

I. PROJECT TITLE

The Agritourism Premium: Culinary Trails as an Experiential Marketing Strategy for State-Branded Farm, Fish, and Fiber Products

II. FUNDING

Funding for this project is provided by a \$15,000 Graduate Student Research Grant from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

III. SUMMARY

Maine farms provide residents with local food and employment along with the rural character that contributes to the state's high quality of life and its destination brand. Over the last decade, however, the number of Maine farms has decreased 14% while acreage has declined 16% (Census of Agriculture, 2022). Moreover, Maine imports over 95% of all food consumed within the state (New England Feeding New England, 2024). One strategy for reversing these trends is agritourism.

Agritourism offers a variety of benefits to producers, enabling them to increase sales, generate supplemental income, attract new customers, and create jobs. However, most studies are limited by their focus on agritourism's impacts at the establishment (e.g., individual farm) level versus regional or industry-wide impacts. More research is needed to examine the impacts on a broader scale.

Culinary trails are emerging as a new framework to organize, market, and brand the signature assets of a region, shaping the identity of places (Andéhn & L'Espoir Decosta, 2021; Nazariadli, et al, 2018; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020); promoting rural economic development (Van Sandt, et al, 2019); branding distinctive local food products (Che, 2006); and increasing the contribution of tourism, agriculture and fisheries to GDP (Dhungana & Khanal, 2023; Rossi, et al, 2017).

To achieve these positive outcomes, farmers, fishermen, and other food producers must work together to organize and market assets. In fact, agritourism can function as an industry cluster, a geographic concentration of suppliers, producers, and service providers in a related industry that improves productivity and performance across the value chain (Porter, 1998; Ruiz-Labrador et al, 2023; Wulandari et al, 2024). Established in 2003, the Maine Cheese Guild represents one such cluster: a state association that promotes the products of 50+ cheese producers.

Welcomer et al. (2017) conducted a study of Maine cheese producers to examine how the industry can support the sustainability of both new and scaling businesses. However, the study did not explore the role of agritourism in helping producers diversify their business

models. For example, Maine cheese may cost up to three times that of a national brand. Such a premium inherently demands a great deal of education to win over consumers, such as that provided by agritourism experiences. Established in 2003, the Maine Cheese Guild organizes such agritourism opportunities as an annual Maine cheese festival in September and an Open Creamery Day in October, the latter of which has been referred to as the Maine Cheese Trail.

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine how individual cheese producers in Maine who participate in the Maine Cheese Guild and Maine Cheese Trail perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their business and industry, along with the strategies their industry uses to work together to promote agritourism. For the purposes of this study, culinary trails are defined as a route or zone that organizes and promotes product-specific assets into a cohesive theme, highlighting producers, history, culture, and related activities.

IV. METHODS

Data for this study will be collected through confidential interviews (Appendix A) conducted with 8-10 members of the Maine Cheese Guild who participate in agritourism (21 establishments out of a possible 50 members).

Two interviews will be conducted in Spring 2025, with additional interviews to follow from November 2025 to January 2026. Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be conducted either in person at the participant’s place of business or by Zoom, according to the participant’s preferences. Interviews will be audio-recorded using a portable device or through the Zoom platform and will be transcribed by the principal investigator. Participation in this study will require agreement to be interviewed and to have the interview audio-recorded. An audio-recording will ensure an accurate transcript for the purpose of data analysis. Interviews will follow a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A). As illustrated below, specific interview questions contained in the interview protocol have been aligned with two broad research questions.

Broad research questions

1. How do cheese producers in Maine perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their industries and regions?
2. How do cheese producers in Maine describe how their members work together as an industry cluster to promote agritourism, for example, through strategies like cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration?

