

The role of locally produced bio products in the development of agritourism

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Abstract. One of the preconditions for the development of agritourism is the cultivation and production of natural agricultural products. It is for this purpose that we studied the specificity of the interdependency between tourism and agriculture on the example of Guria, one of the regions of Georgia. The potential and development perspectives of all three municipalities of the region (Ozurgeti, Chokhat'auri, and Lanchkhuti) are discussed in the article. The study is focused on the main elements of agritourism, on the local possibilities of food production, and on its natural character. The results of the research prove that there is a great interest among tourists in this activity, which is due to the purchase and tasting of quality and safe food and their participation in its production. Besides that, hindering factors are identified: in the first place, it is the ignoring of food safety rules, the failure of the infrastructure, and insufficient financial resources.

1 Introduction

In contemporary world, agritourism is closely related to agriculture. The development of this direction of tourism, together with other factors, was mainly determined by the demand for ecologically clean agroproducts. Accordingly, creation and development of bio farms became a priority for farmers. Bio farming refers to a production method that does not include the use of pesticides, mineral fertilizers, genetically modified organisms, antibiotics and growth hormones. In this regard, the Organic Agriculture Research Institute (FIBL, Forschungsinstitut für biologischen Landbau in German) has published statistical data, namely: the largest organic agriculture markets are the USA, with a turnover of 40 billion euros; Germany, with 10 billion; France, with 7.9 billion; and China, with 7.6 billion. Organic agriculture is practiced in 181 countries (on 69.7 million hectares). The biggest demand for organic products is in Switzerland.

According to the same statistical data, there are 2.9 million organic farms and producers in the world. Among them, the most, 835,000, are in India, followed by Uganda (210,352) and Mexico (210,000) [1]. All of this, has its consequences for the tourism field. In particular, in the world, during the last 50–60 years, the field of tourism has been developing at a fast tempo. Agritourism is chosen by 25–30% of the total number of tourists. In terms of income, 20–30% of all tourism income comes from agritourism [2].

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Georgia has important resources for the development of tourism, including agritourism: diverse natural conditions, natural healing waters, traditional agriculture, outstanding hospitality, unique and diverse dishes varying from region to region in Georgia, etc. In this respect, one of the regions of Georgia, Guria, is also outstanding. Across all three municipalities of the Guria region, farmers involved in tourism can offer consumers the following: living in an eco-environment, getting to know farm activities, participating in the creation of a diverse assortment of ecologically clean products, and tasting and purchasing products on-site.

Therefore, the demand for agritourism has recently increased, which is the reason for the relevance of the research topic. Despite the fact that the development of agritourism in Georgia is still at the initial stage, the perspective of this direction has been clearly outlined; in particular, it is clear from the example of Guria that we have more opportunities and natural resources for the priority development of this field. In particular:

In the pre-pandemic period, by 2018, the total income turnover of the Guria region from tourism was 487.3 mln. GEL, out of which, the turnover according to accommodation facilities, food delivery and entertainment activities amounted to 37.4 mln. GEL. By 2019, the total revenue turnover was 558.7 mln GEL, of which 40.3 mln GEL was tourism's share. During the pandemic period, in 2020, the total turnover was 542.6 mln GEL, of which 25 mln was tourism's share. And the income received from agritourism was 15% of the total income received from tourism during the year [3].

In addition, the average daily expenditure of one tourist (in the case of organized tourism and not independently) during visits to the Guria region, according to the data for 2022–2023, amounts to a range of 200 GEL (without overnight stay) up to 400 GEL (overnight) [4].

Despite some steps forward, today the main problem of Georgia as a whole—in our case, the Guria region—is the small number of farms. In addition, agricultural lands are low-yielding due to a lack of proper agritechnical measures, which, in turn, leads to a lack of jobs. Agritourism, due to its essential features, allows for solving the mentioned problems. The aim of the research is to show, using the example of the Guria region, the importance of high-quality arrangements of biofarms and the cultivation and production of ecologically clean products for the prospective development of agritourism. According to the mentioned goal, we set the following tasks:

- Analysis of the situation in the region in this regard and identification of the hindering reasons.
- Developing appropriate practical recommendations using existing resources.

2 Methodology

In order to obtain data using the survey method by filling out a questionnaire. In the study were also used methods of comparison, quantitative analysis, deduction, and abstraction. As a result of the research, a total of 182 villages and 566 farmers were recorded in all three municipalities of Guria. Of these, we conducted a survey with 400 respondents, and it was revealed that 80 farmers are involved in agritourism activities and 320 only in farming activities. For the purpose of comparison, both local farmers engaged in agritourism as well as people employed in regular farming activities were interviewed. The survey of representatives of local self-governing entities also helped us assess the current situation and identify problems.

