

Farm to Fork:

Strengthening and Developing Agri-Food Initiatives in the Central Border Region

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I. Introduction: Context and Process

The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN)'s Framework of Regional Priorities (FRP) for the Central Border Region (CBR) of Ireland / Northern Ireland, 2021-2027 aims to “develop the Central Border Region as a *thriving, resilient, vibrant and diversified economy*” (ICBAN, FRP, 2021, 6).¹ ICBAN's regional priorities support this vision. These priorities include:

1. “Exploiting new opportunities based on regional strengths and assets”;
2. “Supporting economic development”;
3. “Enhancing citizens' quality of life”;
4. “Enabling greater connected/remote working”; and
5. “Developing the region's tourism offering and quality of life infrastructure” (ICBAN, FRP, 2021, 10).

ICBAN has established five Emergent Catalyst Projects that outline tangible aims for achieving these priorities. The first, “Farm to Fork,” calls on ICBAN to focus on “strengthening the region's agriculture sector, food processing industry, catering firms and hospitality providers to collaboratively avail of new and emerging opportunities and sectoral trends” (ICBAN, FRP, 2021, 13). ICBAN's initial research on the project divided the “Farm to Fork” theme into three areas:

1. “Food trails/food tourism/clustering”;
2. “Agri-processes”; and
3. “Biodiversity” (ICBAN, “Initial Brief,” 2021, 2).

My research has focused on the first of these, with the goal of “research[ing] and identify[ing] opportunities for food trails / food tourism opportunities / sectoral clusters across the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland” (ICBAN, “Initial Brief,” 2021, 1). The FRP highlights the importance of “collaboration between all stakeholders in the food industry – farmers, processors, distributors, retailers, the hospitality sector and consumers” and emphasizes strengthening “pre-existing food networks,” improving “inter-stakeholder collaboration” and promoting “regional food initiatives” (ICBAN, FRP, 2021, 76).

Consequently, my research has emphasized strengthening agricultural and food, or agri-food, initiatives, such as food trails, festivals, strategies, and similar initiatives designed to connect consumers with locally produced food and beverage and to

¹ Where possible, this paper includes parenthetical in-text citations to denote sources. Where having a web link immediately following the information provided may be more helpful, a full citation is included after the entire relevant text instead. All sources are included in the reference list.



engage tourists in the region's food and beverage scene. This paper summarizes the research process and data collected, as well as recommendations for local council areas, existing initiatives and other stakeholders, that have emerged throughout the process.

My research included four steps:

1. Mapping existing initiatives on the island of Ireland and in the CBR, such as food festivals, food trails and other agri-food initiatives;
2. Exploring best-practice examples and identifying and reading about best-practice agri-food (tourism) initiatives worldwide to compile a list of the most helpful models for the CBR;
3. Interviewing stakeholders from a sample of existing agri-food initiatives in the CBR to understand why these were formed and their future ambitions; and
4. Compiling a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis of regional agri-food initiatives and making recommendations, which were presented to the ICBAN Sub-Committee on the Implementation of the FRP on 5 May 2020.

This briefing paper presents the data gathered at each step, along with my analysis of how the information may be helpful.



Figure 3 The Columbia Gorge, location of the East Gorge Food Trail, on map of the US (Google Maps).

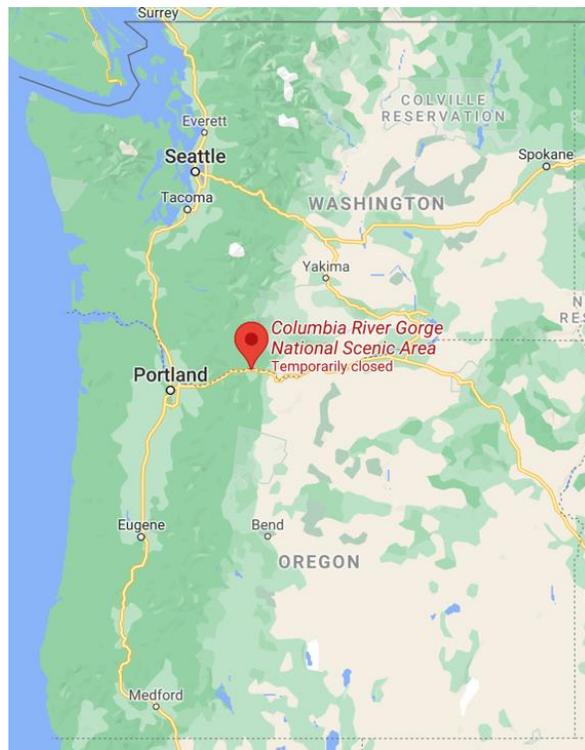


Figure 4 Close-up of the Oregon-Washington Border (Google Maps).

The trail provides a promising example for the CBR. Its website is modern and user-friendly (see screenshots in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8). It connects visitors to lodgings, restaurants and businesses offering local food. Visitors set their own itineraries, likely reducing the amount of management required by website facilitators. The Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance has also enhanced regional

tourism by offering buses, walking trails and other car-free travel options. The region is known for its natural beauty and outdoor activities, like the CBR, providing opportunities to build upon an already-large tourist base.

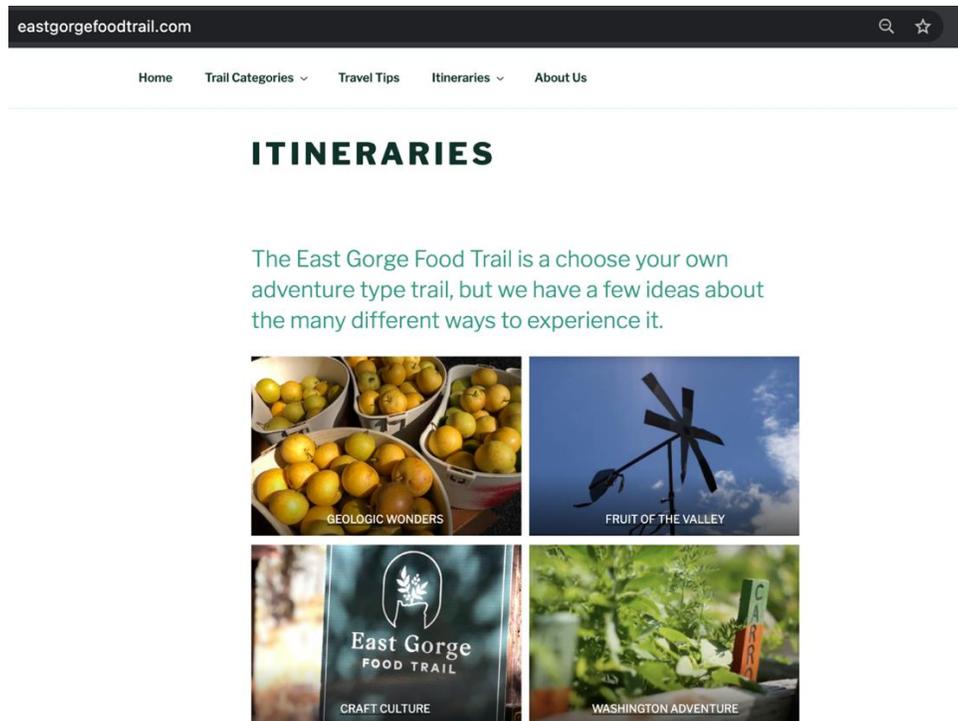


Figure 5 Visitors have the option of selecting from a variety of recommended itineraries based on what they want to experience.