Research Questions	Questions
Background information	1, 2, 3, 4

Q1: How do individual cheese producers in Maine perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their industries and regions?	5, 6, 7, 8
Q 2: How do cheese producers in Maine describe how their members work together as an industry cluster to promote agritourism, for example, through strategies like cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration)?	9, 10, 11, 12
Reflection	13, 14, 15

V. PERSONNEL

Caroline Paras is an Interdisciplinary PhD student pursuing a self-designed major in agritourism at the University of Maine to explore the role of experiences on culinary trails in promoting consumer loyalty and brand promotion for local food. Caroline has led three IRB-approved projects. She has 5 years of experience doing research with human subjects, and experience conducting interviews and analyzing qualitative data. She has completed the online training for research with Human Subjects. Caroline will conduct the interviews and code the data, with guidance from Dr. Fairman.

Janet Fairman, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Education in the COEHD, University of Maine, and co-Director of MEPRI. Dr. Fairman has expertise in the areas of education policy analysis, program, evaluation, and qualitative research methodology. Her research focuses on state and federal education policy, teacher and school leadership, and STEM education. She has conducted numerous research studies for MEPRI and has over 25 years of experience doing research with human subjects. She has completed online training for research with human subjects. Dr. Fairman will provide general supervision for the project during the spring semester.

VI. PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Participants who are cheese producers in Maine and who participate in agritourism will be invited to participate in the research study, with a target of 8-10 participants. All subjects must be at least 18 years old to participate.

Participants will be recruited through two methods:

1. March 2025: Direct recruitment through email by the principal investigator based on personal and professional networks (Appendix C).
2. November 2025-January, 2026: Gatekeeper approach whereby the executive director of the Maine Cheese Guild invites members to participate in the research study through an email (Appendix B), which they have already agreed to do. See Appendix E). Late fall and early winter represents the slow season for cheese

producers, providing a better window of opportunity to conduct a majority of the interviews.

In addition to purposeful sampling from this group to target Maine cheese producers, the principal investigator will aim for maximum variation in the sample by selecting interested potential participants that reflect diverse agritourism activities in their businesses and different regions of Maine:

- **Range of agritourism activities**, including direct sales, education, outdoor recreation, and special events.
- **Geographic representation** across four regions: Southern Maine, Central Maine, Midcoast Maine, and Downeast Maine. There are no producers located in Northern Maine.

Eligible producers not selected for participation will be provided with an email reply (Appendix F).

VII. INFORMED CONSENT

All participants will receive the informed consent form as an attachment to the recruitment email message (Appendix D). The researcher will verbally review the information with participants at the time of the interview. Participation in the interview will indicate consent.

VIII. CONFIDENTIALITY

Individuals and their businesses will not be identified in the audio recordings nor in typed transcripts. Interviews will be transcribed using an AI platform. The AI platform will provide an initial transcription that the PI will review and correct for accuracy. Recordings conducted via Zoom will be downloaded, deleted from the cloud within 72 hours of the interview, and stored on a password-protected computer. Audio recordings will be deleted by June 30, 2026. The de-identified interview transcripts will be stored on the principal investigator's password-protected computer indefinitely for future analysis. Research findings may be shared in a published dissertation, scholarly presentations, and academic journal articles which will not identify individual participants nor their businesses.

IX. RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS

Except for time and inconvenience for participation in the interviews, the study poses minimal risk to participants.

X. BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits to individuals for participation in this study. Findings will be shared with industry associations to help inform best marketing practices at the establishment and industry level.

XI. COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

XII. REFERENCES

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XIII. APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview questions

Appendix B: Industry association outreach

Appendix C: Direct recruitment message

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Appendix E: Industry association letters of support

Appendix F: Email script to non-selected producers

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Background information

1. Tell me about your business. (Probe personal journey)
2. Describe the goals of your business. (Probe stage of development)

Participation in agritourism

3. Describe the on-farm and off-farm agritourism opportunities you offer visitors.
4. How does agritourism factor into your business model?

