

FRANCE - GERS

Maison de l'ail, Saint-Clar

The case study described here illustrates the enhancement of links between agriculture and the wider rural economy in the area of Gers. The project is an example of how farmers have taken control of the whole production chain — from the production of garlic on the farm to the direct sales to consumers. This enables the farmers to earn more income for their production while creating event and tourism activities out of their farm products.

1. Project details:

Nature of the project

Purpose: Farmers and garlic producers in the Lomagne countryside, Mr and Mrs Gamot decided to create the House of Garlic in June 2000. Located on the farm, this museum is a place devoted to all aspects of garlic. The goal in launching this tourist facility was to attract customers to purchase garlic and other local products, thereby avoiding selling their products through other market channels. The farmers benefit from direct sales, ensuring a better price for the gersois garlic, which has been recognised with the label « Ail blanc de Lomagne » (a Protected Geographical Indication) since 2008.

Content: Visitors can learn the history of garlic, discover the culture and festivities surrounding it, and even see an exhibition of sculptures made from garlic peelings at the Maison de l'ail. The visit is free of charge. The farmers started their garlic production 25 years ago. Most of the garlic production is directed to local producers markets or sold at the farm. White garlic is the main production in Gers; however, the Gamot family's production is about 60% purple garlic- to meet customer demand. The farmers pick the garlic at the beginning of June and after letting the garlic dry naturally or with the aid of a drying machine, the farmers sell it in braids, manually made on the farm.

Inspiration: Sales occur between July and October, but the Gamot family —pressed for time— found it a challenge to address tourist and customer questions. Therefore they decided to welcome visitors on the farm and create a museum that's both educational and entertaining. As tourist destination in Gers, the Maison de l'ail receives 4,000 visitors in a five-month period, half of whom during July and August.

Policy coherence: The project is coherent with the strategic aims of regional (Region of Midi-Pyrénées) and local (the Gers Department) rural development policy, especially in relation to promote certified quality products and generating agri-tourism activity.

Links between agriculture and the rest of the economy

Main agricultural sub-sectors involved: Garlic production is the main agricultural sub-sector involved. Nationally, the Gers department is ranked first for the production of garlic. The other sub-sector involved is duck production and food processing. Each autumn, the owners buy 400 duck carcasses (gorged with corn grain in the purest Gersois tradition), to prepare traditional recipes like foie gras, confit, duck with prunes, stewed duck, and duck confit with beans. By preparing preserves and gastronomic products, the farmers supplement their revenue with another income stream. The Gamot family also make jams and marmalades from their own orchard fruit. Lastly, tourism is the other

major local sector. As member of the "Bienvenue à la Ferme" network, the Gamot family also sells local products from neighbouring farms: wine, Armagnac liquor, Colza oil.

Description of these links: Backward links relate to the purchase of ducks from neighbouring farms which are transformed into food products to be commercialised. Because the Gamot family sells directly to consumers—whether at local markets or directly from the farm—they do not have any forward links with the food industry and trade. The farm is part of the "Bienvenue à la Ferme" network, which is a tourism initiative that encourages visitors to visit the farms in the department (tasting local products, learning about life on the farm, and spending the night on site), and for this reason it can be considered intricately linked to the wider rural economy.

The Gamot farm is certified "Excellence Gers", meaning that the farmers have complied with a Charter that guarantees the quality of their products and services. This label provides not only legitimacy and credibility, but it has also made the Gamot farm renowned in the department. In fact, the House of Garlic is one of the most visited agri-tourism destinations in Gers.

Promoted by the General Council, the Excellence Gers initiative aims to bring together under one signature all the expressions and the know-how of the terroir Gersois. Quality, traceability, respect for the environment and hospitality are the key features of this initiative, which concerns farms, handicrafts, tourism services, trade and industry. The political partnership between these industries can create internal and external synergies. This is particularly true between tourism and food, conducting promotional activities. This departmental plan of action boosts the "alliance of interests."

Lastly, the Gamot family has created a network with Tourism offices and the owners of rural gites to bring more and more visitors to the Maison de l'ail. The Gamot farm is also part of the France Passion network, welcoming camping cars for overnight stays on their property.

Scale of the project

Size: Small scale production (between 5 to 8 tons per year), for 1 hectare of land cultivated for garlic production. They also have 70 hectares with cereal crops.

Time scale: The Gamot family started their tourism project in 2000 without any EU funding.

