

# California AgVentures



## Impossible Acres

Creativity Most Important Ingredient for Successful Agritourism Enterprises

A farmer or rancher wishing to start an agritourism or nature tourism enterprise must take many important variables into account: geographic locale, crops, agricultural production techniques, people skills, and marketing strategies. Still, there is no simple recipe for a successful agritourism enterprise. Thus creativity is one of the most important ingredients to have. One must creatively assess all the variables and combine them with the farm's unique qualities and characteristics to create an attractive and marketable agritourism package.

For seven years, Katie and Clyde Kelly have put their creative energies into *Impossible Acres*, a farm on the outskirts of Davis, California, that successfully integrates education, you-pick, and recreational activities. In this profile, they share some of their strategies.

### Customer Orientation & Niche Development

Agritourism requires a keen focus on customer relations. About 12,000 people visited *Impossible Acres* last October—twice as many as visit the farm during the rest of the year. According to Katie, farmers hoping to start an agritourism operation must understand what they're undertak-

ing in terms of customer service and decide whether or not they have the requisite resources and people skills. "It takes a certain make-up, a mentality, to do



Children at *Impossible Acres*' farm animal petting zoo.  
Photo: Desmond Jolly

it. Because you have to be really patient and you have to like people," says Katie. "You have to realize that you need the people and the crop and be able to integrate the two."

### Introducing Kids to Agriculture

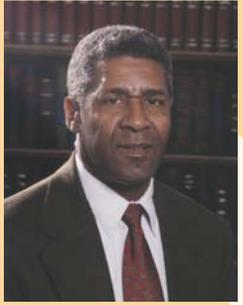
Farmers' viability depends on urban appreciation for agriculture, something the Kellys promote through *Impossible Acres*. One way to establish the connection early in life is by exposing children to agriculture through school programs. The Kellys recognized this opportunity and have built a strong school-based program. "People in schools want to teach agriculture but they don't have a way to get to a farm that is really child-friendly and

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Davis, California

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### Editor's Message

This is the inaugural issue of **California AgVentures**—a magazine published by the **University of California Small Farm Center** to contribute to the development of California's agritourism, nature, and rural tourism industry. You are receiving this complimentary copy of *California AgVentures* because you are either an operator of an ag- or nature tourism venture or a stakeholder related to the development of agriculture and nature tourism.

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## California AgVentures

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### Impossible Acres (continued from page 1)

education-friendly," says Katie. The Kellys' current program invites first and second grade classes to the pumpkin patch in the fall. Activities were designed in consultation with a preschool teacher to ensure a kid-friendly environment. According to Katie, they arranged the farm so that "there's not a lot of things that kids can't do—no big piles of pumpkins they're not allowed to climb on; no animals they can't touch. People aren't going to yell at you all the time, telling you what to do."

Functional organization also minimizes hazards and makes the experience more relaxing and enjoyable for everyone. Katie gathers everyone together when they arrive and reviews the rules, then breaks out smaller groups for individual activities. Each small group spends about fifteen minutes at each stop—the hay bale maze, animal petting area, pumpkin patch, and hay ride—and Katie rings an antique dinner triangle to signal that it's time to move to the next activity. School groups must make advance reservations and provide one parent for every four students, creating a safe level of supervision for young children.

Sue Darst has brought two second grade classes to the farm to pick Halloween pumpkins. A trip to *Impossible Acres* offers her students both a fun day and educational benefits. Life cycles are an important part of her students' curriculum. They have a school garden where they grow vegetables, including pumpkins, watching them develop from seeds to

mature fruit. The opportunity for her students to spend the day at *Impossible Acres* continues "that study and of course adds a little bit of fun too. They love to come to the pumpkin patch, be outside, see the baby animals, and so forth." They



Photo: Desmond Jolly

also get a chance to see where some of their food comes from. It is apparent that students feel comfortable at *Impossible Acres*. "It works well and the teachers appreciate it," says Katie. At the end of the day, the kids want to come back, and their teachers and parents are willing to bring them back.

### Expanding the Curriculum

Since the pumpkin patch appeals only to very young children, the Kellys plan to enhance the educational capabilities of *Impossible Acres* by creating fun, educational curricula for older students. For example, more mature students will experience all the steps involved in raising a tomato by planting seeds, transplanting seedlings, weeding, watering, and harvesting—all in one visit. This compact educational session also makes it affordable for schools that are invariably restricted by tight budgets and schedules.