On the basis of the received statistical data and results, a qualitative and synthetic analysis was carried out. Also, in the research process, the following scientific works were used in the direction of agritourism: collections of scientific-practical conferences, works of Georgian and foreign researchers and scientists, data from the service of the National

Statistics Agency, and the legal entity of the public law "Georgian National Tourism Administration". Also, the data on the tourism services of the municipalities of the Guria regions: Ozurgeti, Chokhat'auri and Lanchkhuti.

Based on the received data, the role and importance of tourism, in general, and agritourism, in particular, was analyzed. The mentioned issue has been more or less studied by Georgian and foreign researchers. Important works on agritourism belong to the following authors: Ghongadze [1], Kvaratskhelia [2], Kaini [5], Yang [6], Kerdpitak [7], Lak [9], Joshi [10], Rodrigues [11], Bršćić [12], Burr [13], Domi [14], Phelan [15], Pehin Dato Musa [17], Hung-Hao [18], Ghadiri Ma'soum [19], Zalokar [21], Kartvelishvili [23], Rossi [24], Brune [26], Duglio [29], Montoya-Guevara [30], Wachter [31], Salukvadze [32], Csurgó [33], Jenkins [34], Luzzi [35], Privitera [37], Bojić[38], Adelle [39], Ecker [40], Desmond [41], Akhmedi [42], Busby [43], Sunitha [44], Blau [45].

However, the potential of tourism at the level of regions, especially in the direction of agritourism, is still less explored. It is this reality that led us to choose this topic. Agritourism is a new field that is intensively developing all over the world. Georgia, including the Guria region, has significant potential in this regard. The development of this field has not only economic but also social significance because it helps in the creation of new jobs, firmly settles the population in rural areas, etc. Therefore, we believe that research in this direction should be continued even more in the future.

3. Results

3.1 Specific features of agritourism products

Agritourism activity implies compliance with relevant rules, especially in terms of cultivating agriproducts; agricultural products must be local and natural. Services must be of high quality, the infrastructure must be orderly, as must the offered activities; marketing events must have an active character; consumer rights and sanitary-hygienic norms must be strictly observed. For farmers, it will be more profitable if they open their own shops, bakeries, and restaurants where various dishes will be made from the products cultivated by them and raw and semi-finished products will be sold, for instance, milk products, etc. The farmer should be focused both on the quality of the product and its quantity [4].

About existing regularities, it is interesting to consider the views of foreign scientists. In particular:

- It is necessary to have a proper legal system [5].
- In a combined form, tourism should be developed along with farming activities [6];
- It is necessary to create diverse farms [7];
- Visitors should be offered locally cultivated and natural products [8];
- Farmers must be systematically educated and retrained [9];
- Attention should be paid to the arrangement of the farm and its surroundings [10];
- It is necessary to take care of material and non-material cultural heritage [11];
- Farmers involved in agritourism can provide tourists their production and service, both directly and with the help of touristic agencies and tour operators [12].
- Agritourism, in addition to farming activities, must include additional activities [13].
- For farmers involved in agritourism to be interconnected with the aim of sharing experiences is a necessity [14].
- Farm-based recreation or agritourism should be viewed as part of sustainable rural economic development [15].

As a result of all this:

- Agritourism can handle number of development challenges - including low agricultural productivity, high food import and loss of the income from tourism, poor public health and youth unemployment [16].
- Sustainable development of the region economically, socially and ecologically, is facilitated. Which is accompanied by the following processes: development of tourism, farms, establishment of small, medium and micro agro-enterprises [17].
- Significant contribution is made to the income of small farming families and family employment [18].
- In addition to economic well-being, the development of agritourism can: maintain the population in rural areas [19] and reduce migration processes.

During the research carried out by us in 2021, there were 41 farms operating in the direction of agritourism in Ozurgeti municipality, with a total of 325 permanent employees and 1,381 additional workers during the season. In Chokhatauri municipality, there were 16 facilities with 76 permanent employees; during the season, the number of additional hires was 175. There are 23 facilities in Lanchkhuti municipality, with 112 permanent employees during the season and more than 200 additional hires (see Figure No. 1).

