

Three-Year Culinary Tourism
Strategy 2013-2016

Alberta Yum!



Content

INTRODUCTION	04
SUPPORTING INDUSTRY AND CREATING OPPORTUNITIES	05
GOALS, STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS	06
GOAL ONE	10
GOAL TWO	13
GOAL THREE	15
GOAL FOUR	16
STRATEGY PRIORITIES	18



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Introduction

Culinary tourism is fundamentally about story telling -- of conveying a "taste of place" that helps a visitor immerse him or herself in a sensory experience that reflects Alberta in all its wonders. Like many other visitor experiences, culinary tourism experiences aim to be unique and memorable, using food and drink to delight the visitor's senses and make their visit a special one. This makes culinary tourism a compelling part of the overall tourism world.

Food is universal; everyone needs to eat. As such, culinary tourism experiences can occur just about anywhere: on farms, in restaurants, on crowded streets, or at a sport or cultural event.

Culinary tourism enables visitors and consumers to:

- support local farmers, chefs and restaurants
- obtain fresh and wholesome food
- learn more about how food is grown
- experience local lifestyles.

Importantly, culinary tourism also has substantial economic potential. Up to one-third of tourist spending is on food. One quarter of leisure travellers say that food is vital when they are choosing a destination.

Studies also indicate there is growing interest among tourists in actively seeking out unique food and dining as a way of having a more authentic cultural experience in the place they are visiting. This can translate into substantial tourism-related economic benefits for Albertans, including more tourism-related employment.

Against this backdrop, Alberta has substantial opportunities to grow and enhance culinary tourism in our province. Agriculture is a key industry in the province, with producers growing and raising a range of products. Beef and grains are perhaps the most notorious products, but our province also produces other livestock, honey, and many fruits and vegetables.

Products that help tell the story through taste of Alberta life and Alberta history (e.g., bison, saskatoons) are available and abundant. Alberta's agricultural lands are vast, providing an important input for culinary tourism experiences: we are experts at growing lots of foods.

Alberta is one of the best places to be a restaurateur. Alberta restaurants have the highest average unit volume, at \$798,371 per unit in 2012. This is 28 percent more than the national average. Alberta restaurants also experienced a 7.5 percent annual increase in sales, the highest in the country.

The province is also a foundry of talented chefs. Alberta chefs have achieved national recognition in the county, including accolades from the Chef Federation. Notably, four Albertans competed in season three of the national television program, Top Chef Canada.

With these incredible assets, there are significant opportunities to enhance culinary tourism in our province by:

- Creating unique, compelling, emotional and authentic culinary experiences that focus on the needs of travellers
- Bringing the Alberta experience to life for travellers through food and drink
- Aligning Alberta's culinary tourism players with the broader tourism industry to foster effective development and marketing of culinary tourism products
- Working with public and private sector partners to improve industry performance and enhance Alberta's position as a leading tourism destination
- Investing in culinary tourism products and experiences that aim to increase visitor numbers, visitor expenditures and tourism employment in Alberta.

The Alberta Culinary Tourism Alliance (ACTA) was established to help leverage those assets and realize those opportunities.

As a relatively new organization, ACTA recognizes the need for its early efforts to be focused, meaningful and timely. This three-year strategy and action plan is designed to bring direction to ACTA's efforts. The strategy has been informed by conversations with key stakeholders in Alberta's culinary tourism world, with a view to the assets it has and the strategic opportunities that exist to make a meaningful impact in the industry. The following strategy was informed by a series of stakeholder-driven facilitation.¹



1 UNWTO, 2012
US Travel Association
UNWTO, 2012
CFRA, 2012
CFRA, 2012

Supporting Industry
and Creating
Opportunities

Our Mission

ACTA's mission is to support and nurture the enhancement of culinary tourism in Alberta so that Alberta's culinary assets are known, savoured and grown through visitor experiences.

Our Vision

ACTA works to achieve a vision in which Alberta offers a wide range of high-quality culinary tourism experiences that appeal to locals and is regarded internationally as a premier visitor destination for culinary tourism experiences.