*Impossible Acres'* proximity to Davis puts the farm in an excellent position to offer nearby students a look at farm operations. Students made up about a third of the Kellys' visitors in October and that number will undoubtedly expand as new programs are developed. All of the Kellys' creative efforts help them capitalize on this business opportunity, which in turn increases their profits and builds a strong, steady customer base.

## Interpreting Customer Needs

The ability to interpret customer needs is fundamental to the success of an agritourism enterprise. According to Katie, autumn is a time when urban dwellers want to be out in the country: “It’s like this overwhelming urge. They have to be on a farm in October. I don’t know why. It wasn’t like that when I was growing up. But I think it’s part of being urbanized and part of thinking ‘fall’ and thinking this is the time to harvest. So it’s really a big thing. If you can do things in October, you’re a step ahead of the game, because October is the month when everybody wants to get out and do stuff on the farm.”

Last summer the Kellys were so busy constructing a new barn that they did not have time to plant pumpkins for Halloween. To solve the problem, they bought an entire pumpkin harvest from a Woodland farmer. “People in town don’t understand things like you had a crop failure so they can’t come out to the pumpkin patch this year,” says Katie. “You don’t ever do that. They’ve got their routine and they want their routine to happen. So if you have a crop failure, you buy your pumpkins or else they’ll go somewhere else and get out of the habit of coming to you. You want to have a consistent supply even if you can’t grow it. That’s a really big thing in marketing that farmers don’t understand. When you’re farming, if it’s not worth your while to pick the crop, you don’t pick it. But if you’re marketing and you’ve got a consistent customer base and they want to see consistency in you, then

you do it, no matter what it costs you. Just for consistency’s sake.”

Consistency is important because enterprises rely primarily on repeat customers. *Impossible Acres* enjoys annual visits from local residents who pick berries in summer and pumpkins in the fall. Some have visited the farm every year it has been in business. The Kellys recognize that retaining existing customers is as important as attracting new ones.

## Marketing Techniques

The Kellys’ most recent marketing investment is their website, [www.impossibleacres.com](http://www.impossibleacres.com). According to Clyde, the Kellys were skeptical about the value of an internet presence at first; they did not expect *Impossible Acres*’ appeal to extend beyond the local community. But they were pleasantly surprised by the number of people who visited the farm

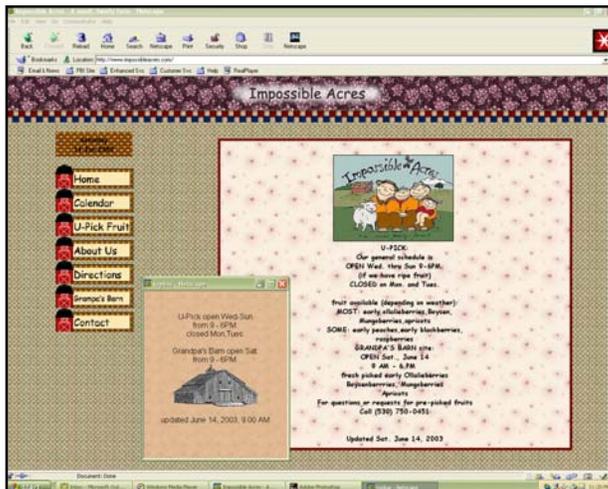
thanks to the site. This year’s visitors came from a much wider geographic area, including a large increase in traffic from the Bay Area. A family from Reno, Nevada, for example, made the three-hour drive to *Impossible Acres* a family outing.

In addition to introducing an operation to new customers, websites offer customers important information quickly and free owners from some of the burden of telephone calls. “When people call you up, you want to be able to refer them to something they can look at and get an idea of what you’re all about,” says Katie. *Impossible Acres*’ website answers the many questions potential customers may have: how to get to the farm, information



Raising the new barn at *Impossible Acres*—Clyde Kelly at left.

Photo: Desmond Jolly



Katie Kelly at *Impossible Acres*.

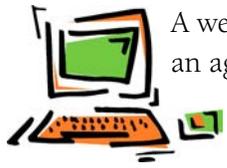
Photo: Desmond Jolly

Editor's Message (continued)

California AgVentures is the newest addition to a growing array of methods the UC Small Farm Center has employed to foster development of California's agritourism and nature tourism sector. Our program thrust in this area began in 1997 with seed money from **USDA's Fund for Rural America**. While that initial grant has long been depleted, the Small Farm Center continues to nourish the growth of agritourism and nature tourism in California through a variety of approaches.