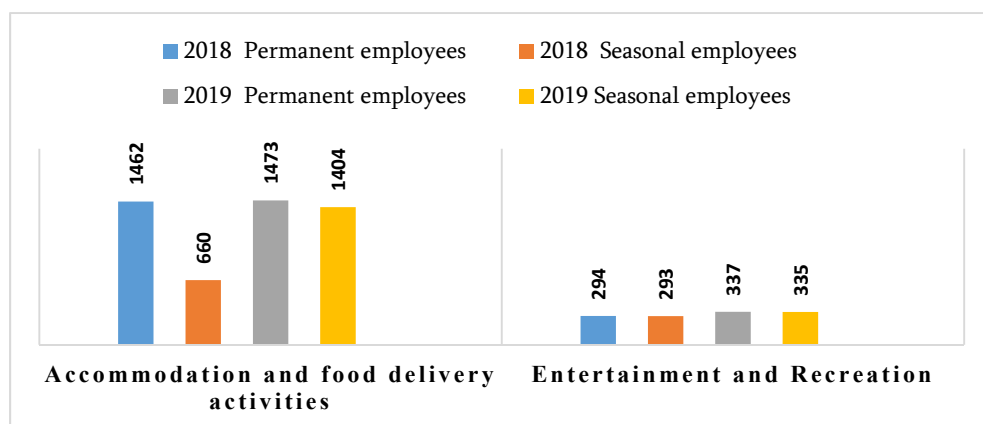


Fig. 1. Average annual number of employees and hires according to the tourism activity of the Guria region [3].

As can be seen from the diagram, the average annual number of employees in the region for 2018 was 1,462, among them 294 in the entertainment and recreation sector. In 2019, the average annual number of employees reached 1,473. And, in the field of entertainment and recreation – 337.

Thus, the expansion of agritourism enterprises will contribute to the diversification of the local economy and create diverse employment opportunities, especially for the youth of the region [20]. Thus, the existence of farm tourism enterprises will create employment opportunities that contribute to the development of the local economy [21]. Accordingly, it can be said that the mentioned activity is related to certain challenges. Therefore, a farmer, when forming a tour, should consider the following:

- **Seasonality/availability.** In tourism business, when evaluating existing resources, both from an ecological and economic point of view, a full-fledged study of environment and climate change is one of the urgent issues. Because the result of farmers' work is - dependent on climatic conditions too. It depends on the geographical location, topography, flora, weather and climate of a given region, as well. Unfavourable climatic conditions and their change can influence the tourist flow or the seasonal shift of tourist activity [22]. In the case of agritourism, problems created by seasonality are less common unless there are no unfavorable climatic conditions, which can destroy farms [23].

- **Farming fields in tourism.** In order for farming to become a tourist product, it is important to create appropriate conditions. For example, visitors to the apiary who want to participate in the pressing of honey or the maintenance of the beehives must be dressed like beekeepers, with suitable clothes and a protective hat.

- **On-site host/farmer offering forms/activities.** Hosts of family hotels and agritourism farms are trying to create innovative tourist services based on agricultural activities with different methods and activities for receiving the guest. For example, such is showing the collection vineyard, where local and rare grape varieties are presented. In addition, the catering facility and the vegetable garden are located in the same space. In addition to tasting and buying food, tourists are interested in where and how food is prepared. They are eager to meet with farmers and processing industry representatives and to talk about what is happening in the food production field.

Two directions are distinguished in this field: first, food preparation and traditional cooking. Second, acquainting and viewing the technology of producing food products:

- **Traditional cooking** implies that there is a growing demand for a diversity of high quality, local, original food and culinary products. Tourists want to eat and be involved in the cooking process. So that cooking in agritourism activities reflects the tradition, heritage and local culture.

- **Acquaintance and sightseeing of the food production technology** - refers to the observation by visitors of the production and technological processes of food products, as well as the operation of the relevant machines. Also, going through and participating in the stages which the raw material goes towards the enterprise and up until the consumers, after processing in the enterprise. Also, attention is focused on food safety, whether the raw materials grown on the farm and processed afterwards are of good quality and safe for health. For many people who visit farms, especially for children, such a visit is important also because they see practically for the first time everything from what and how the food they want is made. Farmers take good advantage of the existence of that interest and try to maximally present the products and the production process to potential customers, as they are dealing with the potential consumer. Hence, farmer profession demands high investments in infrastructure, education and skills development [24].