Our Board

ACTA is a non-profit organization governed by a Board of Directors. The Board has diverse membership from across Alberta's culinary tourism world, including producers, restaurateurs and hoteliers, and representatives of tourism organizations.

2013-2014

Board of Directors

Don House, Chair
Integrated Digital Media Group

Kevin Kisilevich
Go East of Edmonton Regional Tourism
Organization

Fraser Abbott
Hotel Arts Group

Lori Schmaltz , Treasurer
Meyer Norris Penny

Valerie Lugonja
Writer, Educator, Slow Food Advocate, Eat
Alberta

John Jackson
CHARCUT Roast House

Caralyn MacDonald
Downtown Calgary Business Association

Cindy Amos
Canadian Badlands Tourism

Who We Work to Support

The world of culinary tourism in Alberta includes a diverse set of individuals and organizations. In many ways this set defies definition, since culinary tourism experiences can be many things to many people. One approach is to consider the “culinary tourism industry” broadly -- including all those involved in bringing together and executing culinary tourism experiences - from the farm to the visitor’s fork.

While by no means an exhaustive list, this includes:

- agricultural producers and associations
- farmers’ markets and associations
- restaurateurs
- chefs
- tour operators
- tourism marketing organizations (such as Travel Alberta and local destination marketing organizations)
- members of the hospitality industry
- economic development organizations
- culinary-related organizations (such as Slow Food organizations)
- cultural, sport and festival organizations
- governments
- others who may be involved in conceiving, organizing, promoting and executing culinary tourism experiences.

The Role We Play

ACTA serves first and foremost as an industry association. ACTA works to build capacity across Alberta’s broad and diverse “culinary tourism industry”.

The focus of ACTA’s work changes over time, in response to:

- the current state of culinary tourism in Alberta
- the changing needs of members of Alberta’s culinary tourism industry
- the opportunities that exist to enhance Alberta’s culinary tourism industry.

While its work focus and specific initiatives adapt from year to year, ACTA consistently fulfills three major roles for Alberta’s culinary tourism industry:

- **Educator**
ACTA provides information and resources that can help those in Alberta’s culinary tourism industry enhance their businesses, their skills and the experiences they offer visitors

- **Connector**
ACTA brings together people and organizations from across Alberta's culinary tourism industry and beyond, to foster relationships, partnerships and the development of new culinary tourism experiences.
- **Communicator**
ACTA relays great stories that keep people informed about and showcase the incredible talent and culinary tourism experiences that can be found in Alberta.

ACTA is guided by a three-year Strategy and Action Plan, which spells out the organization's major goals, and the strategic directions and specific actions that ACTA will take towards achieving those goals.

The Strategy and Action Plan has been informed by input from ACTA Board members, members of the culinary tourism industry, and other key stakeholders. Their input has provided valuable insight on the state of Alberta's culinary tourism industry, its current assets and possibilities, and the ways in which it can be strengthened.

The goals expressed in the Strategy and Action Plan are aspirational. It is not expected or intended that a goal will be entirely achieved within the three-year period, but rather, that substantial progress will be made in furtherance of the goal. ACTA reports on this progress and its key activities in its Annual Report. ACTA's Annual Report serves as a key mechanism for accountability to itself, its membership, its funders and the wider culinary tourism industry.

Our Strategy and Accountability

Goals, Strategies and Actions

Goal One

Alberta's culinary tourism industry has the capacity to deliver an innovative range of market-ready culinary tourism experiences.

For Alberta to be credibly regarded as a premier visitor destination for culinary tourism experiences, our province must have a stable of culinary tourism products that are "market-ready".

"Market-ready" means that the product is of a sufficient calibre - in terms of structure, quality, and service level - to be credibly marketed to its target audience(s). Generally, a visitor who partakes in a "market-ready" culinary tourism product will have an experience that is equivalent to or better than what they expected, based on what was promoted to them.

It is important to enhance the capacity of industry members to develop and deliver different kinds of "market-ready" culinary tourism experiences. This requires action on several fronts, because members of the industry have different levels of knowledge about how they can fit in the continuum of culinary tourism.

