Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance: Developing Michigan’s Wine and Food Experiences as Contributors to Agriculture and Tourism Economies

Abstract
Michigan has the opportunity to develop markets for specialty crops by capitalizing on the growing consumer trend of appreciating regional wine and food travel experiences. According to the Travel Industry Association (TIA), culinary tourism is a growing travel trend. Many other states and regions of the world are actively developing and promoting Culinary Tourism.

Research and policy development activities in the Michigan Department of Agriculture in recent years have indicated that wine and food tourism can make greater contributions to the economy and provide opportunities for producers of many specialty crops. (Agricultural Tourism Commission - 2007 and Food Policy Council – 2006). To accomplish this goal, efforts must be coordinated to develop promotional messages and trip planning tools for consumers, and engage more Michigan restaurants in supporting local specialty crop producers.

This funding proposal will facilitate a partnership among key specialty crop producer groups and members of the hospitality and tourism industry to form a Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance to develop these opportunities. The Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council is an appropriate leader of these efforts, due to the strong regional identity of wine, existing relationships with many key partners and a strong reputation for innovative partnerships in market development. Furthering the development of Culinary Tourism in Michigan is identified as a priority, in the Council’s strategic plan.

Specialty Crops impacted by this project:

- Wine Grapes
- Cranberry
- Herbs and Spices and others
- Apples
- Peach
- Lettuce and other greens
- Blueberry
- Asparagus
- Honey
- Cherry
- Pumpkin
- Maple Syrup
Specialty Crops impacted by this project cont’d:
The wine grape industry of Michigan has taken leadership on this project and provided important match funds. The wine grape industry in Michigan has a farm gate value of $2 million (2008) and is growing at a rate of 3 – 4% per year. There are now 65 wineries in Michigan, up from 20 just 13 years ago. The Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council feels that there are valuable synergies in engaging other specialty crop producer groups to join in these activities, where appropriate. We are confident that many positive outcomes will arise from the broader scope of the project. The wine industry in Michigan is estimated to contribute over $300 million to Michigan’s economy. The full impacts of this project will be realized over many years and will be difficult to quantify, however, there will be measurable outcomes achieved for the project (outlined below). The economic impact of this project on the wine industry is estimated to be $500,000 annually by 2012. Other comparable positive impacts will be achieved by other specialty crops that are in a position to take full advantage of the proposed market development opportunities.

Benefit Statement:
The project will benefit specialty crop producers by assisting them in finding new markets for their products within the Michigan restaurant community. By publicizing the Culinary Tourism offerings in Michigan, more restaurants will be encouraged to devote more attention to featuring local foods and wine on their menus, to achieve greater consumer popularity and positive media attention. These activities will enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops by developing new markets and expanding existing ones.

Project Purpose and Description:
The plan of work identified in this proposal will increase the sales volume and profitability of the Michigan specialty crops listed above. We will promote Michigan as a travel destination for culinary experiences and strengthen the menu offerings of Michigan products at Michigan restaurants. This will be accomplished by forming a project steering committee, the Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance. The Alliance will meet regularly to share success stories, pool information and disseminate promotional message to consumers and educational messages to members of the hospitality and tourism industries.

The need for such an Alliance, arises from the fact that there is a lack of coordination among the many successful entrepreneurs operating in the Culinary Tourism arena in Michigan. Wineries, farm markets, restaurants that specialize in local cuisine, cider mills, maple syrup producers, etc. These provide excellent models for building on success across the Culinary Tourism sector. Larger and co-operative enterprises in Michigan also can play a role in developing Michigan’s offerings in this area, such as The Henry Ford, the Select Michigan program, Michigan wine trails, Convention and Visitors Bureaus, the Slow Food Movement, Culinary and Hospitality Schools and many agriculturally related festivals and events. Co-ordination of the promotion and educational messages of these key partners is a gap in Michigan’s economic development plan in the agriculture and tourism sectors. The Michigan Grape and Wine
Industry Council proposes to provide leadership to fill this gap, due to our existing relationships with Culinary Tourism partners. The project's goal will be to provide assistance to these existing examples of Culinary Tourism in Michigan, to make them even more economically successful. This activity was identified as a Council priority in the Council's Strategic Plan, developed in 2007 – 2008. The Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council has a strong history of successful collaboration in the agriculture and tourism industries, providing experience that will assure success of the project. The Council’s structure, activities and accomplishments can be viewed by visiting the website www.michiganwines.com and viewing reports listed under Council Business. The Council also has important connections to other states with similar successful programs. New York’s Grape and Wine Foundation has created a successful NY Wines and Dines program (2003 – 2009) that can serve as a model for this project.

Goals and Objectives:
1. Increase sales and profitability for Michigan specialty crop producers through increased menu offerings of local products at Michigan restaurants. This goal will be accomplished by outreach to the restaurant industry and partnership with Michigan food and wine vendors to engage in specific promotions to increase their sales with specific restaurants.
2. Promote Michigan as a destination for Culinary travel experiences (where "travel" is defined as a trip more than 50 miles from home) This goal will be accomplished by developing communications materials to capture the attention of the consumer and the media, through websites, news releases, media tours and consumer events.

