Cash in on culinary tourism

As much as we eat to live, or live to eat, eating is more than nutrition and pleasure; it's also business, and a rather significant one. According to the S.C. Agribusiness Council and the S.C. Forestry Commission, agribusiness has a $33.9 billion impact on South Carolina's economy, supporting nearly 200,000 jobs.

In 2008, culinary tourism alone produced $40 million in economic output and some 657,000 visitors in the S.C. National Heritage Corridor, a swath of the state running from Oconee and Pickens counties to Charleston. University of South Carolina researchers in the College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management found that the most important food-related activities were sampling local foods, dining where food is prepared with respect to local tradition, and dining at restaurants offering regional specialties. This is more than stopping for a burger and fries, in terms of both nutrients gained and money spent.

Food-related group tours in the Heritage Corridor are especially popular among out-of-state visitors. These include Peaches, Politics and Pottery in historic Edgefield; A Taste of South Carolina Low Country on Johns and Wadmalaw islands; A Taste of South Carolina — Blueberries and Peaches in Edgefield; Rice, War and Plantations in Charleston; Grits, Goats and General Stores in Pelzer and Honea Path; and A Taste of South Carolina — Apples and Alpacas in Townville, Walhalla, Liberty and Mountain Rest.

These preferences suggest a strong link between culinary tourism and appreciation of local culture, which can range from crafts to history to music. Properly combining these elements could form a highly profitable tourism draw, not only for the corridor but for the entire state.

As with a fine meal, presentation and palate are crucial. The state's tourism leaders might consider blending things cultural and culinary in a complementary, cohesive way. Doing so could constitute a new model for agritourism based on matching consumers with local crops and products and providing opportunities for tasting and sampling at local events and programs beyond mom-and-pop outlets. These tours and events would augment the traditional model of individual, sometimes random, visits to private farms and agribusiness operations that can become costly in terms of marketing, advertising and insurance.

Here's one way to move forward:

- Inventory S.C. restaurants, farmers markets and farm stands specializing in local cuisine and products. Where possible, link them with arts and history attractions.
- Persuade state and local tourism agencies to promote these links in-state and beyond. Coordinate dates, places, themes and offerings, perhaps linking to existing "Certified South Carolina" and "Fresh on the Menu" brands.
- Try to interest television "foodie" shows to feature facets of South Carolina's agriculture and cuisine.
- Tap the energies and talents of S.C. chefs, cookbook authors and food columnists for informational and promotional purposes.

The raw material for this endeavor already exists; undertaking it successfully depends on the commitment and cooperation of university experts, government officials, agribusiness owners, tour operators and others interested in refining S.C. tourism. One thing seems certain: Travelers would eat it up.

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News Views

Verbatim

"They're getting rewards whether they're a good teacher or not."

Rep. Dan Cooper, Ways and Means chairman, on plan to pay teachers based on performance rather than years in the classroom

"They'll either get skills as taxpayers or break the law. If they don't get a job, I promise you, they will not starve."

Bill Byars, Corrections director-designee, on the need to increase training and post-release supervision for convicts

Others Say

Editorials from elsewhere

Medicaid fixes will be painful

There are no easy answers. Some services will need to be cut. Some changes will need to be made in how the state's poor receive medical care. And still the deficit is not likely to be bridged. That means some of the money will probably have to come out of other state agencies that also are strapped for cash.

To be sure, there are some minor adjustments that can