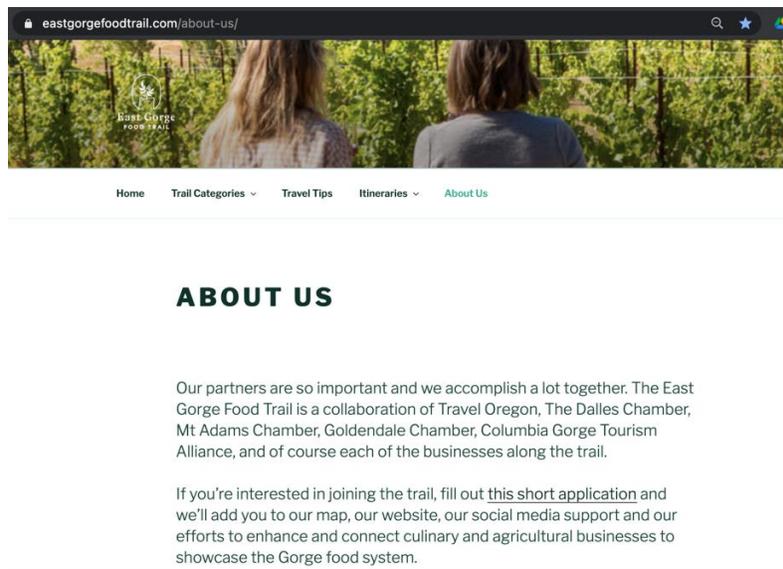


Figure 6 The East Gorge Food Trail website is sleek, modern and easy to use, with a clear menu at the top of the page.

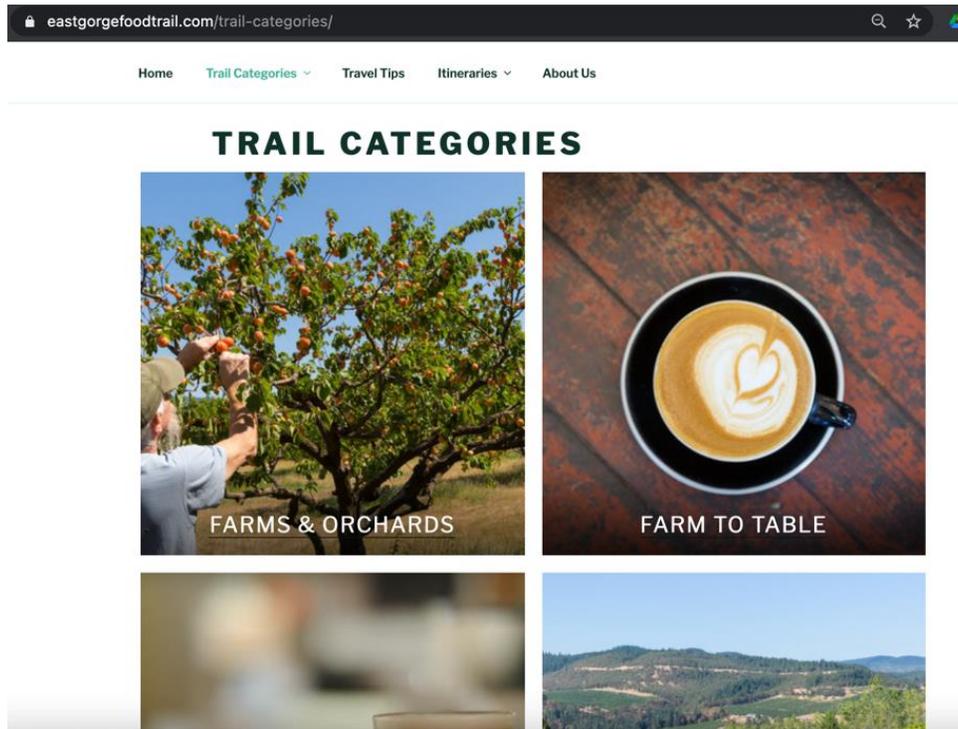


Figure 7 The website offers visitors the option to view various types of producers.

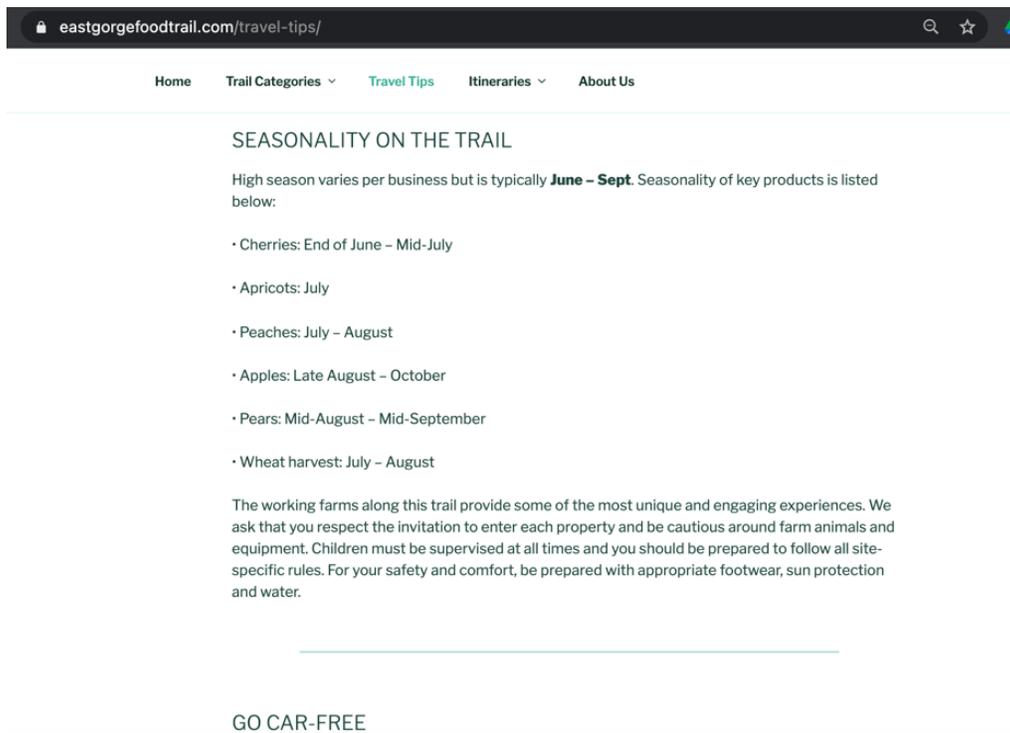


Figure 8 The website offers travel tips, including which products are in season and how to travel without a car.

See:

Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance, January 4, 2021.

<https://columbiagorgetourismalliance.org/>

East Gorge Food Trail, April 21, 2021. <https://eastgorgefoodtrail.com/>

The **Løgstør Mussel Festival**, started in 2005, is an annual festival held in a rural village in Denmark that is singularly dedicated to mussels. Guests eat mussels for free and enjoy markets, music, art and other festivities. The festival was highlighted in a 2014 study by Blichfeldt and Halkier on rural place branding, which explained that the town deliberately decided to use mussels to brand the place and appeal to tourists (1,587). Initially, the festival brought in 1,000-2,000 tourists per year, and by 2010, it brought over 5,000 guests per year (Blichfeldt and Halkier 2014, 1,595).

