it workshops and they call it farm visits. There are at least 5,000 farms across Alberta that are interested in getting into this. And we see it as our responsibility as an association to make sure we offer some professional development so that they have confidence in welcoming people to their farms and they do it well. It's an experience that people want to repeat and become part of their family tradition.

We just recently had a group out from Germany. We don't think it's anything special, when we're having dinner, to have a bison stew for supper. And they're like, "Wow, we've never tasted bison before. This is so good!" You just never know where you're going to make that point of connection. But they said, in terms of what they were looking for was exactly this, to have an authentic farm experience where they taste the land, they taste the fruit and berries and Alberta beef or Alberta bison, and their day is made and they go home with stars in their eyes. And then they discover that

they can actually come back out and watch the aurora borealis from the farm in the beautiful night skies. as something we enjoy every night as it bounces off the top of our barn, and we don't even think of it as special now.

With those linkages, you start to involve Indigenous tourism, the viewing of the Northern Lights on farms, and just that taste of place and culinary tourism, it's going to be the rocket ship that takes off.

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YC: What you have just described, Tam, there are no digital devices attached to any of those kinds of experiences. And especially with the youth, for example, my daughter, and I'm guilty of that too. Engaging through agritourism is really important because it takes us out of that digital life.

What Tam just mentioned on the farm can completely change how someone thinks about food, land, and agriculture, and it takes something that feels abstract and makes it so real.

Another example is Granary Road, just outside of Calgary. It is a family-focused agritourism destination that uses a lot of hands-on learning, on-farm experiences, and food to give many visitors their first look at what food actually comes from in a way that feels approachable and fun, which is very important. It really builds respect and curiosity, and a much more, deeper connection to the land where we all live.

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AS: You both mentioned Alberta Open Farm Days. Could we talk a little bit about what that is and what that looks like in Alberta?

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TA: Every year, farms are invited to open their gates to visitors for just one weekend of the year for an educational experience on the farm. Many farms thinking about agritourism get a chance to dip their toe in the waters for just a weekend and see what it's like.

There are literally now thousands and thousands of guests that come across Alberta. And the Open Farm Days program is wonderful for both the farmer and the consumer because it opens those opportunities to go on traditional farms where you may not ever get that opportunity otherwise. And for the farmer, it gives us training in agritourism experience delivery. Things like biohazard and security for animals, and that interaction between people and animals on farms. It's a solid

process and a great way to introduce agritourism to Albertans and Canadians because it's open to anybody that weekend.

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YC: Usually it's happening in August. Participation has been really growing very steadily with over 150 farms taking part. Collectively, those farms now welcome about 100,000 visitors each year.

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AS: I would suspect that, even those people who are not pursuing an agritourism stream of business, the benefits are still there for their own farm because people are learning more directly from the farmer. Some of the most important messages we need to tell them in terms of animal care and stewardship of the land and how their food is made. I suspect that that's been the experience of farmers participating in this program.

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TA: We are that bridge between urban and rural. It addresses all those disconnects that people don't even understand about where their food comes from or especially stewardship of land.

One of the interesting developments also from this program is that it has connected chefs to farmers. We see that weekend, in particular, many opportunities for people to go to a farm and experience that farm's product or the food that we've grown at a farm-to-table dinner that evening. It's a wonderful experience, and it really makes that taste of place real for people.

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AS: What are the challenges facing agritourism today?

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YC: One of the biggest challenges that I mentioned is the awareness and confidence gap. We really need to have them understand that what they do is actually good enough. There are visitors actually very interested in knowing how they go about doing their day-to-day operations. Building that confidence, it takes a lot of those conversations.

Another challenge is alignment. It is important that producers, communities, as well as municipalities all have a shared understanding of what agritourism is, and just as

important as what it isn't. When the alignment isn't there, it can create uncertainty around things like land use, community support, as well as local regulations.

My role at Travel Alberta often sits right in the middle of all of that. A lot of it comes down to really talking things through with producers and rancher farmers, but also really helping communities see what's possible and finding an approach to agritourism that feels right locally while still working for the visitors who are coming to visit as well.

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AS: Yeah, there's a balance there, absolutely.

Tam, what do you see as the challenges?

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TA: A great deal of it is regulatory and policy challenges within the province and across Canada. Agritourism is a relatively new concept in every province across our wonderful country. And we find that municipal land use frameworks and provincial land use frameworks are lagging behind agritourism realities. So there can be friction.