Thus, agritourism includes any agricultural operation that can attract interested visitors. For example, if working on farms is popular in Italy, there are different specifics in other countries: selling ecologically clean, organic products directly on farms, picking fruits, and taking care of the cattle. Or else: the participation of tourists in the first harvest, milking a cow, observing the cheese-making process, herding cattle on pastures, resulting in the creation of a tour, which is the reason for the guests for coming to the farm [25]. In addition, living in a place where there are vineyards, orchards, or farms of various purposes, which, in many cases, are surrounded by an ecologically clean, natural environment, is another motivation for agritourism trips. As a result of developing the business, farmers' incomes increase, and attention is focused on the protection of wildlife and the preservation of socio-cultural heritage. Ultimately, agritourism is an effective way to connect agricultural producers with consumers, which helps the local economy and its long-term sustainability [26].

3.2 The current state of agritourism development in the Guria region

The development of agritourism is facilitated by the diversity of farms in the region. The leading branches of agriculture are citrus growing, nut growing, corn growing, and tea growing. An important place is occupied by the food industry, where there are agro-enterprises of various profiles. Namely:

a) Family farming and family hotel "Komli" with a tea plantation and a wooden one-story house elevated from the ground and standing on stone walls, also characterized by exterior supporting facilities. More modern versions of the Oda are two-storied and the first floor is used as a basement. In addition to overnight stay and meals at the family guesthouse, visitors have the opportunity to participate in the process of picking tea, processing it, and then tasting tea made by themselves. There is a vegetable garden nearby, where the harvested vegetables are getting directly on the table of tourists [27].

b) "Menabde Winery" is a typical Gurian homestead. The Oda type house[†] has been fully restored and receives guests, also. The owners kept the traditional appearance as much as possible. Visitors can taste traditional Gurian cuisine and participate in culinary master classes [21].

Such examples make clear that the Guria region has the opportunity to receive and make interested more foreign tourists. There are also changes in this direction. The following projects are being implemented: "Tea Road", "History of Chkhaveri". The project "Participatory principles for the development strategy of Guria tourism" is also worth noting. Within its framework was created a strategic plan for the development of tourism in the Guria region. It establishes the priority directions of the region. Among them, agritourism is also highlighted.

Within the framework of this project, the "Guria Agritourism Festival" is held every year, the purpose of which is to popularize the agricultural products produced in the Guria region, promote local rural products and the activities of farmers. For example: in 2021, within the framework of the agritourism festival, was held an exhibition and sale of products produced by the local population, in which, more than 50 farmers, entrepreneurs and representatives of cooperatives of the Guria region participated [28].

3.3 Food service as the basic element of agritourism

Food is an important element of agritourism. It promotes the development of tourism in this direction, with diverse agriculture [29]. It implies human's relation to food that reflects the cuisine, heritage or culture of tourism destination [30]. Farmers provide tourists with dishes made from local, authentic products, often using traditional recipes handed down from parents and grandparents [31]. In some countries, the production of agricultural products is regulated by quality marks: the Product's place of origin (PDO), geographical location (PGI), and traditionality designator (TSG) marks. Good examples of this are champagne and cognac in France and Gorgonzola and Parmaggio-Reggiano cheese in Italy [32]. Cooking classes in Thailand are a way to preserve and spread the local food culture. It may also include traditional food presentation festivals, routes [33]. This strategy is the basis of the agritourism routes, such as the wine route, the artisanal cheese route, and the beer pathway [32]. In the case of the Guria region, mainly "Tea tours", "Wine tours," and "tours of Orange Vintage" are dominant. Therefore, it can be said that various branches of agriculture are used for the diversification of the tourist product [34].

Food and beverage service is the main component of agritourism farming. This component is the function of chefs in large family hotels and agritourism complexes. In small family hotels and farmer's houses, this function is additionally held by family members. Therefore, they have proper knowledge about the consumption procedures for these products. In both cases, food safety and security must be considered. The rights of guests must be protected, as well as their health.

[†] Oda - a wooden one-story house elevated from the ground and standing on stone walls, also characterized by exterior supporting facilities. More modern versions of the Oda are two-storied and the first floor is used as a basement.

Special caution is needed when storing and using high-risk food products such as meat, poultry, fish, certain types of cereals, and vegetables, microorganisms multiply faster. It is necessary to observe the temperature and humidity regime and to control acidity, oxygenation, and lack of oxygenation.

In addition to food, when organizing a tour, the farmer should take into account the activities inside and outside the farm, the costs, the sources of information used in planning and booking the trip, the possibility of using social media [35].