Project Work Plan

Activity 1. Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance
Organize an informal Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance of those interested in developing Michigan as a place for world-class culinary experiences. The Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council would be the lead agency in the Alliance with participation from the Michigan Restaurant Association and numerous allied food and beverage and tourism groups. The group would meet at one day-long strategic planning meeting every 12 months, plus three conference calls per year.

A Michigan Chapter of the International Culinary Tourism Association (ICTA http://www.culinarytourism.org/ ) will be formed to assist the Alliance in bringing together Michigan food and beverage purveyors (producers, restaurants, and culinary event organizers) to promote Michigan as a premiere destination for “foodies”. By forming a chapter of the organization, Michigan will receive over $5,000 in in-kind supplementary membership benefits over two years. The ICTA was established in 2002 to support one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Current Board members of Oregon-based ICTA represent several regions of North America and Europe. The recent growth of food shows on television travel channels and travel shows on television food channels - not just in the US but around the world is evidence of this growing trend. More people than ever now care about the quality of the food they eat - not just at
Outcomes:
A minimum of ten organizations representing several specialty crops, the restaurant and tourism industries will contribute their time voluntarily to participation in the Alliance. Six meetings will be held during the grant period. Minutes of the meetings will be recorded and a detailed work plan developed. The Alliance members will gain a better understanding of market development for Michigan products to the restaurant industry and tools to improve their sales efforts. We will increase the number of organizations and businesses who are on the database of the International Culinary Tourism Association from 65 to 150 by December 31, 2010.

Activity 2. Staff Support

The Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council will contract with a part-time Promotion Agent or Communication Specialist for 14 months to create itineraries around the theme of Culinary Tourism, write media stories and newsletter articles about the rewarding experiences available in Michigan with Michigan food and beverages. This person will expand upon the “Cook’s Tours” developed by the Michigan Department of Agriculture to develop itineraries within geographic regions of Michigan that can be promoted on tourism and agriculture related websites. Administrative support to the Alliance (minutes, filing etc.) will be responsibilities of this person. (Goals 1 and 2)

Outcomes:
Increased awareness and interest in the culinary and agri-tourism opportunities in Michigan. New pages of web content related to culinary and agri-tourism on partner websites. Obtain a total of 12 direct media stories as a result of this activity. Records of Alliance meetings will be maintained.

Activity 3. Trade Events with Key Restaurant Decision Makers

The project team will organize two events in Southern Michigan to promote Michigan wine and food to fine dining owners, buyer and sommeliers to showcase the quality and diversity of Michigan specialty crop based foods and beverages. This event builds on the success of the Northern Michigan Wine Summit (fourth year in 2009), which has been effective in promoting Michigan wines to the Northwest Michigan restaurant community. An experienced contractor in the restaurant industry will be retained to coordinate these events (proposal available on file). The budget will provide base participation for reduced booth fees for supplier participants. (Goal 1)

Outcomes:
Increase in the number of restaurants in Michigan that offer more than four Michigan wines on their wine lists (currently 40, goal to reach 100). Increase in sales of Michigan food and wine producers to individual restaurants during the grant period (participating companies will be asked to provide baseline data and report at the end of the grant
period). Suppliers will be required to report sales information to specific accounts during the project to document impacts of these promotions.

**Activity 4. Michigan Restaurant Association Trade Show**

Promote Culinary Tourism as a theme for the Michigan Restaurant Association Trade Show in October 2010, using grant funds to bring speakers to the educational program to speak to restaurant attendees about the economic opportunities in Culinary Tourism. We will also address the issue of the difficulty that restaurants may have in sourcing local specialty crop products through communication at the trade show and in Michigan Restaurant Association newsletters (Goal 1)

**Outcomes:**
Increase awareness among the restaurant industry regarding the economic opportunities for increased sales by promoting Michigan foods and beverages. This activity will also assist in supporting the outcomes of Activity #3 - increasing the number of restaurants in Michigan that offer more than four Michigan wines on their wine lists (currently 40, goal to reach 100). Increase in sales of Michigan food and wine producers to individual restaurants during the grant period (participating companies will be asked to provide baseline data and report at the end of the grant period).

**Activity 5. Other Trade and Consumer Shows**

Participate in key trade and consumer shows that will support the goals and objectives of the project. The budget will provide booth space and for high impact displays at the Michigan Restaurant Association Show (Novi - October - 2010), Grand Rapids Food and Wine Festival (November - 2010), and Schoolcraft College Culinary Extravaganza (Livonia – September 2010). These shows have been selected from a large number of annual events, due to the strong networking connections provided with restaurant owners and restaurant wine buyers as well as consumers. (Goals 1 and 2)

**Outcomes:**
30 Michigan company booths and /or Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance booth will be in place at up to 3 shows during the grant period. Professional display materials will be created to support the communication messages of the specialty crops of Michigan and their availability through

**Next Steps:**
We expect to continue this work in 2011 and 2012 with additional proposals submitted to the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. Potential future activities will be determined by the Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance members and may include:

- Media Tours for Food and Wine Travel Writers
- Regional outreach meetings with Chamber of Commerce restaurant members
- Recipe development for food service
- Educational activities with culinary and hospitality students
Subsidized attendance by Alliance members to the International Culinary Tourism Alliance annual conference

One of the goals of the Alliance will be to become self-supporting and sustainable without federal funding. It is expected that the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council and other members of the Michigan Culinary Tourism Alliance will continue to support the project financially, once the start-up activities are in place in the first few years.