Coverage: Local coverage for the production but selling is local and France-wide

Beneficiaries and supporters

Beneficiary: the owners

Supporters: In 2003, with the assistance of the Chamber of Agriculture, the Gamots were recognised with the Label "Produits fermiers". Indeed, the Gamots were the first producers to attain the label "garlic produits fermiers". Then the farm integrated into the "Bienvenue à la ferme" network, based on the achievement of the "produits fermiers" label. Finally, the farm qualified for "Excellence Gers." The local LAG PORTE de Gascogne was not involved on the initiative; local product development measures were not targeted by the Leader programme (Leader+ and Axis 4).

Finance

Funding: During the last decade, the Gamots spent roughly 12,000 EUR to develop their Maison de l'ail with its small exhibition space and retail shop. In April 2010, they submitted an EAFRD application in order to receive an EU grant (measure 311 - diversification of the agricultural economy). The new project aims at expanding the museum and the sale area, creating a video room and trying to enhance the visitor experience with a professional educational tool. The total budget exceeds 38,000

EUR, co financed by the Conseil Régional (7,612 EUR), the EAFRD (7,612 EUR) and the largest amount of the investment will be devoted to renovate the old barn (11,000 EUR) and to film the movie. The private quota of the investment is 22,826 EUR, 22,000 EUR obtained through a bank.

Budget: The running costs of the Maison de l'ail are quite low. The promotional budget is around 1,000 EUR per year, to print 10,000 flyers.

Results

Direct results: The Gamot family has created one of the most famous agri-tourism destinations in Gers, increasing the visibility of the products and opened sales channels by bringing the consumer directly on site. By eliminating the middleman from the production chain, the Gamots have increased the value of their products (the cost to produce and to process 1 kilo of garlic is about 2,30 EUR; the Gamots sell it for 4,50 EUR per kilo and the supermarket sells the same product for 6 to 8 EUR PER kilo). In addition, the Gamots continue to see increased demand for their products (each year, internet sales double). However, they do not want to increase their production. They prefer to limit the size of their operation so as not to deal with employee management.

Main target: individual customers and tourists

Wider benefits: The Maison de l'ail has benefited the greater rural economy of Gers by providing a destination tourism attraction for visitors. Tourists appreciate the scenic pastoral countryside and enjoy learning about the origins of gastronomic products on the department's farms. As a member of "Bienvenue à la ferme," the Maison de l'ail is an important part of a greater network of farms, and also serves as a retail point for the local products from other neighbouring farms. In addition, the Gamot farm has brought recognition to a quality local product; visitors to the Maison de l'ail are naturally curious and keen to learn about garlic and its quality. The Gamots have actually witnessed a change in customer habits in recent years; the current consumer trend is to "buy fresh, buy local" and Gersois farms, like the Gamot family's, satisfy this market demand with their products closely associated with the terroir.

2. Relevance of case study experiences for others

Problems: The main challenge in launching the Maison de l'ail was diversifying into a new sector as tourism without prior experience, and then learning the rules of the tourism industry. Another problem has been the strain on the personal lifestyles of the farmers in accepting a constant stream of tourists to their property. The Gamots never close their shop during the year, and are always available when customers arrive on the farm.

Transferability and mainstreaming potential: This project can be replicated anywhere, around various farmer products.

Innovation: This project is small but innovative. There are 200 garlic producers in Gers; however, this farm is the only one involved in tourist activities directly related to the main product of the farm. None of their competitors have chosen to be involved in the tourism sector. Though the niche might be too small to add another garlic museum, this project could be replicated around any number of different products (ie foie gras, Armagnac, wine). In addition, the Gamots' competitors choose to sell their production to the market, while the Gamot family avoids this economic model and sells directly to the consumer. The name "Maison de l'ail" has been trademarked at the INPI (Institut national de la propriété industrielle).



Institutional aspects: The Chamber of Agriculture has been important in assisting farmers to think "out-of-the-box" and find new ways to attract tourists (eg. specialising in educational farms).

Social aspects: This farm employs two people (the owners).

Environmental aspects: The farm keeps 12 hectares of farmland as prairies naturelles to naturally filter pesticides and it is also limiting the use of phytosanitary products. The farmers decided to not convert the farm in organic because of the high risks to loose production, mostly when the spring weather is too humid.

Sustainability: This project is sustainable; it does not require huge investments, but imagination and entrepreneurial spirit.

Lessons to pass on: becoming a member of the national trademark "Welcome to the farm" has been very important to become part of a larger agriculture and tourism network and to promote the activity and products of the farm outside Gers. This association brings together 5,200 farms in a nationwide network, promoting different activities for visitors, thereby bringing them closer to country life. The Network "Welcome to the Farm" advises farmers in their work, ensures the quality of products and activities, informs about the possibilities of home and work on farms, and promotes the network.