The festival provides an example of how a rural place can deliberately brand itself to attract tourists. It provides a strong best-practice case for towns in the CBR that may seek to draw in tourists that are already in the region, or that seek to increase the overall number of tourists who visit their region. Because it provides an example for individual towns, it may need to be adapted to work for the CBR as a whole, such as by creating a network of similar small festivals.

See:

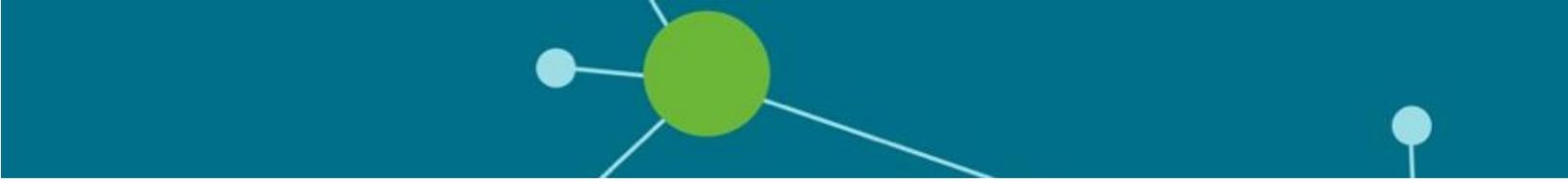
Blichfeldt, Bodil Stilling, and Henrik Halkier. 2014. "Mussels, Tourism and Community Development: A Case Study of Place Branding Through Food Festivals in Rural North Jutland, Denmark." *European Planning Studies* 22(8): 1587-1603, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2013.784594>

"Løgstør Mussel Festival." *VisitNordjylland*, 2021.

<https://www.visitnordjylland.com/north-jutland/things-do/logstor-mussel-festival>

"Muslingebyen Løgstør." *Løstør*, 2020. <https://muslingebyen.dk/>

The **Bluefin Tuna Cultural Festival** is an annual festival held every May and June in Donggang, Taiwan to celebrate bluefin tuna, a locally sourced fish that brands the culinary destination. The annual festival features additional activities, such as races, concerts, auctions, competitions and other attractions designed to encourage tourists to stay longer. The festival has been a successful venture and "has raised billions in economic value since 2001" (Lin and Bestor 2020, 373).



The festival exemplifies how a food initiative created and supported by local government can boost tourism by capitalizing on a pre-existing good. This effort has also boosted return migration among younger populations. In the case of both the Løgstør Mussel Festival and Bluefin Tuna Cultural Festival, tourism develops when a community commodifies one culinary item and develops an identity around that item, especially where the town's history, culture or identity is uniquely tied to that commodity. This kind of initiative currently exists on smaller scales in the CBR, as in the case of the Armagh Food and Cider Festival.

See:

“Blue Fin Tuna Cultural Festival.” *Dapeng Bay National Scenic Area Administration, Tourism Bureau*, March 29, 2021.

<https://www.dbnsa.gov.tw/Festival-Content.aspx?Lang=2&SNo=03001989>

Lin, Yi-Chieh Jessica, and Theodore C. Bestor. 2020. “Embedding food in place and rural development: Insights from the Bluefin Tuna Cultural Festival in Donggang, Taiwan.” *Journal of Rural Studies* 79: 373-381.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.08.030>

The Malt Whisky Trail in Scotland offers tourists information about opportunities to taste whisky, learn about production, and meet the individuals who make single-malt Scotch. Visitors create their own itineraries using the website and book tours directly with distilleries (Figures 9 and 10). Visitors can view a full range of tour options at each distillery, from longer, more intensive experiences to shorter stays.

Like the East Gorge Food Trail, this trail provides tourists with information, but visitors plan and book tours themselves. This offers tourists the freedom to design their own itineraries and likely minimizes the work of trail managers. The Malt Whisky Trail builds on a pre-existing place-based culinary identity centred around Scotch Whisky. The trail provides tourists with a convenient source of information about each producer and thus enhances the prospects that each distillery will receive visitors. This model works well because Scotland is already known for whisky. The CBR may be able to strengthen its profile as a source of a particular good to offer a similar initiative by building on current offerings of cider, gin, whiskey and other goods.

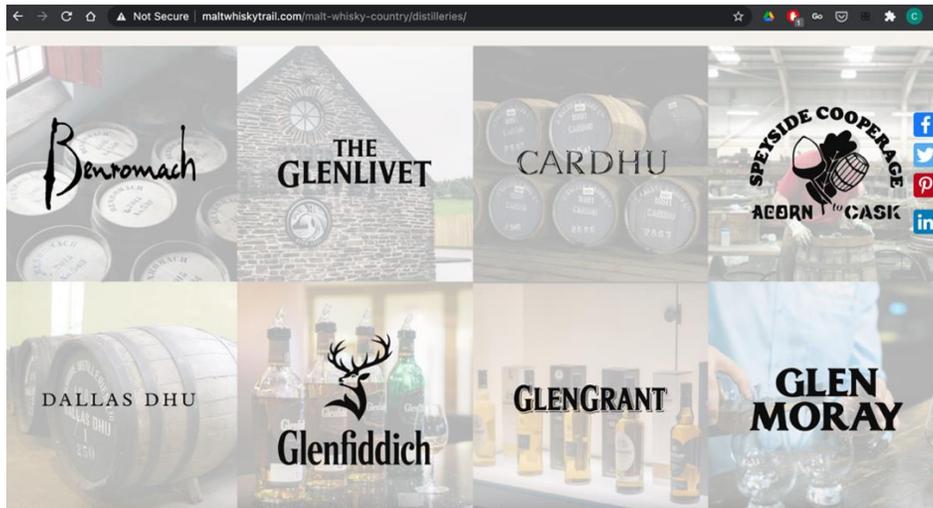


Figure 9 The website boasts an elegant, simple menu that allows visitors to learn more about each producer.

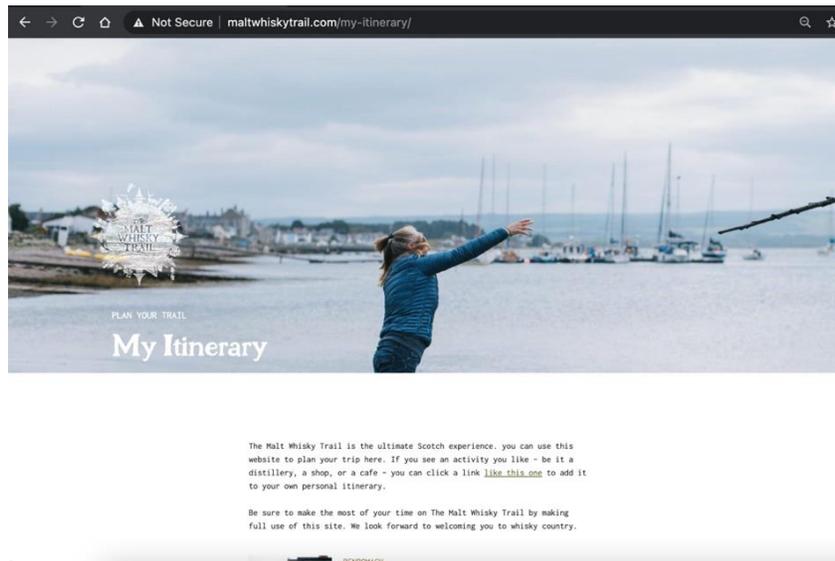


Figure 10 Visitors can use the website's "My Itinerary" feature to organize a list of sites to visit, but visitors are not able to book tours through the site.