For example, while some farmers may be experts in growing certain products, they may have low levels of knowledge about how to host farm visits or how to work with local restaurateurs. Likewise, while chefs know how cook and host guests in a restaurant setting, they may lack all of the knowledge they require to host a farm-to-table or other signature event.

Strategy 1.1

Support industry members with knowledge resources to help them deliver culinary tourism experiences.

Many members of the culinary tourism industry have culinary tourism experience concepts at different stages of development. Industry members also have different levels of knowledge about to turn these concepts into "market-ready" products and experiences. Industry members would benefit from having a place they can turn to easily access knowledge resources to help them turn their concepts into realities.

To this end, ACTA will:

- Engage the ACTA Advisory Committee and other industry members to identify subject areas where members would find knowledge resources helpful (e.g., event planning, media relations, engaging tour operators, etc.)
- Engage the ACTA Advisory Committee and other industry members to identify what types of knowledge resources would be most useful and practical for industry members (e.g., webinars, how-to guides, checklists, etc.)
- Undertake environmental scanning to identify existing knowledge resources and tools that can be adapted for use in Alberta
- Conduct environmental scanning to aggregate existing market research information regarding culinary tourism
- Conduct environmental scanning to gather information about traveller interests and preferences
- Synthesize available information to develop useful knowledge resources for members of Alberta's culinary tourism industry
- Provide the knowledge resources through a "knowledge hub" on the ACTA website that is accessible to industry members.

Strategy 1.2

Facilitate the delivery of professional development opportunities to members of the culinary tourism industry.

Ongoing professional development is important for ensuring Alberta's culinary tourism industry has the capacity to develop and deliver new and innovative culinary tourism experiences. This is particularly (though not exclusively) the case when it comes to chefs and restaurateurs.

While they are very skilled, it is worthwhile for these individuals to keep abreast of new and emerging trends in the culinary world. Having access to professional development opportunities will enable these individuals to develop new skills and hone their existing skills, which in turn can foster the creation of new and exciting culinary tourism experiences.

To this end, ACTA will:

- Engage with industry members to identify gaps in professional development that could be filled
- Undertake environmental scanning to identify new trends in culinary tourism for which professional development in Alberta would be advantageous
- Identify existing professional development opportunities that could be levered or adapted for delivery in Alberta
- Partner with post-secondary institutions (including NAIT and SAIT), and other appropriate industry members and stakeholders, to facilitate the development delivery of professional development opportunities to industry members.

Strategy 1.3

Deliver consulting services to assist individuals and organizations in the industry to make their products "market-ready".

While some industry members may only require "self-serve" assistance (such as accessing ACTA's online knowledge hub or engaging in an ACTA-facilitated professional development opportunity), others may require more personalized assistance to make their products "market-ready". For these industry members, ACTA provides tailored consulting services, whereby ACTA works with an individual or organization to: assess their culinary tourism product, identify gaps and opportunities related to the product, and advise and assist the member in making their product "market-ready".

On this front, ACTA engages in strategic outreach, placing its focus on those areas of the province and those products which are a stage of "near-market-readiness". This enables ACTA to deploy its available resources in a way that will maximize the number of products that can become "market-ready" over the next three years.

ACTA will:

- Hold regional roundtables with industry members to assess the current level and state of market-readiness of culinary tourism assets across the province
- Informed by the roundtables, develop an inventory of existing or emerging culinary tourism products and opportunities, their locations and their levels of market readiness
- Identify communities and regions with concentrations and/or large numbers of "near-market-ready" culinary tourism products
- Engage in strategic outreach with industry members having these "near-market-ready" products, and work with the members to make their culinary tourism products market ready.



Goal Two

Individual and organizations across Alberta's culinary tourism industry are well connected with each other.

The development and delivery of a successful culinary tourism experience takes many individuals and organizations from across the industry. At a minimum, a farmer is required to produce food and drink, and a chef is required to prepare that food and drink for a visitor. High-quality culinary tourism experiences develop organically from the grassroots level when the players across the industry are well connected. ACTA pursues strategies and actions to facilitate these connections.

Strategy 2.1

Facilitate networking opportunities for members of Alberta's culinary tourism industry.

