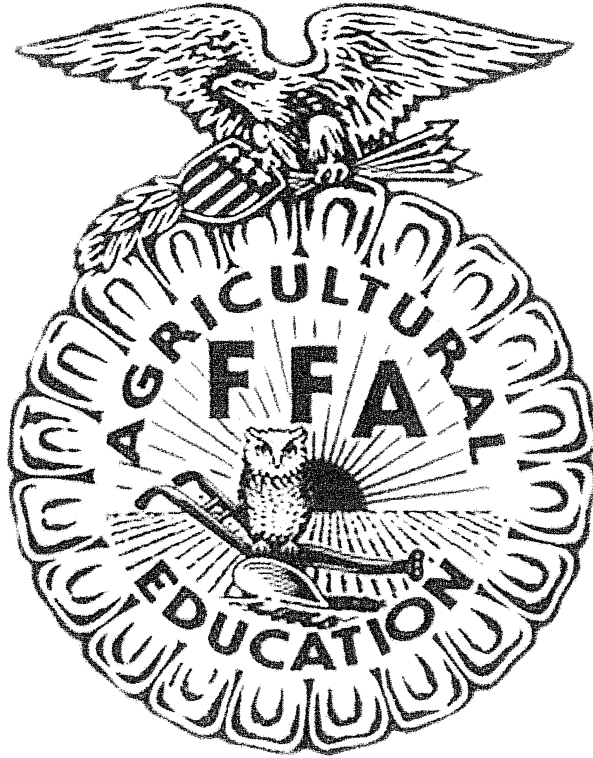


# FIELD OF DREAMS



**AGRIBUSINESS**

**KALEIGH LYNCH  
OWASSO FFA**

The cameras' flashed, the baby calf's nerves twitched, and the petite, brown-haired, little girl beamed with excitement as her parents could barely snap photos fast enough to keep up with all of the picturesque views they were witnessing. As the calf sucked on her fingers, causing her to squeal, they smiled with satisfaction knowing that these Kodak moments were some that they would not soon forget. They laughed as they watched her nervously milk her first cow at the Hollandia Dairy in San Diego, California. In Iowa, this same little girl visited the John Deere Waterloo Works and climbed aboard her first tractor – “Nothing Runs like a Deere.” An annual trip to the Hartman Reserve to make fresh apple cider from a hand-cranked press; roaming through corn mazes, searching pumpkin patches for the largest of all, picking fresh sweet corn on a real farm, and visiting the famous Field of Dreams in Dyersville, Iowa. Little did I know, I was an “agritourist” at a very young age.

So what exactly is agritourism? It has been called many names in the past, such as entertainment farming, rural tourism, farm experiences, agri-tainment and now most recently agritourism. Perhaps the best definition of agritourism is the place where agriculture and tourism meet -- and Oklahoma truly offers the best of both worlds in agriculture and tourism. A common example would be any agriculture-related business or farm that is open to the public. The diversity of agritourism operations provides for both educational and entertaining experiences for people of all ages and backgrounds. Agritourism is a broad industry, and it encompasses everything from pick- your-own operations, guest ranch stays, bed and breakfasts, horseback riding, vineyard and winery tours, corn mazes, and much more.

The variety of experiences available under the umbrella of agritourism is one of its greatest strengths. Almost everyone can find a memorable agritourism experience that meets

their needs at the time – this is especially true for families. Abby Cash, the former Director of Oklahoma Agritourism, said “Today’s general population is three to five generations removed from the family farm.” People want to show their children that there are many steps in food production and that their meals do not come straight from the grocery store or restaurant. With today’s fast-paced, technology driven world, full of microwaveable meals and communication via texting, parents long to show their children a glimpse of an earlier, simpler way of life.

While agritourism is growing across the country, it is booming in Oklahoma. Domestic travel spending in Oklahoma in 2007 was greater than 5.8 billion dollars, which was over a seven percent increase from the year before. Agritourism has been around for many years, but the idea of developing coherent, state-sponsored development plans and marketing campaigns is relatively new. In March 2005, Oklahoma Senate Bill 365 was passed to help our state create a vibrant agritourism industry by more formally combining the first and third largest economic bases in the state – agriculture and tourism. This program is a joint venture between the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture. Along with those efforts, the Oklahoma Tourism Campaign has provided focused advertising that highlights the many diverse agritourism activities across the state of Oklahoma.

So how does one find out about the over 500 agritourism attractions and events in Oklahoma? And where can a small farmer or rancher go for information and resources to help them successfully start their own agritourism business? Recognizing the needs that existed for both potential agri-tourists and agri-businessmen and women, the Oklahoma Agritourism Initiative recently introduced a website to give travelers an easy reference to the different attractions across the state. This website provides a wealth of information for those

considering joining the ranks of the growing agritourism industry. This information includes everything from determining if agritourism is a good option for your farm down to the level of detail where one can walk through each step of creating a business plan. Through resources such as this website, the partnership between the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation and the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture is making a real difference in many farmers' lives across the state. It is no secret that today many farmers and ranchers are having a difficult time making a living on their cash crops alone. This is one reason why so many are now turning to agritourism as a way to earn a little extra income.

For example, in my hometown of Owasso, agritourism is playing a crucial role in helping to educate people about the importance of agriculture, as well as increase job opportunities for residents in the community. Even though Owasso is a relatively urban area, it has a prime example of agritourism. The Owasso Christmas Tree and Berry Farm gives families the opportunity to cut down their own Christmas trees in the winter and have the chance to pick fresh blackberries in the summer. After interviewing Bill Jacobs, owner of the Owasso Christmas Tree Farm, and getting to tour his amazing property, Mr. Jacobs explained to me how through agritourism programs he has not only had local residents visit, he has had "agritourists" from all over the country travel to Owasso to visit his farm. In the February 2010 edition of their newsletter, the Jacobs' said that the Christmas of 2009 was the most successful of them all. This just goes to show that even in a troubled economy, people are still looking for the opportunity to make memories with family members, even if it means staying closer to home.

Another local agritourism venue is the Blue Bell Ice Cream Factory in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. While touring this factory, visitors are educated on the process of making ice cream from the cow to the super market shelf. In addition, these "agritourists" get to

sample some delicious Blue Bell ice cream, and in my book, there is certainly nothing wrong with combining education and ice cream.

My generation is known as the “millennial generation” meaning that we are the technology-centered children of today. With this comes the decrease of backyard barbeques and the ability to socialize in even the smallest casual conversations. I believe Oklahoma agritourism truly has the unique ability to offer authentic experiences that can bring families closer together as it removes them from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and enables them to appreciate God’s wonderful creation. It has also become clear that agritourism will play an increasingly significant role for many farms and ranches across the country, and with roughly 82,500 farms across Oklahoma, agritourism has unlimited growth potential. But perhaps most importantly, agritourism has and will continue to provide a means for families across the country to build memories together in this increasingly hectic world – just ask this once four year old little girl how priceless those hours spent with her family are to her today as she finishes her last year of high school, and prepares to start a whole new adventure. . . college.

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