See:

The Malt Whisky Trail, 2021. <http://maltwhiskytrail.com/?age-verified=9ed47b01e3>

"Alaska Grown," based in Alaska in the US, is a state government-supported branding initiative that highlights local products and supports a market for local producers. Members of the "Alaska Grown" group are permitted to apply the symbol to their products (Figure 11). These products are featured in farmers' markets and stores and include fruit and vegetables, plants, meat, dairy and other products. The program also offers members opportunities to apply for a variety of government-supplied farming grants. The initiative's website (Figure 12) provides a central

location for stakeholders to locate stores that sell “Alaska Grown” products, find grant opportunities, and learn more about the program.



Figure 11 The “Alaska Grown” logo is displayed in stores and applied to official “Alaska Grown” products.

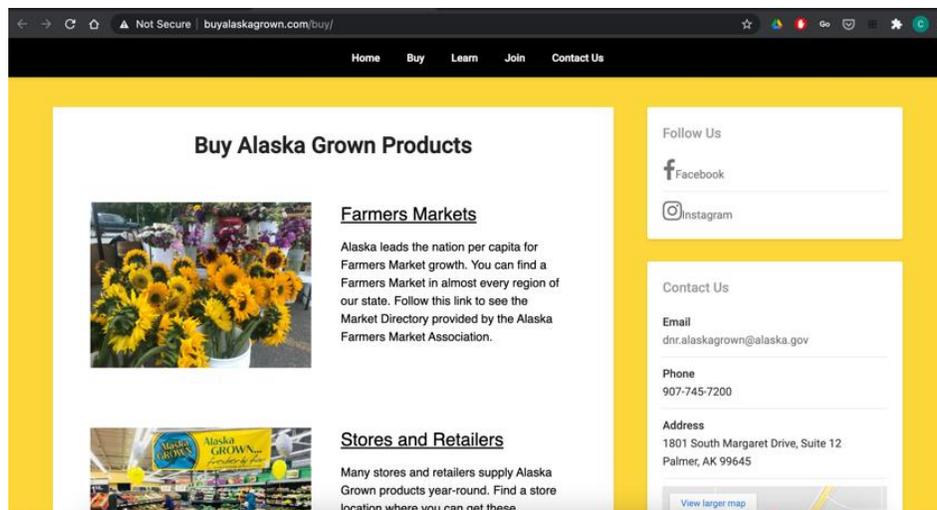


Figure 12 The “Alaska Grown” website features lists where customers may be able to find “Alaska Grown” products, although customers cannot make purchases through the site.

“Alaska Grown” is a relatively low-cost and non-time-intensive branding initiative designed to promote awareness about and strengthen the market for local goods. At approximately 730,000, Alaska's population is smaller than that of the CBR (850,000), but the territory is vastly larger (663,300 sq. mi compared to 6,700 sq. mi). The smaller size should make an initiative like this easily scalable to the CBR, but place-based identity is important to developing an initiative like this one. “Alaska Grown” is based on an existing place-based identity that consumers associate with a certain kind of ruggedness or natural product.

See:

“Alaska Grown.” *Buy Alaska Grown*, 2021. <http://www.buyalaskagrown.com/>

The **Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE)**, based in Clemson, South Carolina in the US, is an online farmers’ market and network of local, small-scale producers and consumers who share an interest in accessing fresh, local produce. Producers list the goods they have available on the online platform, and consumers purchase what they will use, preventing waste. Goods are delivered to local distribution centres, where customers pick them up each week.

CAFE could be scaled to the CBR, which is about three times larger than CAFE’s current operating area, with modifications to allow for farther transport of produce, more distribution centres and a potentially larger customer and producer base. Extensive research and interviews were conducted on CAFE after it was identified as an especially promising model for increasing sales of local products, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Detailed information about this initiative may be found in the “Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE) Description” in Appendix A.

See:

Clemson Area Food Exchange, 2021. <https://clemsonareafoodexchange.com/>

Howard, Lance, and Ashley Townsend. 2021. (Clemson Area Food Exchange and Oconee County Agricultural Board.) Interview with Callahan Moore. March 1.

Tyson, Elian. 2021. (Clemson Area Food Exchange.) Interview with Callahan Moore. February 22.

III. Interviews: Discussion and Analysis

After gathering information on existing initiatives and best-practice examples, I contacted and conducted interviews with stakeholders involved in organizing, facilitating, marketing and/or coordinating eight agri-food initiatives on the island of Ireland, including the following:

- Sarah Jane Macdonald, Diane Stinson, Sara McGeary, Gill Robb and Lissa O'Malley, *Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Agricultural Strategy, Food Heartland Forum, Food and Cider Festival and Georgian Festival*
- Deirdre Donnelly, *Cavan Food Strategy*
- Eimear Kearney, *Lough Neagh Artisans and Lough Neagh Tours*
- John Brennan, *Leitrim Organic Farmers' Coop*
- Marie Casserly, *Sligo Food Trail*
- Mark Edwards, *Enniskillen Taste Experience*
- Siobhan Sherry, *Monaghan Food Trail, Monaghan Taste Club and other Monaghan Food initiatives*
- Jonathan Birnie, *Wicklow Naturally* (outside the CBR, but helpful for comparative purposes; conducted upon ICBAN's request).

A full citation for each interview may be found in the reference list. The interviews focused around several key themes: origins, meeting needs of customers and stakeholders, collaborations and partnerships, food link to place, challenges, and opportunities for future growth. I have integrated my analysis into a discussion of each theme.

Origins

Most initiatives and strategies, though not all, have emerged within the last six years. The Food Heartland Forum in ABC Borough was launched about five years ago, when the Borough was formed. Lough Neagh Artisans, Lough Neagh Tours, the Enniskillen Taste Experience and the Cavan Food Strategy are similarly new, having emerged in the last few years. The Leitrim Organic Farmers' Coop was an exception, as it has been in place over 20 years. It can therefore be seen that the interest in promoting locally produced food and beverages is a relatively new development. Generally, the initiatives have emerged out of a desire to connect local producers with consumers. The fact that the sector is relatively new indicates that it still has opportunities to grow and develop to fully meet customers' and producers' needs, and that stakeholders are still exploring avenues of connecting producers and customers.



Meeting Customer and Stakeholder Needs

Interview participants described a variety of strategies developed in response to emerging customer and stakeholder needs. These included increasing the amount of time and money visitors spent in the area; expanding tourists' visits beyond the town centre or more broadly throughout the County, Borough or District; meeting tourists' desire for a "hands on" experience to engage with community residents, as well as revitalizing and bringing footfall to the town centre and helping local enterprises compete with "high street businesses" (Edwards 2021); providing support to farmers to ensure they can continue to "make a living from the land" (Brennan 2021); and expanding sales of local products and supporting local producers and enterprises.