A gap currently exists in the availability of opportunities for members of Alberta's culinary tourism industry to meet and network. Through networking, industry members can exchange ideas, brainstorm, identify potential partnerships and develop business relationships. New and innovative traveller-focused culinary tourism experiences can naturally spring from these activities.

Through ACTA's Alberta Ate program as a model and catalyst, it will:

- Hold regional networking meetings across the province each year, to bring together industry members within each region through collaboration
- Organize one to two "farm tour" events each year, to facilitate networking and connections among stakeholders including producers, chefs and restaurateurs
- Animate events and festivals that facilitate collaboration between rural and urban industry members to enrich culinary tourism experiences in measurable ways
- Explore the development of an ACTA-sponsored "food auction" based on those used in other jurisdictions (e.g., Ontario).

Strategy 2.2

Develop knowledge resources that make it easier for people to locate products and players in Alberta's culinary tourism industry.

Industry members are busy people and time is a commodity at a premium. This can result in industry members making choices of convenience, thereby foregoing opportunities to develop rich and interesting culinary tourism products or experiences. For example, some chefs and restaurateurs report finding it difficult or time-consuming to determine what products can be sourced locally, or what culinary events are taking place in the province.

Being able to more easily locate products and players in the culinary tourism industry would enable industry members to make strategic choices that will result in additional and diverse culinary tourism experiences in the province.

Towards this end, ACTA will:

- Work with industry members to develop a farmer's market cookbook that also serves as an industry directory, including information on producers and the products they offer
- Further develop ACTA's culinary calendar, using available databases (e.g., ATIS) and existing information sources
- Develop an online "culinary map", available to industry members and the public, that identifies regional strengths, flavours, culinary trails and key products.



Goal Three

A broad range of people and organizations are aware of Alberta's culinary tourism industry, its products and its potential opportunities.

Just as strong connections within the industry are important for fostering culinary tourism experiences, connections also need to be developed beyond the industry. Since food is universal, culinary tourism experiences can lend themselves to many settings beyond a farm or restaurant. For Alberta to be regarded as a premier visitor destination for culinary tourism experiences, potential opportunities need to be explored and unlocked to the fullest extent possible. This requires that a broad range of people and organizations are made aware about Alberta's culinary tourism industry, including its assets, major products and key players. While foodies and culinary-connected individuals have good levels of awareness about Alberta's culinary tourism industry, there are generally lower levels of awareness among most other organizations and the general public. ACTA undertakes strategies to build relationships and raise awareness about the industry more broadly.

Strategy 3.1

Raise awareness about Alberta's culinary tourism industry by building relationships with individuals and organizations outside of the industry.

There are boundless opportunities for Alberta's culinary tourism industry to work with organizations in many industries to develop innovative culinary tourism experiences. However, many organizations (and the decision-makers and opinion leaders within them) have likely not considered these possibilities. By meeting with and fostering relationships with organizations, ACTA can raise awareness about Alberta's culinary tourism industry. This work opens doors to new partnerships and ideas that can germinate into interesting culinary tourism experiences. This work can also help break down silos and barriers that stand in the way of developing culinary tourism experiences (such as municipal bylaws or government policies).

ACTA will:

- Meet with major sport, festival and cultural organizations in Alberta, so ACTA can further their efforts to raise awareness about Alberta's culinary tourism industry through communications

- Determine its role in fostering a relationship with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development to discuss areas of alignment between ACTA and the ministry and how the culinary tourism industry can advance the ministry's interests and objectives
- Engage with federal and provincial government ministries to raise awareness about ACTA and how the culinary tourism industry helps advance those ministries' interests and objectives
- Meet with other major industry organizations (e.g., those in energy, health, construction, forestry) to raise awareness about the culinary tourism industry
- Develop relationships with major media outlets to raise awareness about the culinary tourism industry and the work of ACTA
- Engage Visitor Information Centres around the province to explore possible opportunities for collaboration
- Undertake a signature event involving the Alberta Ate, in conjunction with a major ACTA networking meeting, and invite representatives from organizations outside the culinary tourism industry
- Partner with the Government of Alberta to deliver culinary tourism experiences to international in-bound missions to the province.