Farmers involved in agritourism typically see themselves as farm direct marketers. So they're just using agritourism in some ways as a marketing activity, and it makes sense to them to involve an experience with it.

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TA: That experience has just as much value as the actual product on the farm. And so that is kind of the gray area that we find is not well understood, and it goes across all the different genres of policymaking.

Agriculture has and always will be a very big backbone of what Alberta stands for, and it's very cherished by every resident in Alberta and probably across the country when they find their local producers. When we start to introduce the new concept and the new way of farming and women-led, that change will come. We can, we will, we must keep our small family farms as small family farms in rural Alberta.

And it's worthwhile investing in change.

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AS: You mentioned a few times safety and biosecurity challenges. How are safety and biosecurity considerations addressed in your businesses and for some of these activities?

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TA: It all begins with training and understanding. First, there's a risk assessment analysis, so you understand what is actually maybe at stake.

Open Farm Days has a great program where they're introducing these concepts to new farmers, but our association also has a quality assurance program that we're in the process of finalizing so that we can offer that as professional development to farms looking to expand their operations into agritourism, looking at market readiness, looking at best practice across not only Canada, but the U.S. and the world is a very big part of this.

The Global Agritourism Network is very active and offers conferences across the world. In Scotland this year, the Global Agritourism Conference will take people to farms and have on-farm stays and see how they're handling it in other countries, and we bring that best practice home to Alberta. That's a good way for us to start addressing it in a responsible way and making sure that everybody's safe, the animals are safe, and the visitors.

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AS: I'm sure there are lots of opportunities to learn from other regions that are doing these types of activities as well.

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TA: Scotland's really interesting because they've gone from having about 50 farms that are involved with agritourism maybe five or six years ago to having 900 farms involved in agritourism right now. Where they see their success and the model is it's still primary agriculture. Agritourism is agriculture, but added to that is value. So you can value add your primary agricultural products and make jam or make whisky or make a pie.

And then to that, you add the agritourism experience and the visitor, and now you have a built-in market for your products that have more value than they would have if you just sold them in bulk to the commodity markets. When all of that comes together, it's a really great model.

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AS: I would suspect that larger farm operations and commodity crop growers, for example, might find it difficult to see how their operations might participate in the agritourism economy.

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AS: What opportunities do you see for these types of operations in this space?

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TA: I think it's storytelling. It's sharing that artisanal knowledge and the beautiful vistas on your farms. It's thinking more about sharing your story and doing it safely. In our case, with our farm, we have actually two separate farms, really. I have my small 25-acre farm that's fully equipped and completely adapted to having visitors on the farm. And then the big agricultural plots we take people out to on foray sometimes and we'll offer wagon rides, but we're doing it with the land in mind and the stewardship piece.

We're limiting the risk to those exposures, but also making sure that people have that opportunity to see the vastness and the beauty of Alberta in every way that they can.

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AS: Growing up, we went on farm tours as a school and nobody thought that was agritourism, that we just went to the local dairy farm to see the cows. That was what you did in kindergarten.

But we need to have a mindset shift about these things because all of these things are contributing to those experiences and those connections with consumers and the larger picture.

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TA: We have a great story in our region about a local dairy farmer. He started by offering little school field trips out to the farm. He got involved with local restaurants and chefs with his beef. He also grows potatoes. But when people started coming to the farm, he realized there was a very magnificent opportunity in opening an on-farm store and selling his own dairy's cheese. He's very successful with this.

We don't have many cheeseries in Alberta, but what a shining example of how to connect all the dots. People now are able to come to the farm. They are able to observe the animals in a safe way, so they're not exposing any animals to risk, but they can take home a souvenir, which is a beautiful, tasty piece of cheese.

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AS: That sounds like a perfect day for me. Would you say there's opportunity on the public relations side of things?

Tam, does your agritourism operation benefit your commercial farm other than the income streams that you talk about?

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TA: There are so many pieces of the puzzle that start fitting together when you do this kind of work. My daughter, who is in her late 20s, sees the opportunity to stay on the farm, but she'd like to make it her own opportunity. She doesn't necessarily see herself following exactly in the footsteps of dad or mom, so it's a great way for her to make it her own and make it a life that she can envision herself living in rural Alberta.