3.4 The role of food safety in the development of tourism

In the field of plant protection, quarantine measures are implemented in the region within the framework of a special state program. Biological and chemical control measures against particularly dangerous quarantine pests are financed. Phytosanitary monitoring of agricultural fields, diagnostics, prediction of spreading harmful organisms and development of measures for combating them, are periodically carried out. Phytosanitary inspection and certification of export products subject to quarantine is executed. In the field of veterinary medicine, preventive and curative measures against particularly dangerous diseases of animals are applied.

Coordination and supervision of private veterinary activities and issuance of certificates in accordance with the law, is performed. The purchase and research of drinking water and food products is accomplished with the current monitoring program. Nevertheless, the existing food safety system does not fully meet the needs of the region [36]. Despite measures carried out, supplying natural and health-safe food and drink to consumers still needs to become the main priority [37]. For that purpose, a special object called a "bio-house" should be created where visitors will have the opportunity to get comprehensive information about organic agriculture [38]. That will oblige farmers to consider the national food supply standards [39]. Finally, better coordination between stakeholders involved in agritourism, food tourism, and food safety services affects the performance of the activity [40]. So, getting education and proper planning in the field of food safety is necessary for this activity [41].

3.5 Factors hindering the development of agritourism in the Guria region

Problems and challenges faced by farmers include, on the one hand, small agricultural lands and low agricultural productivity. On the other hand, problems are created by the destruction of natural resources [42]. The mentioned problems are relevant in Georgia, more specifically in the Guria region, and there are factors that prevent solving them.

In order to determine these hindering factors, a research was conducted by us in 2021, using a survey with a specially prepared questionnaire. Four hundred farmers participated in the survey. It was found that most of the farmers consider a lack of financial resources and high interest rates on agricultural loans to be the main problems. It is impossible to start any kind of business, in this case, agritourism, without financial resources. In addition to this, there is a malfunction in the infrastructure. The service process also needs to be developed:

- Besides that, some of them do not have the experience of managing a tourism business or lack sufficient information [43].
- The negative effect of agritourism development occurs when this development violates ethical principles. Potential negative effects are mainly related to environmental degradation and loss of local cultural properties [44].
- Rural communities are under the double stress of economic pressures from falling crop prices and increasing impacts of climate change [45].

The following issues also require consideration:

- The level of development of local production is significantly behind the level of advanced countries.
- Limited laboratory capabilities;
- Insufficiently developed insurance system, etc.

Therefore, the development and specialization of agriculture in the region requires thoroughly thoughtful, reasonable and innovative approach.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

There is a lack of eco-friendly products in the world. One of the preconditions for solving the mentioned problem is the development of agritourism. This activity allows farmers to establish themselves in the local market by using and developing their farms. Also, visitors from different parts of the world will be offered the natural environment and natural countryside food and drink. As a result of the research, the existence of similar opportunities was also revealed in the Guria region. In particular, 41 farms work in the direction of agritourism in Ozurgeti municipality. In Chokhat'auri Municipality - 16, in Lanchkhuti Municipality - 23 agritourism facilities. Thus, in order to develop agritourism in the region, it is necessary to carry out the following measures:

- Planning and management of agritourism should be implemented in the region, at the level of individual municipalities, which should take into account the principles of ecological, social, and economic sustainability. The planning and organization should imply the development of infrastructure together with the agritourism industry. In some villages, the road is not in order, there are problems with waste removal and disinfection, sewage and other problems. First of all, it is important for the agricultural area to be sound and clean, along with the existence of properly functioning sanitary junctions, informational and road signs should be set in the settlements, pointing to villas, storage areas, vineyard great vineries or tourist farms.

- The restoration-development of agriculture and agroproduct enterprises should be carried out in connection with the tourism development. In particular, it will be more profitable for farmers if they open their own shops, bakeries, restaurants, where different dishes will be prepared from the natural products grown by them, raw products and semi-finished products will be sold, say, dairy products and others.

- The farmer should be focused both on the quantity of the product and its quality. For this, it is necessary to have a well-functioning farm, thorough knowledge of a foreign language and work by the farmer, development of necessary skills for serving tourists and then adapting it to practical activity.

- New agritourism routes should be created and perfected, taking into account accommodation: in a cottage located on a farm, in a rural agritourism hotel, or in a guest house. Adding to this: getting to know the local cuisine and the participation of tourists in cooking and tasting dishes. Cooking and organic farming courses should be offered. The tour should include: an excursion to the farmer's homestead; participation of tourists in harvesting, which, as a rule, is accompanied by feasting, getting to know folklore and studying folk songs.