These answers display a broader interest in raising the profile of participants' Counties, Boroughs or Districts as destinations for food tourism. They seem to reflect a shifting or emerging interest among tourists for a more local or genuine-seeming visitors' experience. Paying attention to this visitor interest in having a distinctly "local" experience will be key to strengthening agri-food tourism, and the agri-food sector more broadly, in the CBR.

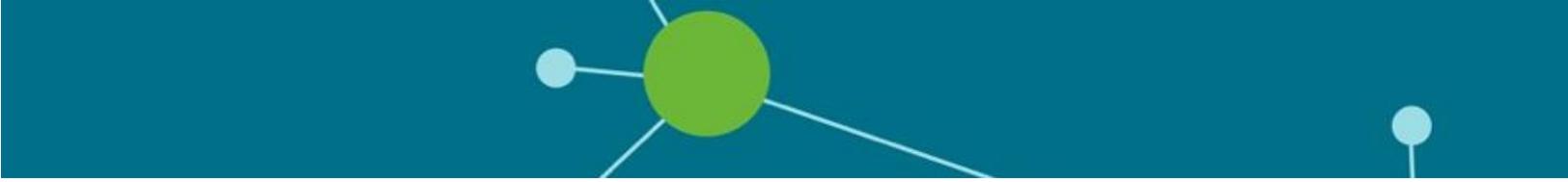
Collaborations and Partnerships

Stakeholders have described collaborations with a variety of entities above the County, Borough or District level, such as with bodies including Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the Northern Irish and Irish Departments of Agriculture. These partnerships have offered the agri-food initiatives support in the form of funding and grants, business support and the provision of examples and models to build upon. In addition, the Republic of Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has recently announced funding awards for a variety of "Agri-Food Tourism projects," including the Cavan Food Network and A Taste of Donegal Food Festival (2021; see Appendix B). The fact that so many initiatives have already partnered with larger entities indicates a willingness and interest in collaboration across borders and at a regional level.

ICBAN has an opportunity to serve as a valuable partner in connecting stakeholders to resource networks and opportunities across the region, strengthening the region's agri-food sector as a whole.

Food Link to Place

A common thread throughout the interviews was the way that tourists' interests seem to be shifting. Tourists seem especially interested in locally-based activities that feel "authentically" grounded in the locations they visit. One interviewee



likened the desired experience to that of traveling the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain. Others highlighted recent interest in place-specific activities, such as foraging for mushrooms; attending old-fashioned Irish cooking demonstrations; visiting festivals grounded in the heritage of the place; and meeting the local people.

Perhaps the existence of such initiatives highlights the pride local communities have in their offerings. Participants were very proud of their local food scenes, and some emphasized the importance of maintaining the integrity of their County, Borough or District's particular initiative, alongside any broader regional collaborations.

The fact that such opportunities have been designed as part of recent efforts to appeal to tourists, though, seems more likely to indicate an awareness that tourists visiting the CBR seek experiences that do not feel manufactured, but rather seem to be based in the geography and culture of the place. Advertising these bespoke, place-based offerings may be key to building momentum, especially in the re-opening of the tourism sector following the pandemic, as many initiatives seek to initially draw in domestic tourists.

Challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the sector's greatest current challenges as businesses try to operate according to restrictions implemented by respective governments. For many initiatives and businesses, revenue and visitor numbers have decreased. The loss of momentum could make re-starting initiatives challenging, as businesses may not have the funds to invest in branding schemes or other efforts to re-build customer bases, and some customers could be reluctant to engage in public life in the same way as before the pandemic (for example, in crowded spaces or indoors). It is impossible to predict the pandemic's long-term effects on the sector, but loss of momentum seems to be its greatest threat going forward.

Though Covid has perhaps accelerated the decline of high-capacity events like food festivals, these were already waning in popularity across the island (See the Google Map of existing agri-food initiatives for more information). The Taste of Cavan food festival was cancelled in 2020 prior to the outbreak of the pandemic because it was cost-prohibitive for smaller producers, for example. Maintaining foot traffic in town centres while ensuring business opportunities remain viable for smaller producers is a challenge, but there is an opportunity as the economy reopens to find new avenues for maintaining customer bases developed through the festivals.



Brexit also presents considerable challenges for trade between Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. These limitations may hinder trade in seeds and agri-food products, preventing producers from accessing resources and markets they need. As ICBAN tracks the progress of Brexit, taking note of the impact on the agri-food sector will be key to maintaining its strength.

Another challenge that has emerged is weak internet connectivity. Some of the CBR's rural areas lack strong broadband connections, meaning farmers and rural producers may have difficulty connecting to virtual events and opportunities. A generational gap in technological capabilities also means that many older farmers and producers may struggle to adapt to newer technologies, such as smartphones and tablets. Though the emergence of these challenges indicates that stakeholders are finding ways to maintain businesses and relationships despite the pandemic, this challenge is especially problematic in that it may further isolate rurally-based producers from stakeholders and markets in town centres. Finding ways to maintain connections with rural producers—whether in-person or via trainings and similar opportunities—will be key to preventing such exclusions.

Opportunities for Further Growth

Stakeholders identified a variety of potential opportunities for further growth. Some suggested building or further developing websites where customers may purchase local products. Others seek to build a domestic tourist base after re-opening post-Covid. Building on and partnering with other existing forms of tourism—for example, literary or adventure tourism—may also provide an opportunity for growth. In addition, though not specifically noted as an opportunity during the interviews, several interviewees highlighted the important role that visitors from across the border play in their agri-food markets. The variety of opportunities noted for growth indicates that stakeholders have high hopes for the potential of their initiatives in the future. Where Covid has halted normal operations, these initiatives and businesses have an opportunity now to re-imagine how tourism may look when the sector reopens, providing potential new avenues for growth and partnership-building.

IV. SWOT Analysis: Existing Agri-Food Initiatives in the CBR

The following SWOT analysis considers and responds to previous stages of work: understanding the context of the Catalyst Project within the FRP, drawing on the best-practice findings and reviewing the feedback from interviews. It clarifies the status of existing agri-food initiatives in the CBR to provide context for the recommendations in the following section.

Strengths

- Council areas on both sides of the border possess remarkable existing agri-food industries, with talented and successful producers of a variety of products.
- Committed public servants are seeking ways to boost this sector.
- Many council areas—including Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Leitrim; Monaghan; and Sligo, among others, already have promising existing agri-food initiatives, including food trails, food festivals, and networks of producers, chefs, hospitality providers and other stakeholders.
- Several interviewees reported that many of their agri-food customers and tourists are border-crossers, indicating that cross-border integration is already strong and normalized in several sub-regions.

Weaknesses

- There are few initiatives above the council-level at this moment. Partnerships developed with entities such as Tourism Ireland, Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland indicate interest in upscaling and further development, but as of yet there are no regional initiatives across the whole CBR or a focus on the border in particular.
- Interviewees who discussed how long tourists stay generally noted they only visited for short periods of time. Council regions want to extend this period, but the CBR has not yet been able to compete with tourist draws such as Dublin and other larger cities and coastal areas.
- Due to the loss of momentum caused by the pandemic, many initiatives may need to restart to some degree to re-secure their customer bases.

Opportunities

- Though some participants stressed the importance of maintaining the integrity of existing local agri-food initiatives, interviewees were enthusiastic about the potential for a region-wide initiative.
- Even prior to Covid, food festivals were closing. This gap may create space for a larger, region-wide festival or other opportunity designed to draw in tourists and create revenue for farms and artisan producers.