It's a great way to connect folks back. That educational piece about where their food comes from is something that we share a lot. Even though my husband doesn't offer tours on the farm, he grows fava beans, for example. And we'll talk about how that happens and what the food ecosystem looks like when people are out on the farm. I'll explain to them that in the commodity system, we would grow the fava beans, harvest them as a dried bean with a combine, load them up in trucks and put them in our grain bins. And then we would sell them to our local fava bean company, which is on the rail. And they would load the crop into the railway cars and ship it across Canada. And eventually it ends up in Egypt. So our family farm feeds families in Egypt. And everybody's always amazed that a small family farm would actually be feeding someone in Egypt.

But at the same time, when we're talking about the food ecosystem, I would explain to them that the only way they could buy beans from our farm in Alberta would be with a B-train, which is thousands and thousands and thousands of bushels. And I couldn't just sell them a bucket full because our farm's not equipped for that. But what I do is bring those fava beans into our other operation, the agritourism operation, and they would go into our CSA food baskets from time to time. More importantly, we would sprout them and grow them as a fava green and harvest those greens all year long so that we have farm fresh greens growing as salad materials. And people love that. And when they taste the beans, they're like, "Wow, this is really good! Tastes like a fresh bean!" Because they are. And they are.

So you connect all the dots for people that, as an agricultural producer, you feed the world.

00:39:50

AS: That's amazing.

We talked a little bit about schools and opportunities for youth. So why is engaging youth through agritourism important?

00:39:59

TA: For many, it's their first time job. At our farm, we employ 20 to 30 youth in our pumpkin festival season. And literally, it's the first time they've ever had a job. And we introduce them to the world of work, what the protocols are and what the expectations are. In doing so, we build their confidence in just being out in the world.

We will often ask them the question, "Have you ever considered a career in agriculture?" And invariably, it's no. But once in a while, you'll get a high school student stick their hand up and they'll go, "Yeah, we're kind of interested."

And then you start talking about bees and pollination and they start to put together that without bees and without pollination, there may not be food. The room gets really quiet and they start just soaking it in. And that's what we love to see.

But the most important thing for us on our farm, and this always chokes me up a little bit, is that it gives that opportunity for my daughter to be a farmer and that's such a gift and I'm so proud of her.

00:41:07

AS: That's amazing.

Tam, tell me a little bit about the Indigenous learning and culture that you've integrated into your farm.

00:41:13

TA: Our farm is located on Treaty 6 lands. It's with great honour that we feel as farmers, we're just stewards of the land and we're trying to do it in the Indigenous ways of knowing and in a good way.

We offer Indigenous programming with Indigenous elders on our farm and we actually have a forest, which is not a huge piece of land, it's about 40 acres, that we have declared a conservancy project. We call it the Payhonin National Healing Forest, but it's part of a David Suzuki program initiative where the healing forests are meant for people to heal.

By working with Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers, we find that we can introduce others to the ways of knowing. Our elders would usually say something like, “We don't have an indigenous culture, we just have a way of life”, and this is it. And they share that way of life with them.

Whether it's going for a walk in the forest and we're foraging and learning about medicinal plants, or whether we're sitting in a teepee learning about the seven grandfathers, and all of that wisdom that comes with it, it's a great way to share our land.

We have a big patch of sweetgrass growing on our land, and that's a really amazing connection point for people. Not just people that are interested in Indigenous culture, but actually Indigenous peoples because they have lost their culture too, and it's a place for them to connect back to the land.

Learning that we are all related has been transformational for us in how we think about the land and how we involve people on the land.

00:42:56

AS: So how did you make these connections with local Indigenous groups?

00:43:00

TA: It always starts with something simple and not what you would expect. Somebody gifted me with a teepee canvas. I needed some poles. And so I asked around and someone said, “Bill is a really great guy with teepees and he would be able to get some poles”.

I contacted Bill. He came out to the farm one day and he said, yes, I can get you teepee poles. And then I offered tobacco and he said, yes, he would teach me how to set the teepee up and everything.

The day came, he brought the teepee poles and we literally spent all day setting up this teepee and it was a magical, spiritual day. And at the end of the day, the teepee was up and we looked up and there was an eagle soaring over top of the teepee.

And Bill went, “Hmm, eagles are pretty important. We better offer some tobacco.”

And we did.

And then not 3 minutes later, two hawks flew right through the top of the teepee poles and Bill said, “Well, hawks are good hunters. Let's offer them some tobacco too.”

And then a prairie gopher came through underneath the teepee a few minutes later, and he said, “Well, gophers teach you about humility”.