Perceived benefits and challenges of agritourism

5. In your view, what kinds of benefits, if any, does agritourism provide to your own business? (Probe motivation, such as monetary benefits like direct sales, or non-monetary benefits like consumer education, along with proportion of revenue generated from agritourism)
6. In your view, what are the challenges associated with participating in agritourism yourself? (Probe: bandwidth, boundaries, tolerance for risk, such as food safety, liability, and biosecurity)
7. In your view, what kinds of benefits, if any, does agritourism provide to your industry? (Explore their perspective on having visitors year round via the Maine Cheese Trail versus just one day on Open Creamery Day; Explore the role of agritourism in building a recognized brand for Maine cheese, along with cultivating loyal customers)

8. In your view, what kinds of challenges does agritourism pose for your industry as a whole? (Probe whether there have been safety incidents within the industry)

Industry-level strategies to promote agritourism

9. How do members of the Maine Cheese Guild work together to promote your industry?
10. What specific strategies does the Maine Cheese Guild employ to promote agritourism? (Probe if strategies used: capacity, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and ask for an example for each strategy if used)

Region-level strategies to promote agritourism

11. Your business is located in the [name of tourism region]. How have you collaborated with the Maine Office of Tourism or with [name of destination marketing organization] to promote agritourism? If not, why not?
12. What strategies might be effective in attracting visitors to your region to participate in agritourism?

Reflection

13. In your view, what has been the most successful approach used in your industry to promote businesses like yours through agritourism?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked you?
15. Please provide me with feedback on my interviewing skills.

Appendix B: Industry Recruitment letter



On behalf of the Maine Cheese Guild, we are looking for 8-10 Maine cheese producers that host agritourism opportunities to participate in a research study conducted by Caroline Paras, an Interdisciplinary PhD student at the Graduate School of Business, University of Maine. Ms. Paras is conducting a study to understand the role of agritourism as a marketing strategy for industries and regions. Her research is supported by a grant from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Participation consists of a 45-60 minute confidential interview via Zoom or at your place of business, scheduled for a mutually convenient day/time between November 2025-January 2026. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Questions may include a description of your agritourism activities as well as the benefits and challenges of working together as an industry to promote agritourism. To ensure an accurate transcription of the interview, all interviews will be audio recorded and you must consent to the audio recording to participate.

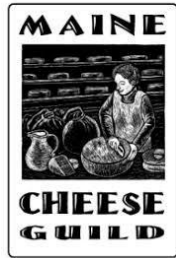
If you are interested in participating in an interview or have any questions about the research study, please contact Caroline Paras, Interdisciplinary PhD Student at the University of Maine, at caroline.paras@maine.edu or (207) 318-7900. More information about this study is attached to this email.

Sincerely,

Executive Director

Maine Cheese Guild

Appendix C: Direct recruitment letter



Dear[Name]:

In collaboration with the Maine Cheese Guild, I invite you to participate in a research study I am conducting as an Interdisciplinary PhD student at the Graduate School of Business, University of Maine. My project seeks to understand the role of agritourism as an effective marketing strategy for industries and regions. Participation consists of a 45-60 minute confidential interview via Zoom or at your place of business, scheduled for a mutually convenient day/time in February or March 2025. Participants must be at least 18 years old. Questions may include a description of your agritourism activities as well as the benefits and challenges of working together as an industry to promote agritourism. To ensure an accurate transcription of the interview, all interviews will be audio recorded and you must consent to the audio recording to participate.

More information about this study is attached to this email.

If you are interested in participating in an interview or have any questions about the research study, please contact me at caroline.paras@maine.edu or (207) 318-7900.



Caroline Paras
Interdisciplinary PhD Fellow
University of Maine

Lecturer of Local Food & Agritourism
University of Southern Maine

[207-318-7900](tel:207-318-7900)
www.carolineparas.com
caroline.paras@maine.edu



Appendix D: Informed Consent Letter

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Caroline Paras as part of her doctoral dissertation work at the Graduate School of Business, University of Maine, to explore the role of agritourism as a marketing strategy for the cheese industry in Maine. Through this project, Ms.Paras will explore how individual Maine cheese producers who host agritourism opportunities describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism for their own businesses and for their industry as a whole, and how producers work together to promote agritourism. Dr. Janet Fairman, Associate Professor of Education at the University of Maine, will supervise this research project. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a confidential interview lasting 45-60 minutes. The interview will take place via Zoom or at your place of business, on a mutually convenient day/time over the next two months. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for research purposes. To ensure an accurate transcription of the interview, all interviews will be audio recorded and you must consent to the audio recording to participate. Examples of the questions you may be asked include the following:

- Describe the on-farm and off-farm agritourism opportunities you offer visitors.
- Describe the benefits of agritourism to your business and/or your industry.
- What strategies does your industry association employ to promote agritourism?