- Emerging platforms such as online marketplaces offer opportunities for stakeholders from different geographical areas to bring their goods to new markets. The exposure by farmers and other stakeholders to new technologies throughout the pandemic period may help to increase skills and reduce any user anxieties, though it is important to address these anxieties when developing new virtual opportunities.
- Development of producer forums and similar initiatives may help ensure producers and other stakeholders are able to share ideas effectively and equitably.

Threats

- Brexit may hamper farmers' abilities to import certain seeds and sell products to a wider international market. It will be important for all stakeholders to monitor the impacts of Brexit and the NI Protocol with regards to the agri-food sector.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impeded the operations of the hospitality sector, and by extension, local producers who have struggled to transition to takeaway-only service (i.e., hotels.).
- Covid has also slowed momentum for initiatives such as food festivals, which depend upon tourism and in-person attendance for revenue. Some towns and council regions may not be able to re-develop this sector very quickly, even after restrictions are lifted.
- Any continuing negative impacts by the pandemic could have longer-term consequences for these sectors.

V. Recommendations

Interviewees were generally excited about ICBAN's interest in promoting agri-food initiatives and agri-food tourism in the CBR more broadly. In light of this enthusiasm and the best-practice examples, stakeholders may wish to consider the following recommendations:

1. **Engage with producers**: Producers are an important stakeholder and should be actively engaged with to gain their perspectives on the existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the CBR's agri-food (tourism) sector. Such engagement can help ensure producers feel that their input matters and that these initiatives are being developed to support their businesses and livelihoods.
2. **Information**: Visiting other initiatives, both outside and inside the CBR (as highlighted by several attendees at the presentation to the ICBAN Sub-Committee on the Implementation of the FRP on 5 May 2020), will allow stakeholders to gain a more complete sense of the nature of existing initiatives, adopt other best practices, and express support for other agri-food initiatives in the region.
3. **Branding**: Some participants emphasized the significance and the lucrative potential of branding. A CBR-wide brand for regionally produced food and drink could boost sales and create a sense of community among stakeholders throughout the CBR. This branding initiative could apply specifically to the agri-food sector and agri-food tourism, although it could also coincide with broader efforts to strengthen tourism and socio-economic development throughout the region.
4. **Invest in web technology**: Support in funding and resources should be sought to assist initiatives in developing stronger functional websites, such as those modelled in some of the best-practice examples.
5. **Regional calendar**: Concurrent with web development, consideration should be given to helping to promote and develop a "master calendar" outlining all known agri-food events taking place throughout the region, and which all relevant stakeholders can easily reference and update.
6. **Further study**: One theme listed in the FRP is food security, or "access to affordable food" (ICBAN, FRP, 2021, 76). Because it is not directly connected to many of the initiatives examined, this theme did not emerge in the



interviews. Currently, the status of food security among the region's population is unclear. ICBAN or local councils might consider conducting research to determine the true proportion of the region's population that is food-insecure and to understand what food insecurity looks like in the area. This research should seek to investigate whether efforts to increase food security in the region are necessary, or whether these efforts may coincide with broader efforts to strengthen and develop the region's agri-food sector.

7. **Mapping:** The maps created for this study provide a starting point, but as the sector continues to develop, a Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping exercise may provide a more sophisticated picture of the CBR's agri-food sector. GIS can create layers of maps outlining food trails, food festivals, locations of producers, processors and suppliers and overlay these with detail of other tourist services and facilities. A mapping project could be investigated or carried out by a future intern.
8. **Build in tandem with other sectors:** Efforts to strengthen agri-food tourism should coincide with the development of new or revamped tourism offerings in the CBR that focus on offering tourists a wholistic, genuine or even “authentic” regional experience. A CBR-wide food trail, website or map listing various hotels and tourist experiences may pair nicely with the implementation of other tourism-focused catalyst projects, such as Greenways and Blueways or International Mountain Biking Destination.
9. **Online marketplace:** Stakeholders should consider coming together as a forum for discussing whether a centralized online marketplace will strengthen initiatives. The development of local or regional marketplace(s) could help strengthen agri-food sales, especially during the pandemic or around holidays for the sale of hampers. The Clemson Area Food Exchange offers a promising model to be “scaled up” to the CBR.
10. **Note larger initiatives:** As many agri-food initiatives have already partnered with bodies such as Tourism Ireland, Tourism NI and Fáilte Ireland, other stakeholders and initiatives may wish to consider engaging in similar partnerships. Using pre-existing resources can help prevent replicating work that has already been completed.

VI. Conclusion

The Central Border Region boasts a strong agri-food sector with a variety of promising initiatives designed to increase consumption of local agri-food products and strengthen agri-food tourism. The best-practice examples, discussion of interviews and analysis of findings have informed the recommendations included, which are intended to assist ICBAN and stakeholders in helping further strengthen and develop this sector.

Participants' enthusiasm for the prospect of broader regional opportunities indicates the potential for the area's agri-food sector to thrive in the near and long-term future. Taking innovative and deliberate measures to integrate agri-food tourism into other efforts to develop general tourism in the region, is likely to strengthen progress towards achieving the Regional Priorities set out in the FRP strategy document.

Appendix A: Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE) Description

The **Clemson Area Food Exchange (CAFE)**, based within a 50-mile radius of Clemson, South Carolina, in the United States, is an online network of local, small-scale producers and consumers who share an interest in accessing fresh, local produce. Local entrepreneurs and fresh-food enthusiasts Lance Howard and Elian Tyson formed CAFE as an alternative to the city-sponsored farmers' market approximately 10 years ago. Interviews with Lance, Elian and a sample of CAFE producers, as well as an observation of CAFE's weekly distribution process, inform this description.

CAFE runs on a weekly basis. Producers list items such as fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, meat, dairy products, preserved foods, salves, bags, face masks and other local and handmade goods on the website each week. From Friday evening until the following Monday at noon, consumers can access the site and order goods from a variety of producers. Customers select to pick up their orders at either the central distribution site near Clemson or one of five regional distribution sites in Anderson, Easley, Pickens, Salem or Seneca. Customers also have the option of paying a small extra fee for a home delivery of their orders. In addition to the goods they order each week, customers pay a US \$20 annual membership fee but are permitted to try the site for two weeks before joining. The cost of goods listed on CAFE's website includes a 20.5 percent mark-up to cover operating costs and provide limited compensation to Elian, Lance and the volunteers.