Strategy 3.2

Aggregate and curate promotional content that can be used by tourism marketing organizations and others to promote Alberta's culinary tourism industry.

A number of organizations currently exist that have expertise in marketing tourism experiences to local, national and international visitors. These include Travel Alberta, and local destination marketing organizations (DMOs). Given its role and limited resources, ACTA does not work to duplicate their efforts. However, tourism marketing organizations are always seeking content - in the form of compelling stories, pictures and video - that they can draw upon for their marketing efforts. ACTA can keep culinary tourism "top of mind" for tourism marketing organizations by building and maintaining a stable of curated promotional content about the industry. For cost-effectiveness, this is best done by leveraging relationships and drawing on user-generated content.

To this end, ACTA will:

- Engage Travel Alberta and DMOs to discuss the kinds of content they would ideally like to have available

- Develop a public-facing mechanism to enable members of the public to share pictures, videos and stories of their culinary tourism experiences
- Work with industry members to ensure that plans for capturing promotional content are built into culinary tourism experiences
- Organize and package user-generated content and other content into forms that tourism marketing organizations can easily use to promote Alberta's culinary tourism industry to visitors.

Goal Four

ACTA is a sustainable organization that industry members regard as valuable.

The long-term success of ACTA depends on its ability to demonstrate value for members of Alberta's culinary tourism industry. While ACTA is a new organization, there is a need to pursue work in a timely fashion and realize benefits for industry members. At the same time, ACTA needs to establish a strong foundation for its future, by tending to governance, administrative and other internal organizational matters. ACTA will work to become self-funded over time.

Strategy 4.1

Ensure governance architecture and key policies are in place.

To ensure that an appropriate degree of rigour exists for ACTA, several matters need to be addressed. Certain architecture needs to be in place to guide ACTA's governance, and certain policies are required to support its operations and the implementation of this Strategy and Action Plan.

ACTA will:

- Establish policies for ACTA's governance structure, including policies regarding the recruitment of Board members and members of the Advisory Committee
- Recruit new members to the ACTA committees to ensure the committee has diverse representation and can provide strong advice
- Deploy human resources in line with the Strategy and Action Plan
- Develop a consulting fee schedule.

- Develop a membership structure
- Develop performance measurements including targets and key indicators (e.g., number of events, visitor expenditures, partnerships, etc.) and regularly evaluate these to assess ACTA's success in achieving its goals.

Strategy 4.2

Promote the work and activities of ACTA to industry members province-wide.

It is important that industry members across the province are aware of ACTA, the services it offers, and the benefits it can provide for them. While the usefulness and quality of ACTA's work is its best calling card, ACTA also takes proactive steps to communicate with industry members and enhance their knowledge about ACTA. As a province-wide organization, ACTA needs to be known and well-regarded by members of the culinary tourism industry throughout Alberta.

To this end, ACTA will:

- Engage existing organizations with touch points in the culinary tourism world (e.g., Slow Food, Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association, etc.) to raise awareness about ACTA and its work
- Establish an ACTA presence throughout the province
- Publish a quarterly newsletter reporting on the work of ACTA, the services it provides, and compelling stories about events in the culinary tourism industry.



Strategy Priorities

Year One - Immediate

- Support industry members with knowledge resources to help them deliver culinary tourism experiences (Strategy 1.1)
- Facilitate networking opportunities for members of Alberta's culinary tourism industry (Strategy 2.1)
- Develop knowledge resources that make it easier for people to locate products and players in Alberta's culinary tourism industry (Strategy 2.2)
- Raise awareness about Alberta's culinary tourism industry by building relationships with individuals and organizations outside of the industry (Strategy 3.1)

Years Two and Three

- Ensure governance architecture and key policies are in place (Strategy 4.1)
- Facilitate the delivery of professional development opportunities to members of the culinary tourism industry (Strategy 1.2)
- Deliver tools to assist individuals and organizations in the industry to make their products "market-ready" (Strategy 1.3)
- Aggregate and curate promotional content that can be used by tourism marketing organizations and others to promote Alberta's culinary tourism industry (Strategy 3.2)
- Promote the work and activities of ACTA to industry members province-wide (Strategy 4.2)