The whole day was spent in storytelling and immersion and just learning, and I loved it so much, and Bill had so much fun tasting our little carrots as he was busy building these teepees that the fundamentals were formed and we're great friends and he still offers programs on the farm. It is open to others as well so we find there are many opportunities and people find us now because they've heard about the Payhonin Forest and what programming they can offer and whether it's a Sixties Scoop group that wants to come and just be with the land or whether it's teenagers that are at risk, they'll come out and have an experience and just be with the land.

We are all related. The ones with roots, the ones that fly, everybody, it's just such a beautiful way of looking at the world.

Bill will always say, “Walk backwards into the future with your eyes firmly fixed on the past.” So we learn and we don't make the same mistakes. And we can always work toward the seventh generation. And that's where we are in our farming too. We're always looking at the next generation and seven generations from now is amazing.

00:45:24

AS: That's so beautiful. I just love that story.

Yvonne, how do Indigenous learning and culture fit into Travel Alberta's offering?

00:45:32

YC: From Travel Alberta, Indigenous learning and culture are a very important part of our work, and we do this in very close partnership with Indigenous Tourism Alberta, who leads and supports Indigenous-owned tourism operators across the province.

Our role really is to help create the right conditions for Indigenous-led experiences to grow, whether that's through sharing market insights, supporting investments, or offering development tools, while really making sure those stories are shared authentically and on their own terms, which is very important. We also know there's a strong interest from visitors as well.

According to Destination Canada's Global Tourism Watch survey, 39% of international travellers, and about one in five Albertans, want to learn about Indigenous culture, traditions, as well as histories when they're exploring Alberta.

So that really reinforces how important it is to support Indigenous-led, land-based experiences that really build understanding, respect, and meaningful cultural exchange.

00:46:48

AS: Similar to agriculture, we have these resources and these people and these ways of knowing right under our feet and our fingertips. We take so many things for granted, including Indigenous culture and ways of being in our country.

00:47:02

AS: What does success look like in this space for you, Yvonne?

00:47:08

YC: For me, success is really enabling authentic agritourism storytelling at scale, while also making sure they are real, viable experiences for visitors to engage with. It's not just about getting people out to a farm or a ranch. A real win is when agritourism shows up through food-led stories, partnerships, and regional narratives that really help visitors understand a place and then experience it in a very meaningful way.

From a commercial perspective, success means giving visitors more reasons to spend time and also spend money staying longer in the rural regions, whether that is through experiences, food, accommodations, or local products. When visitors are inspired by the story and can build those experiences into their trips in different ways, agritourism starts making a real contribution to visitor economy. And when those storytelling and commercial opportunities actually align, experiences can feel authentic, but also viable. That's when I know our work is really having a huge impact.

00:48:32

AS: Tam, what does success look like for you?

00:48:34

TA: When I welcome a visitor to our farm, I see them getting grounded back to the land. I see joy and I see wonder in their faces. I see smiles and I just feel the stress of the day slipping off their shoulders and disappearing into the blue sky. That, for me, is success.

And if I can stay farming and if I can stay farming with my daughter, that is success.

00:49:01

AS: That's beautiful. And I think a lot of people, regardless of if they're in agritourism or not, feel the same exact way. We work so hard to create a legacy for our families, and when they're interested in pursuing that legacy, that means the world to us.

What kind of advice would you give farmers to incorporate agritourism into their business activities? Yvonne, could you start?

00:49:21

YC: Before you build any experience, it is very important what makes your farm, your work, your way of producing food meaningful. So once that story is clear, the experience can grow out of that. When the story leads, everything feels more natural and authentic, not forced. From there, the story tends to travel on its own. When it resonates, it's much easier to share through word of mouth, partnership, media, or content. And visitors start building those experiences into their travel plans.

00:49:57

YC: My biggest advice is to keep it simple. You don't really need to overthink it. What you already do is interesting enough for a lot of visitors. Engaging the public doesn't always mean hosting visitors directly. Stories can travel through chefs, food partnerships, events, participating open farm days for a weekend, and good collaborations within the region. So good PR starts with strong stories.

00:50:29

AS: Tam, what kind of advice would you give farmers?

00:50:32

TA: As farmers, we understand intrinsically that agriculture is changing, markets are changing, the climate is changing, and women are getting more involved and are starting to lead the way.

When women get involved with things like agriculture, education is such an important piece. Community building is a really important goal. But at the heart of it is regenerative agriculture and regenerative tourism.

