

A shopper at the Corvallis Farmers' Market selects bell peppers sold by Willamette Valley growers. Farmers' markets are a popular way to support rural economies, while providing easy access to high-quality, local foods.



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U-pick farm tours, Saturday markets—but all share the common component of food.

**'Taking off'**

"Agri-tourism is taking off in large part because of the shift in our economy," says Kristin Dahl, tourism development and sustainability manager for Travel Oregon, the state's tourism group. "People are not earning enough from the commodity alone to support their family, so they start looking to different revenue sources like tourism. And as policymakers update land-use planning laws, more small-scale agri-tourism opportunities will likely present themselves."

In the produce-laden Columbia Gorge area, the popular Hood River County Fruit Loop markets valley farms as a tourist attraction. The 35-mile scenic drive takes visitors to wineries, apple orchards, lavender farms, U-pick blueberry patches and alpaca farms. All promise a personal look at rural life.

The agri-tourism activities serve the dual purpose of sparking economic develop-

# Agri-tourism helps diversify rural economy

Businesses and farms open their doors so visitors can see, taste and buy agricultural products

When Scottie Jones began advertising farm stays on her Alsea property, she had to explain the term to a lot of people. Although common in Europe and New Zealand, farm stays, where visitors experience life on a working farm, are uncommon in Oregon and much of the rest of the country.

Although the term may have been unfamiliar, the idea proved wildly popular. This year, Jones' second in the hosting business, the Leaping Lamb

Farm is completely booked. "We are like all small farms," says Jones, who owns the farm with her husband, Greg. "We work really hard, and we don't make any money. By adding something else on, it brings extra income, and it uses space we already have. And I actually adore taking people around the farm."

Agriculture-related tourism is coming into its own as an economic development driver for rural areas. The category is wide open—winery tours, corn mazes, petting zoos,

**It's smiles all around when visitors to Leaping Lamb Farm get to feed a new lamb.**



JANET DAHLBERG





ment and making it possible for people to get back to the land, and it's an experience that urban dwellers are embracing.

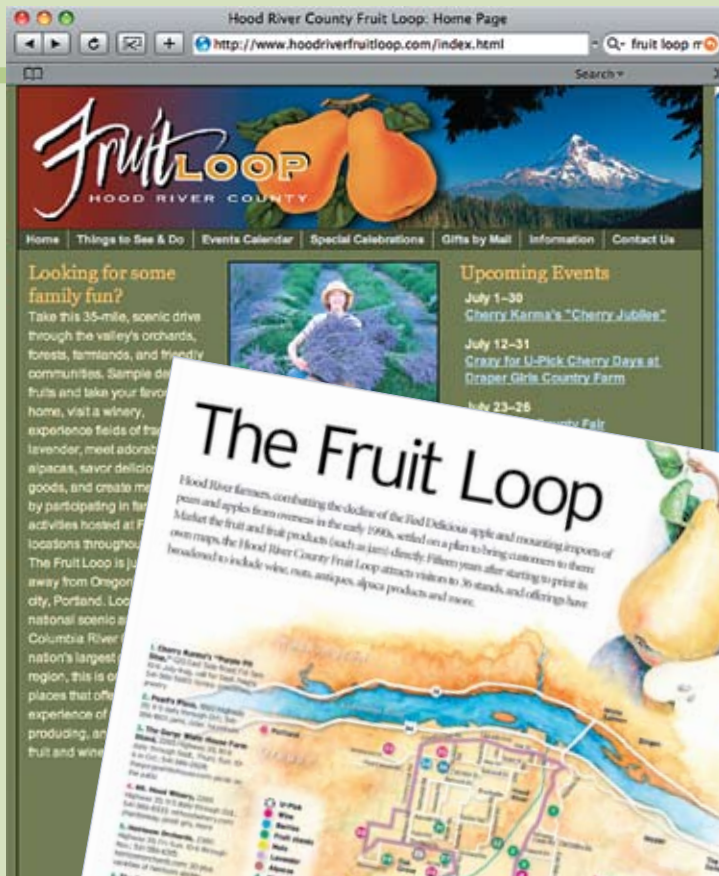
"It's a way for people to reconnect to the farm their grandparents or great-grandparents used to be on," Jones says. "The majority of the country used to be rural. Now it's urban, and people have lost touch. They don't know where their food comes from anymore."

"These businesses are opening their doors so people can see how a product is made, taste it and actually buy the product on site," Dahl says. The Rogue Creamery in Central Point, for example, is a popular attraction for tourists, who can watch its award-winning blue cheeses being made, taste the results and, ultimately, take some home. The creamery recently earned the inaugural Sustainable Tourism Award at the 2008 Oregon Governor's Conference on Tourism for its commitment to community and agri-tourism.

### Wolf sanctuary

In Alsea, agri-tourism is expanding quickly. Oregon Country Trails, a group representing more than 60 rural businesses, entrepreneurs, tours and destinations, has developed four tour routes that visit a wide variety of food- and farm-related businesses. The Alsea Valley Country Trail, for example, takes in a wolf sanctuary, a fish hatchery, an old-fashioned mercantile, a yew wood nursery and, of course, the Leaping Lamb Farm.

After her farm filled up this



year, Jones put the word out to her neighbors that more farmstay sites were needed.

"Four people have come up with places," she says, "including a yurt and a farmhouse. Other people are really getting a handle on this." ■

## Why all the focus on food?

Why are food-related issues getting so much attention today? It's because local food systems are at the center of a "perfect storm" of circumstances, says Deborah Kane.

Kane is vice president of the Food & Farm Program for Ecotrust, a Portland-based organization working to improve public understanding of local agriculture.

One factor is the coverage of food in the media; food has moved off the women's pages. "Food, agriculture and health articles are now in every section of the paper—the business page, the front page, the metro page," Kane says.

The rising cost of food is another factor, with consumers seeking ways to cut costs by shortening the distance between food production sites and their table. Food is also linked to many other issues in the public eye—health and wellness, for example, which leads to concern over early onset diabetes in children, which in turn leads to school lunch reform.

"It's now more culturally acceptable to acknowledge the fact that food is central to our lives," Kane says. ■

**Local farmers' markets are enjoying a resurgence.**



**In the produce-laden Columbia Gorge area, the popular Hood River County Fruit Loop promotes valley farms as a tourist attraction. A Web site and a map draw in the visitors.**