



Blending agriculture, art and tourism across North Carolina

HANDMADE IN AMERICA AND HOMEGROWN HANDMADE

By Jennifer Taylor

North Carolinians across the state are all too familiar with the concerns facing rural areas, farming and the uncertainty of the tobacco industry. With tourism serving as one of the primary economic producers for the state, North Carolina has found a way to boost its rural areas and create a new tourist niche known as “agri-Cultural” tourism. The purpose of this new market is to diversify economic development in rural communities and generate interest in the cultural aspects of art and agriculture.

HandMade in America

HandMade in America, based in the Blue Ridge Mountains, was the first initiative of this kind. The premise of the grassroots project was based not on luring industry to the area, but on an industry already available: arts and crafts.

HandMade in America aimed to revitalize mountain culture by promoting the craftspeople working in studios, galleries and shops in small towns and on winding roads. As this project began to take shape, other industries were incorporated, including local agriculture and lodging. Combining agriculture with arts and crafts was relatively simple. As it turned out, some of the local farmers were also craftspeople and vice versa, said Carole Summers with HandMade in America.

In 1996, HandMade in America published a trail guide called “The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina.” The guidebook is a journey through more than 1,000 miles of mountain roads from Murphy to the top of Mt. Mitchell. It includes studios, galleries, inns and historic sites and has sold more than 40,000 copies. With an increased interest in farming and agriculture, HandMade later produced another trail guide entitled “Farms, Gardens and Countryside Trails.” This guidebook features gardens, orchards, vineyards, farms, walking trails and farmer’s markets, as well as natural attractions and heritage sites. Each travel guide fits easily into the glove box of a car and is arranged so that each tour “loops” back to or near where you started.

Since its inception, HandMade in America has been recognized as a model for local tourism promotion and recruited by other regions throughout the country to help with community

revitalization. For more information on HandMade in America, visit www.handmadeinamerica.org or call (828) 252-0121. The guidebooks are \$19.95 each and can be ordered by calling (800) 331-4154.

Homegrown Handmade

Loosely based on the HandMade in America model, a project called Homegrown Handmade has also developed in North Carolina. To stimulate tourism and showcase the state’s art and agriculture as well, the N.C.

Arts Council and N.C. Cooperative Extension formed a partnership and received a grant from Golden LEAF to fund a trails project. Golden LEAF (Long-term Economic Advancement Foundation) works to promote social welfare and provide economic assistance for North Carolina citizens and communities. Using HandMade in America as a template and training tool, the Arts Council and the Cooperative Extension created Homegrown Handmade.

This alliance of art and agriculture focuses on the farm trails and art roads in the Piedmont and eastern North Carolina. The project should be completed by the end of May and will include 72 counties. Currently, Homegrown Handmade has eight trails available with detailed descriptions of each area and a listing of the art and farm life in the trail towns. Each trail spans several counties and guides you in and out of rural eastern North Carolina. The trails are cleverly titled with names like “Rock Stew Ramble” and “Hushpuppies, Pimento Cheese and Sweet Tea.” From a path at the corner of Cucumber and Vine at the Mt. Olive Pickle Company to a strawberry patch in Scotland Neck, these trails are a great escape to get “in tune with the rhythm of the countryside.”

To visit the “agri-Cultural” farm and art trails created by Homegrown Handmade and their participating communities and partnerships, go online at www.homegrownhandmade.com 