Agritourism is a climate-resilient practice, and community-based food systems are part of that change. We're not just about local food, it's also relational, it's transparent, it shows such integrity, and it's rooted in place.

When we have people come to our farms, it's an opportunity for us to share all of those layers with people, and they want to understand. And what a wonderful

opportunity with agritourism is the bridge that connects urban and rural people with the lands, the seasons, and the rhythms that sustain us. It's so much more than just agritourism.

00:51:36

AS: If an Alberta producer wants to reach out to you or travel to Alberta, they would find you just by going to the Travel Alberta website.

00:51:44

YC: The industry.travelalberta.com website. All my colleagues, including myself, our names are on it. Our contact information is there. I do have six other co-workers actually overseeing different parts of the province. So it depends where they are at. They can reach out to us accordingly.

00:52:04

AS: And you have counterpart organizations across the country that do similar work?

00:52:08

YC: Yes, Destination Canada is one of them as the national tourism management organization.

00:52:16

AS: In a follow-up conversation with Travel Alberta, Yvonne and her team also told me about Savour Alberta's South, a collaborative culinary tourism initiative that connects farms, chefs, restaurants, and communities along Alberta's Highway 3. You'll find the link for this initiative in our show notes.

00:52:32

TA: In our organization, the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Group, Alberta Farm Fresh and Agritourism Alberta, there's an Agritourism Ontario that people can connect with in that part of the world.

And in Nova Scotia, there's the Food Art Nature Group based out of Wolfville, so places to connect across the country. I'm sure we will have a whole bunch of links to drop in our episode notes.

I've so enjoyed our conversation. And I wish you all the success in the future with developing this agritourism economy and growing it and bringing value to our industry.

00:53:07

YC: Thank you for the opportunity.

00:53:08

TA: Thank you very much.

00:53:11

AS: Both Yvonne and Tam gave us a lot to think about in terms of the opportunities for Canadian agriculture and the tourism economy. Farmers do incredible work in feeding not only our Canadian population, but the entire world, and more and more people want to learn about how that food makes it to their plates.

Through the intentional efforts of farmers like Tam, local tourists and people from around the world are getting first-hand genuine accounts of Canadian agriculture, as well as education in regenerative and sustainable ag practices and Indigenous peoples' culture and histories.

In a time when more and more consumers are one, two, or more generations removed from the farm, and in this age of digital distraction and noise, tourists are craving this tangible authenticity, not just for themselves, but also for their kids.

These efforts are gaining momentum and are creating a snowball effect for other farm operators interested in exploring the agritourism opportunity. Whether it is expanding the business in new and creative ways, developing more diverse income streams, or creating appealing opportunities as part of your farm transition plan, an agritourism venture might be the missing puzzle piece.

If this is something you're interested in exploring, check in with your provincial destination management organization or provincial agritourism group. You may be surprised at the resources and support you can access. We'll include as many links as we can in our show notes.

Even if you're not exploring an agritourism opportunity for your business, we've had a lot of insight into the benefits of telling our own farm stories and connecting with consumers. Whether it is building your farm's brand in the community, attracting qualified and motivated employees, or helping bring an accurate perception of the industry to the public, there's an opportunity for all of us to build a more resilient sector.

As Yvonne points out, sometimes we can get in our own way of making progress in these areas. I get it. It's hard to see the value in some of these non-traditional

business activities and non-operational business functions, especially when the ROI is fuzzy. In an industry that for generations has measured success in time spent doing physical labour or in the quantity of physical outputs produced at the end of a cycle, committing resources to these activities requires a mindset shift.

At the root of all this is something that connects us all as human beings. Story. Farmers have amazing stories to tell. Stories of environmental stewardship, participating in global markets, and long-standing farming family histories that built the Canadian agriculture sector into what it is today. We all have an interesting story to tell, and more and more people want to hear it.

My homework for you is this: Think about what you'll say the next time you're asked, either informally or formally, what you do. Are you helping to create interest in your business and the future of the industry? Are you inspiring curiosity and the desire to learn more? Write some of these ideas down so they stick the next time you find yourself talking about agriculture with someone outside of our industry.

Thanks for joining us this season, and we'll see you down the road for episode three.

Check the show notes for further reading and resources relating to this episode. Please do subscribe so you can be the first to know when we drop new episodes. And if you have feedback or topic ideas you'd like to share, go ahead and leave us a review. Your feedback will help us make decisions on what's valuable to you as a listener.

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