Visitors should be offered plant-based and ecologically clean animal-based foods. Also: tasting the typical dishes of the Guria region; introducing the production of organically pure corn, potatoes, honey, milk, and meat products; and the technology of making local varieties of wines and Churchkhelas[‡].

[‡] Churchkhela – traditional Georgian food made of grape must, nuts, and flour.

During the route, tourists will be able to listen to: ancient, traditional Gurian songs preserved in the villages; get to know and buy samples of local crafts: socks, gloves, hats, carpets, headdresses, skis, wooden household and musical inventory, etc.

In addition to the agritourism routes "Tea Road", "Wine Road", which are already functioning in Guria, other directions can be created:

– Bio-animal husbandry based agritourism. Bio-animal husbandry - as a basis for agritourism is interesting in different directions: farmers will offer tourists biologically clean meat and dairy products and make products with high export potential;

– Bioaquaculture, or freshwater fish breeding, is about 4000 years old. Fishing is the main form of aquaculture. As for the importance of fishing in agritourism, of course, it is extremely large and multifunctional: educational-cognitive, entertainment, recreation, hobby, etc.;

– Log beekeeping is not preserved in many places of the world. Beekeepers in Georgia also choose modern methods for obtaining honey. Beekeepers continue the difficult but ancient tradition of domesticating bees - placing the hive in a log, split in two and carved out, called a log hive. Log hive honey, with its history, distribution area rich in biodiversity and completely natural pine, has a great potential to meet both bio certification requirements and become competitive in the international market as a high-quality unique product.

– Sericulture would be particularly attractive to agritourists, if more attention will be paid to the restoration of sericulture in the country, both for domestic and incoming tourists. Agrotours related to sericulture can be planned with educational and entertainment aspects. It is known that silk has been produced in Georgia since ancient times;

– Bio corn farming will attract agritourists too, if mills will be organized, where grinding and baking master classes will be held. Planning tours based on Georgian traditions around the themes of bread and wine, is also possible.

– Agritourism based on the bioproduction of medicinal and aromatic plants (non-timber forest products) and their use will be successful. Non-timber forest plants cover about 10% of the earth's land surface. The forests of Georgia are also rich in non-timber plants. The mentioned plants are used directly or indirectly: as food for people and animals; as raw material in agricultural activities; for decorative purposes; to improve and protect the environment; as a healing agent; and as raw material in the phytoindustry. More than a third of medicinal preparations are made from plants. At the same time, the price of herbal preparations is much lower compared to synthetic ones:

- An agritourism association should be established. Its functions should include: getting to know the problems of farmers on-site and taking into account their interests, retraining farmers, publishing guidebooks, brochures, tourist maps, which will help popularize the existing routes "Tea Road" and "History of Chkhaveri". They will also take care of developing new special programs and new routes.

- Tourism in rural areas should be developed by improving the ecological situation and promoting recreational zones and parks ensuring diversity of ecologically clean tourist product. For example, in the region of Guria, the following can be made into a set of this kind of tourist products: visiting the Kolkheti National Park (Imnati area), boating and fishing, accommodation and food in the family of a farmer in the nearby village of Grigoleti.

- To arrange an old Gurian Oda, an ethnographic corner and an agro-museum, pergola in the surrounding area near the center in any municipality of Guria. It would also be important to hold a small farm nearby, which would allow visitors to learn about ancient and modern agricultural techniques and technology, learn about the history and ethnography of Guria, visit and engage in agricultural activities themselves. Also, they can taste traditional Gurian dishes and ancient varieties of wines.

- In the villages of Nat'anebi and Shroma in Lanchkhuti municipality, the variety of agritourism services is related to harvesting. From this point of view, citrus is a popular culture. Citrus picking takes place in October and November. We think, at this time, it will be interesting for the tourists to participate in the orange vintage. Nearby, there should be a plant for production and processing of citrus juice and compote, where tourists will get to know the production process, buy and taste the products.

In our opinion, the number of farmers employed in the field of agritourism will increase in the future, which will be a prerequisite for the development of the field. For that, it is necessary to mobilize financial resources: through grants, projects, and by seeking different types of investments. Also, through the implementation of relevant supporting programs by the local self-government, through establishing tax benefits, promoting and encouraging the start-up and development of business. In addition, in the perspective of further research in this field, we think to work on the development and improvement of the agritourism model.

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