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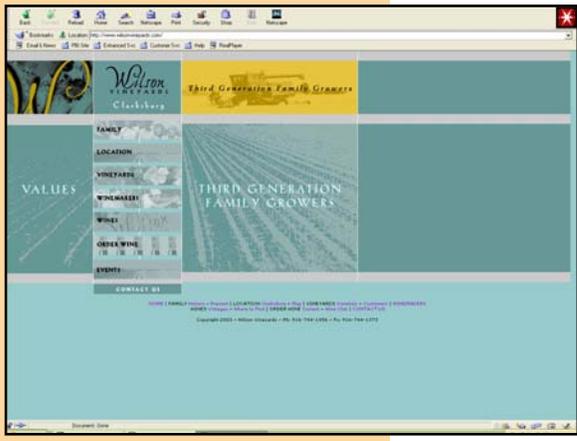
## Websites Key to Agritourism Marketing



A website is key to marketing an agritourism or nature tourism enterprise successfully. Times have changed. For consumers seeking information on agritourism events and operations, a simple Internet search yields much more information than a newspaper and is easier than making phone calls.

### Customer Convenience

The Internet is the most convenient way for people with access to find information on agritourism and nature tourism. Every day more people look to the Internet for weekend activity and trip ideas. Potential customers look for activity ideas on their computers during their lunch hour at work or use home computers after work, when dinner is over and kids are in bed. In today's fast-paced world, many people do not have time to call around and wait for calls back to plan a visit to a farm or other destination. For consumers, convenience is key. Your website makes information on your agritourism business available 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world.



"Wilson Vineyards' website is becoming more and more useful. People in general are becoming more and more used to looking on the web."

— Sandra Wilson  
Wilson Vineyards

Because your web page can be accessed from anywhere in the world, the geographic range of visitors to your farm, and consum-

ers of your product, is sure to expand. You may not get visitors from distant continents right away, but more customers from regional cities, neighboring counties, and states will come to your farm or ranch.

### Time Savings

A website can also make your daily work by answering simple but time-consuming questions from customers about driving

directions, available products, etc. This allows you to focus on other important aspects of your agritourism business. Also, by answering questions with email, you are not constrained by business hours of operation and can respond to email late at night or early in the morning.

Construction of a website is fairly inexpensive. Agritourism and nature tourism operators can hire a web page designer for a one-time fee. After the initial expense of purchasing the domain name (i.e., *www.yourfarmname.com*) and building the site, it is permanently online. Changes and updates to pages can be made by your web designer on an ad-hoc basis. Websites can also be designed and built to allow you to update certain information yourself without much technical computer knowledge.

### Designing a Web Page

When you first meet with your web page designer, be ready to provide all the information you can on your agritourism or nature tourism enterprise. You want to acquaint the designer with your business

"We've been surprised at the amount of response we've gotten from the website from farther afield than Davis. From Sacramento, from up in Reno, San Francisco."

— Katie Kelly, owner  
Impossible Acres

and the essence of what you are trying to communicate on your web page. Bring pamphlets, brochures, article clippings, your business logo, and anything else that

will help the designer understand your business.

### Site Content

Have an idea of what you want to communicate through the site. Your web page designer will know how to organize information efficiently so it is easy for customers to access and can offer ideas on

what you should include. Basic elements are contact information, driving directions, farm activities, a brief description of your farm and who you are, your history, etc. If you run a you-pick business, a calendar specifying when your crops will be ready to harvest is extremely helpful to customers. A link to a website that provides local weather conditions is also helpful.

If you sell value-added products, be sure and feature them, accompanied by pictures, on your website. Sites can be designed to sell value-added products online (thereby reducing the need for marketing intermediaries) and can be linked with

accounting software to track sales information, keep inventory, maintain a contact/ mailing list, etc.

Above all, keep it simple. Make sure the information is organized, straightforward, and not overwhelming with unnecessary information. A well-designed web page integrates farm branding, basic information, communications, and marketing efforts in a succinct, manageable manner.

### Graphics

To enhance presentation of your site, be sure to have some color—if you don't have a digital camera, regular photographs can be digitally scanned or your web page designer can visit your farm and take digital photos.

Once the site is built, you can initiate links with other agritourism enterprises and organizations that support agritourism and nature tourism, such as state and county tourism associations, local county websites, local newspapers, etc. Linking is mutually beneficial: links to

your site will be available on more web pages, so more people will find your website, and sites that list your farm will have more useful information to offer customers. For example, if you link with the [UC Small Farm Center's California Agri-Tourism Database, www.calagtour.org](http://www.calagtour.org), anyone who accesses that database will be able to link to your website directly. By linking with other farms in your geographic area or in your industry, you help

create a collective sense of interdependence between and among other farmers and ranchers.