Confidentiality: You and your business will not be identified in the audio recordings nor in typed transcripts. Interviews will be transcribed using an AI platform. The AI platform will provide an initial transcription that the principal investigator will review and correct for accuracy. Recordings conducted via Zoom will be downloaded, deleted from the cloud within 72 hours of the interview, and stored on a password-protected computer. Audio recordings will be deleted by June 30, 2026. The de-identified interview transcripts will be stored on the principal investigator's password protected computer indefinitely for future analysis. Research findings may be shared in a published dissertation, scholarly presentations, and academic journal articles which will not identify individual participants nor their businesses.

Risks: Except for time and inconvenience for participation in the interviews, the study poses minimal risk to you.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participation in this study. Findings will be shared with industry associations to help inform best marketing practices at the establishment and industry level.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer and you may choose to end the interview at any time. Refusal to participate in the interview or to answer any question will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Maine.

Contact Information: If you have any questions about this project, you may contact the principal investigator, Caroline Paras, at caroline.paras@maine.edu or 207-318-7900. If you have concerns about your participation you may contact the supervising faculty member, Dr. Janet Fairman at janet.fairman@maine.edu or 207-581-2475.

If you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, by email: umric@maine.edu or 207-581-2657.

Appendix E: Industry Association Letter of Support



March 20, 2024

Caroline Paras, IPhD Fellow
University of Maine
Graduate School of Business
300 Fore Street
Portland, Maine 04101

Dear Caroline:

On behalf of the Maine Cheese Guild, we would be delighted to support the dissertation field work proposal outlined in your application to Northeast SARE for a Graduate Student Research Grant to implement *Culinary Trails as an Experiential Marketing Strategy for State-Branded Farm, Fish, and Fiber Products*.

Established in 2003, the Maine Cheese Guild is a statewide nonprofit with over 100 members, including farms, dairies, creameries, and cheese producers. Maine is home to 176 dairy farms on 700,000 acres that support over 4,000 jobs and \$900 million in direct economic impact. To engage consumers with the industry, we sponsor a Maine Cheese Trail, Open Creamery Day, and Maine Cheese Festival, which attract thousands of visitors each year.

We understand that the purpose of this project is to determine how agritourism affects consumer loyalty for state-branded farm, fiber, and fish products compared to other forms of education. This new knowledge will advance Northeast SARE's stated outcome of ensuring the economic viability of sustainable agriculture. Understanding how these agritourism activities provide a return on investment is also important to our organization when we make annual decisions on where to target limited marketing funds. In addition, this information will be critical to individual producers as they decide whether to launch or scale an agritourism operation.

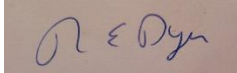
The Guild will support this research proposal in a variety of ways:

- Provide feedback to tailor the proposed outreach and implementation plan to the needs of our industry.
- Allow the researcher to set up a survey booth at our annual cheese festival in 2025.
- Cooperate with efforts to market visitor participation in the survey at the farm level.

- Award one free Admission Ticket for the Maine Cheese Festival 2026 to a respondent drawn at random from the survey pool.
- Invite the researcher to present results at a future Board meeting.

Thank you for your consideration of this application.

Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "R E Dyer".

Ronald E. Dyer
Executive Director

Appendix F: Industry Association Letter of Support

Dear [first name]:

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my research study to understand the role of agritourism as an effective marketing strategy for industries and regions.

Due to sufficient interest from other Maine cheese producers, I have made the decision to limit the number of participants in the study. As a result, you have not been selected to participate in the research.

Thank you for your time and interest.



Caroline Paras
Interdisciplinary PhD Fellow
University of Maine

Lecturer of Local Food & Agritourism
University of Southern Maine

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