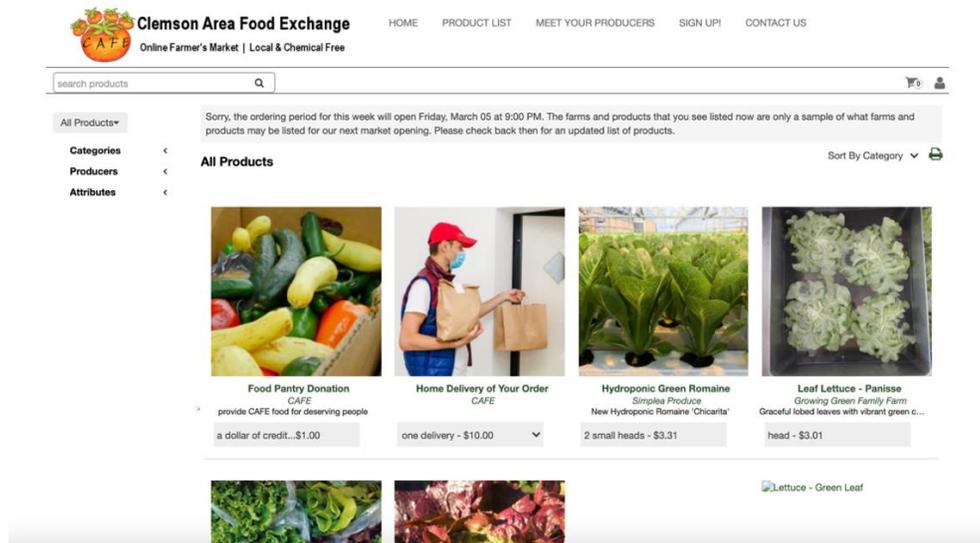


Figure 13 A screenshot of the Clemson Area Food Exchange website, with sample products on offer.

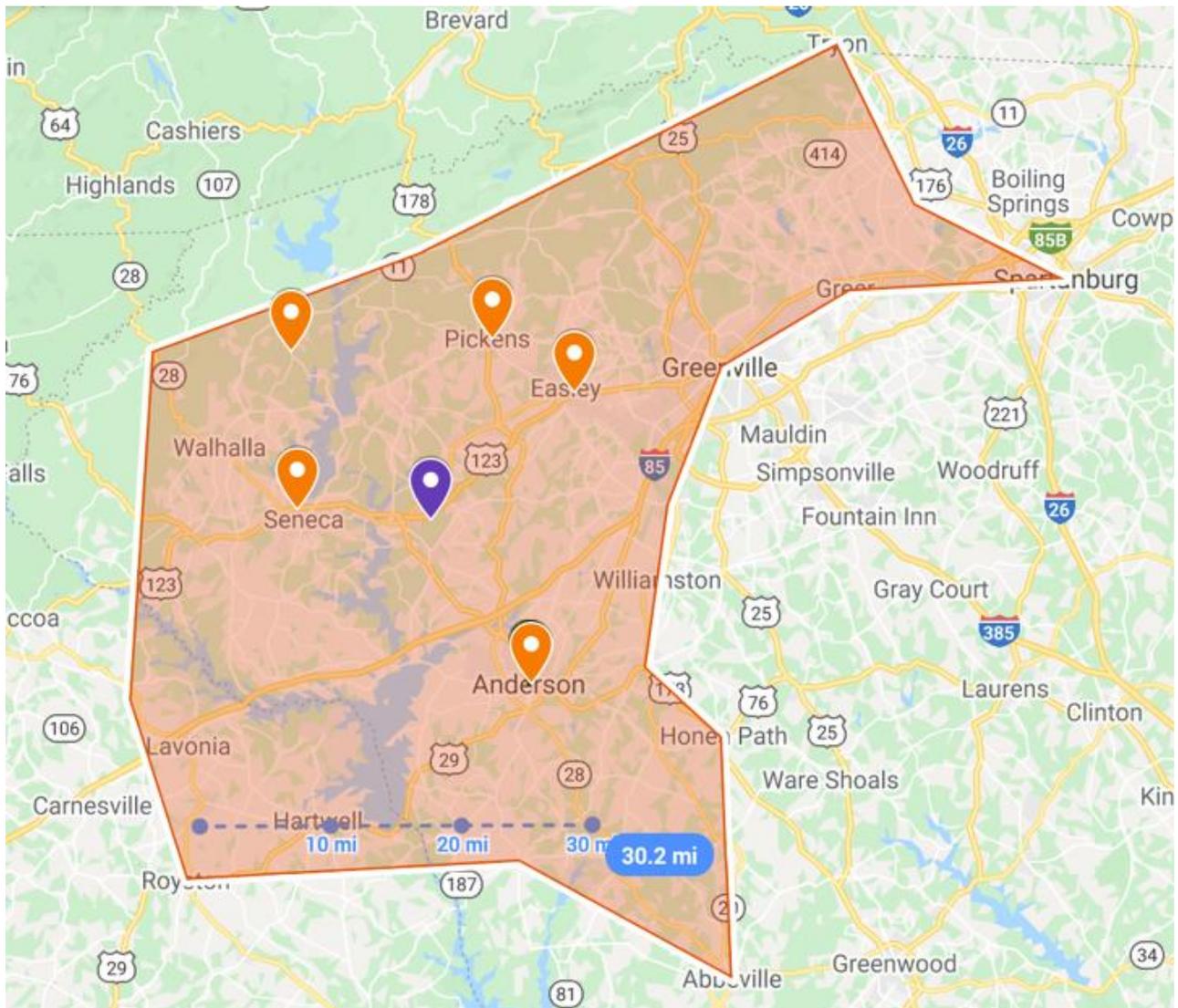


Figure 14 Clemson Area Food Exchange region and Distribution Centres. The area outlined in orange marks the approximate geographic extent of producers involved in CAFE. Most customers live within this region. The Clemson distribution site (main centre) is pinpointed in purple; regional distribution sites are pinpointed in orange. The blue scale provides perspective on the size of the region. See map at <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1Ur1WhLloZiziciBHIlqDERnEhgM8Q-mX&hl=en&usp=sharing>.

After producers receive their respective orders, they gather the goods to be distributed. On Tuesday, producers transport goods to a central distribution site where volunteers collect and separate it into smaller shipments for the five regional distribution sites. Regional distribution sites consolidate the items for each individual order, and customers come to the main distribution site or regional distribution centres on Tuesday evening each week to collect their orders.



Figure 15 Exterior of the CAFE central distribution site. The colourful tubs in front contain ice and jugs of milk for distribution.



Figure 16 Goods waiting to be consolidated and distributed to Clemson customers.



Figure 17 Goods waiting to be transported to the Seneca distribution centre.

Currently, 66 producers are listed on the Clemson Area Food Exchange website, but Elian estimates that approximately 40 to 50 producers participate each week. Lance notes that some producers may not offer products year-round or are more seasonal in nature—for example, CAFE receives requests from producers who have surpluses of eggs around Easter time and hope to list these on the website.

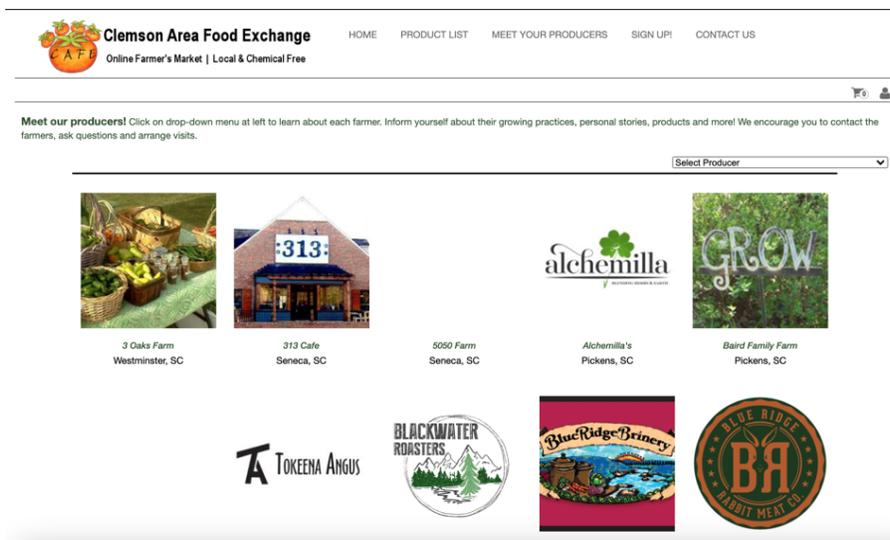


Figure 18 CAFE's "Meet Your Producers" page, which lists producers involved in CAFE and the types of products they offer. This screenshot shows a selection of 10 of the 66 producers listed.