### Marketing the Site

Market the site wherever you can. Put it on your business card and on any brochures

and other communication materials you may have. Put it on your product labels. Also, make sure reporters and other media representatives who visit the farm know about your site and highlight it in their stories if possible.

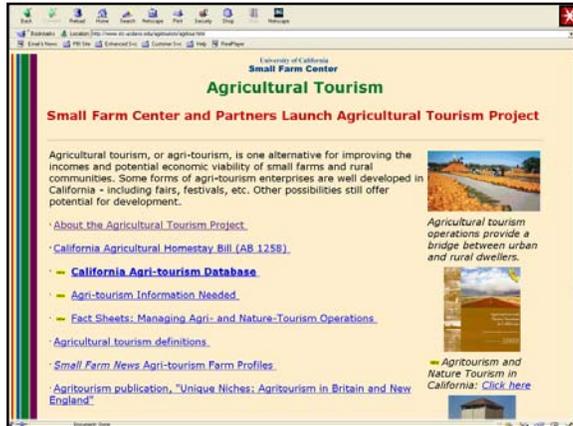
These days, a website is a must for any business, but it is especially important for those running agritourism and nature tourism enterprises. In addition to expanding your clientele and their geographic range, a website will save you valuable time so you can devote more energy to other important aspects of your business. ■

Isabella Kenfield, SFP  
Desmond Jolly, Director, SFC



For examples of agritourism web pages, take a look at:

- [www.impossibleacres.com](http://www.impossibleacres.com)
- [www.wilsonvineyards.com](http://www.wilsonvineyards.com)
- [www.mcevoyranch.com](http://www.mcevoyranch.com)



For more examples, log on to the Small Farm Programs' [California Agritourism Database](http://www.calagtour.org) at:  
■ [www.sfc.ucdavis.edu](http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu).

Editor's Message (continued)

In 1998, I founded the UC DANR Statewide Agritourism and Nature Tourism Workgroup, which, along with the Small Farm Center, has developed manuals for agritourism and nature tourism startups and management—*A Primer for Agritourism and Nature Tourism Startups and Management, Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California—A How To Manual for Farmers and Ranchers.*

The workgroup and the Small Farm Center have cosponsored a number of short courses and workshops. Members of the workgroup and the Small Farm Center have also carried out research and published the results in various outlets.

In 2000, as then chair of the workgroup, I attended the **First World Forum on Agricultural and Rural Tourism**, as well as a two-week immersion summer institute in Perugia, Italy, that included visits to a variety of *agriturismos* in Umbria. I became a founding member of **The International Association of Experts in Agricultural and Rural Tourism**, a worldwide association of professionals in the field.

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Impossible Acres (continued from page 3)

on special events, and an engaging crop calendar that details when the farm's fruits, berries, and vegetables are ready to harvest. This informative website makes it easy for customers to access information, invites urban shoppers who frequently use the internet, and lets the Kellys spend more time on their operation.

The Kellys advertise in local papers as needed. If, for example, hot weather ripens fruit very quickly, they advertise special deals on the produce to encourage buyers. Local media venues are contacted for special events. When the Kellys' constructed "Grandpa's Barn," they invited the public to join in the barn raising. The event helped build community relations, provide exposure for the operation, and increase the urban-rural interface the Kellys are building. They advertised the barn raising in the local paper via a press release. "Now the reporters know us," says Katie. "We can call them up and say here's a press release and they print it up."

Liability

Liability is a major concern for any agritourism enterprise. Definitive steps must be taken to limit liability. *Impossible Acres* is covered under an umbrella policy with CalFarm insurance that Katie feels is reasonably priced at about \$2,000 a year. To reduce the price of their liability insurance, the Kellys take extra precautions. For example, people do not climb ladders to pick fruit. The Kellys planted dwarf trees instead to make picking easy. All wires are wrapped with colored tape to increase their visibility, and instructions and warnings are clearly posted.

For Katie, choosing between conventional and organic farming techniques comes

down to lowering liability risk. The Kelly operation combines conventional and organic methods dictated by customer safety. While they actively work to conserve resources and care for their land, they also realize that conventional farming methods are sometimes a necessity. "The main thing that we're worried about is people being able to walk in the field and be safe with whatever they find. We actually panic

at the discovery of a nightshade bush because its little berries look yummy. And a black widow is a horror scene. So if you find black widows, you've got to get rid of them. If we seem to have an infestation in a certain area, we're gonna spray and get those things out. We're not going to leave them and try to do some soft organic thing with them. We measure the risks."