Elian estimates that between 130 and 160 customers place orders on CAFE's website each week. In the week I observed the CAFE distribution process, CAFE received 147 customer orders. Elian estimates that the total value of goods purchased is between US \$3,000-\$4,000 per week.

CAFE is an innovative example of a farmers' market that meets the needs of both producers and consumers. Producers list the goods they have available (according to seasonality) and consumers only purchase what they want and will use, preventing waste. Customers have the option of making monetary donations to local food banks, which help provide lower-income consumers with access to fresh, local foods. Currently, CAFE faces a challenge in finding ways to connect lower-income consumers to fresh food: Although donations provide a way for managers Lance and Elian to purchase fresh foods for donation to a food bank, Lance notes that CAFE has an excess of donated funds that need to be put to use. Lance has expressed interest in using the funds to start a free community garden on the land surrounding the central distribution site.

CAFE relies upon approximately 15 volunteers. All volunteers do not assist with the distribution process every week, and some only help with a few activities—for example, one volunteer assists with the newsletter, and another helps with administrative work, like billing. Volunteers working solely at the regional distribution sites—for example, employees at the restaurant that serves as the regional distribution site and pickup location for Seneca—are not included in this estimate. In my observation of the CAFE distribution process, I estimated that approximately six volunteers were involved on an average distribution day.

While other farmers' markets in the region exist, CAFE provides producers with the opportunity to access a wider customer base for the full duration of the year. Many farmers' markets—for example, the city-sponsored Clemson Farmers' Market—are only available in the summer time, which does not provide producers with the ability to sell the goods they are producing year-round. At the same time, because they are city-sponsored and are not run by the farmers themselves, the markets do not coincide with the periods when the largest numbers of producers have the most goods available. Lance states that the Clemson Farmers' Market runs from May, which is too early for most summer goods to be available, until September, when the fall harvest is just beginning. There are other local farmers' markets, but these do not run year-round and/or are based in particular towns. Some businesses, such as Farmacy and 313 Café (the distribution site/pickup locations in Easley and Seneca, respectively) sell some local products year-round, but they are not farmers' markets with large quantities of fresh produce and other goods from local farms.



CAFE offers producers several advantages over traditional farmers' markets. Namely, producers prefer that they only have to bring the products they have already sold to the distribution centre. Producers prefer this model to traditional farmers' markets, where they may bring along lots of products, stay for several hours and still make insufficient profit. This model also prevents damage to frozen and refrigerated products that are left out in the hot sun or that customers frequently remove from coolers to inspect. Producers also like the option to sell small quantities of products. For example, while bringing "three jars of jam" to a traditional market would seem "pitiful," producers can easily sell small surplus quantities, or even trial new products, through CAFE (MacAlystre and Clarey, 2021). CAFE provides an accessible sales platform for local and small-scale producers, especially those who may not have easy access to, or spare time to attend, a farmers' market.

Though producers noted a couple of challenges with CAFE's model, generally they appreciate the system and plan to continue using it. Producers described difficulties in listing several similar products with slight variations. For example, if they wanted to list handmade bags or packages of meat with slight variations in weight, the CAFE website did not provide an easy way for producers to sell these products without listing each item individually and taking up excessive space on the website to do so. Overall, though, producers report increased sales via CAFE and express interest in continuing to sell, or even increasing the volume of products they sell, through CAFE.

The Clemson Area Food Exchange provides a promising model for the Central Border Region. It allows farmers to list produce they have according to seasonality and allows customers to purchase what they need. The network relies on local transportation infrastructures (roads, highways, the postal service) and individual volunteers to transport the produce to distribution centres and customers. CAFE could be scaled to the CBR, a region about three times larger than the area CAFE currently covers, but such an effort would be dependent upon a network of dedicated volunteers with the resources to transport the goods over longer distances (vehicles, coolers, refrigerated lorries, etc.) In addition, the implementation of a CAFE-like initiative in the CBR would benefit greatly from, and indeed require, a local distribution centre with facilities such as refrigerators to hold the goods, especially for producers who may have to travel longer distances and may not want to come every week. With local government support, a CAFE-like initiative could use government buildings such as schools as distribution centres that would be open and available year-round to store products and host distribution activities. Although a similar initiative would not necessarily increase tourism, it could help boost the farm-to-table movement in the CBR, and tourists might benefit

incidentally (for example, if restaurants or hotels participate and use the produce to enhance their menus).

Appendix B: Press Release: Minister McConalogue announces approx. €275,000 funding for Agri-Food Tourism projects

Source: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/4a29e-minister-mcconalogue-announces-approx-275000-funding-for-agri-food-tourism-projects/#>

From [Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine](#)

Published on 6 May 2021

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Following a call for proposals for Agri-Food Tourism Initiatives under the 2021 Rural Innovation and Development Fund in January, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue T.D, has announced the projects that will receive funding from his Department.

Minister McConalogue said, “2020 and 2021 have been difficult years for everyone so I am pleased to deliver some good news and support these initiatives in the agri-food tourism sector and build on progress already made. Food Wise 2025 highlights the natural synergy between agri-food and local tourism. I believe that agri-tourism is of great importance for rural areas in order to showcase their people, landscape, history and culture through agricultural produce, food and drink and local cuisine. In addition, it provides opportunities for rural businesses, including farmers, producers and artisans, to develop their products and services, connect with the community and visitors and improve skills and best practice.”

Note for Editors:

Funding of €275,010 has been made available to the following successful initiatives:

1. Drinks Ireland (Irish Whiskey 360°) - €17,678
2. Inis Meáin Restaurant and Suites (Inis Meáin Farm) - €24,754
3. The Honey Tour @Wildacres - €14,350
4. The Three Johns Killarney Food Experience - €12,528
5. Burren Eco Tourism Network (Burren Food Trail) - €25,000
6. Kilkenny County Council (Taste Kilkenny Digital and Social Media campaign) - €17,500
7. A Taste of Donegal Food Festival - €13,600
8. Achill Tourism (Hearth and Community Festival) - €13,600
9. Achonry Farmers Market - €13,600
10. Croagh Patrick Seafood Tours - €13,600
11. O’Connell Marketing/Taste Wexford (Taste Wexford Development)- €13,600
12. Cavan County Council (Cavan Food Network) - €13,600

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13. Galway Co Council (Think Tank Agri Tourism and Food strategy) - €13,600
 14. Tipperary Food Producers Network (Farm tours and experiences) - €13,600
 15. Devenish Research Development and Innovation Ltd (Feasability Study for Foodscape) - €13,600
 16. Athlone Chamber of Commerce (Athlone Food Network) - €13,600
 17. Aran Island Food Tours - €13,600
 18. Waterford County Festival of Food (Food the Waterford Way) - €13,600

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