Because it's a farm, tense situations inevitably arise, and when they happen, the best approach is kindness and decency. Last year, for example, a kitten bit a visitor. "They were pulling the cat and the cat was tired and it bit them," recalls Katie. "The lady was afraid that the cat might have a disease. The issue then becomes not does the cat have a disease, because we know that they're fine, but how do we deal with her concern? Gener-

Linking an agritourism website to other related sites is important in promoting business. *Impossible Acres* is linked to the UC Small Farm Center's California Agritourism Database, [www.calagtour.org](http://www.calagtour.org). The center aggressively markets the database on television, in print, and through advertising and publicity, providing free marketing for *Impossible Acres* and the other operations listed there.

Photo: Desmond Jolly



ally, they (customers) just want to know that if they get hurt in some way you're going to take care of it. That you're concerned. If someone gets hurt, just be as nice as you can and figure the person is more important than whatever they got hurt on. So you just deal with the person."

### Partnership

It takes a strong working relationship to harness the creative potential of an agritourism business. The Kellys have developed a working relationship that utilizes Katie and Clyde's individual skills. "I come up with most of the ideas and my husband implements them," says Katie. "It works really well for us. It's a tricky thing when you work with your husband in a business way, learning each other's strengths and weaknesses. And it's taken us awhile to learn it, but it's really good. He's very consistent, very reliable. And I tend to be more flighty. I'll go gung-ho on a project for a month and then I'll tend to drop it and he'll keep it up. He's very good with people, consistently calling back and answering phone calls. He's got the computer skills, the carpentry skills, and the tractor skills. I do the animals, the pesticides that we use, figuring out what crops to grow. Both of us do irrigation. It's kind of deciding who's good at what."

Another important partner in *Impossible Acres* is Katie's dad, John DeVincenzo, who owns a you-pick business in San Luis Obispo. According to Katie, many of the business ideas at *Impossible Acres* came from her father. He provides consultation about what does and does not work and how to implement ideas. "It's good to have [her dad's agritourism business]. They're about ten years ahead of us as far as their development as an agritourism attraction. So we can kind of see where we're headed and see if we want to go directly there or to a little bit different place. For people wanting to get started in agritourism, having a farm they can

pattern after or somebody that they can use as a mentor is really, really helpful. There are so many things you have to learn."

### Future Plans

The Kellys constantly identify new ways to enhance their business. They capitalized on the farm's proximity to a busy intersection by building a large barn near the thoroughfare, which has attracted more customers. Next they plan to open a produce stand at the corner, complete with a walk-in cooler, where they will sell fruit grown at *Impossible Acres* for customers who want fresh produce but don't want to pick it themselves. The stand will also offer produce from other local farmers who lack the resources necessary to direct market/sell, creating an affordable local venue for their products.

These expansions of *Impossible Acres'* activities extend the Kellys' busy season. While the primary summer activity is the you-pick operation of berries and other fruit, fall is devoted to the pumpkin patch, hay rides, and petting zoo for students. Soon, spring will be busy with the produce stand and more educational activities. Different activities for each season help create a steady customer base and reliable stream of income.

By harnessing their creativity while capitalizing on the unique attributes of their farm, Katie and Clyde have developed *Impossible Acres* into a successful agritourism enterprise. They combine customer orientation, niche development, risk management, and a strong partnership in their agritourism operation. ■

Desmond Jolly, Director, and  
Isabella Kenfield, Research Assistant, SFC



California Women in  
Agriculture Exhibit at  
*Impossible Acres*.

Photo: Desmond Jolly

### Editor's Message (continued)

**California AgVentures** will help address growing needs for increased communication, information dissemination, education, and coordination among stakeholders. **California AgVentures** will include profiles of operations and operators, management information, research results, news updates, and human interest features. This first issue includes a profile of **Impossible Acres** and its operators, Clyde and Katie Kelly, as well as a discussion of websites as a tool for information dissemination and marketing.

Welcome to  
**California AgVentures!**

Desmond Jolly  
Editor



California AgVentures invites your ideas for topics for future issues of this magazine. To contact the Small Farm Center, call 530.752.8136 or send email to [sfcenter@ucdavis.edu](mailto:sfcenter@ucdavis.edu)



# California AgVentures

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