

# On the Trail Discovering Georgia

**W**hat started out as an idea to promote the wine industry in the southern part of the state was transformed into something far greater in scope once Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black got involved. He had a vision of a trail for motorists that would promote agribusinesses and rural tourism stops. He was capitalizing on a marketing concept growing in popularity: agritourism.

Georgia now has four Georgia Grown Trails for Central and South Georgia. The variety of featured stops is immense — from a fully regenerative family farm with an online store for its pasture-raised, hand-butchered meats to another group of farmers committed to returning olive-oil production to the state. There are also conventional growers of peaches, pecans and blueberries, as well as manufacturers of value-added products from them, along with country markets with local products in the tradition of old-fashioned general stores. There are also farm-to-table restaurants.

But the trails are not only about what you can buy but also what you can experience at both public and private facilities. Lodge at a historic inn. Kayak a swamp or lake. Fish for largemouth bass. Visit country stores, petting zoos and a working horse ranch. Savor local honey. Ride a scenic railroad. Stroll farmers markets or pick your own seasonal fruits. Visit a working sawmill and gristmill.

Get involved with a conservation group. The trails offer something for everyone.

## Linking Like Businesses

In 2012, three of the region's wine and spirits makers were researching ways to bring tourists to their businesses. "They would see each other at events and say, 'We are kind of spread out, but we could be connected if we had a trail where people could see all three of us,'" says Jerry Connell, co-founder of the trails and president of the Georgia Grown Trail 37 Association. Those business owners were Charlie Cowart of Still Pond Vineyard, Winery & Distillery in Arlington, Richie Demott (now deceased) of Gin Creek Plantation in Hartsfield and Ed Perry of Horse Creek Winery in Sparks.

"Then we began to hear from the regional marketing people from the state. There was an idea for a wine trail along Highway 37," says Connell.

The big shift in focus occurred that same year when Commissioner Black held a press conference at Horse Creek Winery where he announced the creation of Georgia Grown Trail 37 — promoting not only wine but a variety of agribusinesses — with the promise of more trails running along other U.S. highways in the future, says Connell. "We had another meeting a couple of months later. Just about everybody we found was interested in having

a venue along the trail," he says. "We also invited many chambers of commerce in towns along the trail to help promote the new agritourism businesses in their area."

In 2014, Trail 37 became the first branded agricultural trail in Georgia, followed by 41-341, 1 and 17. Each has its own 501(c)(6) non-profit membership association, effectively creating a business alliance that manages and promotes each trail, says Connell.

## Traveling Georgia's Trails

Every trail is unique. Trail 37 runs east to west from Homerville to the Alabama line. Trails 41 and 341 run from Lake Park north to Barnesville. Trail 1 runs from Folkston north to Augusta. Trail 17, the newest, promotes Georgia agritourism along the coast. It runs from Savannah south to Kingsland. There is groundwork taking place for a trail along U.S. Highway 27, says Connell.

In 2015, Trail 37 won the Bill Hardman Tourism Champion-Product Development Award from Governor Nathan Deal. Trail 41 won it the following year.

"One of the great assets for the trails is a free app for Android and Apple that visitors can download," says Linda Mahan of LEM Ag. Her firm represents many agribusinesses along the trails. LEM Ag designed the logos for all the trails.

Another big marketing resource for the trails is the large wall



# TRAILS

display at the welcome center off of Interstate 75 near the Georgia/Florida line, Mahan says. “We wanted to draw people from the interstate to agribusinesses along the trails.”

The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, impacted the trails and Trail 37’s Connell fears that some of the businesses have closed completely. “It’s always a good idea,” he says, “to contact each business or public facility before visiting — but especially now.”

But things are looking promising for others. Georgia Olive Farms, for one, started offering tours again this year after being shuttered in 2020 and 2021. “We benefit greatly from the trails,” says Vicki Hughes, who represents the farms. “Before COVID we saw people doing a trail run and we would ask them how they heard about us. It was through the trail association. It is a good way for people to get a wider perspective on agriculture. And it’s better if we are all connected.”

Start your journey with maps of the trails at [GaGrownTrails.com](http://GaGrownTrails.com).

— Scott Reaver



## Agritourism Stops:

### Trail 37

Wineries, distilleries state parks, olive farms, local honey, U-pick, farm tours, farm to table restaurants



### Trail 41/341

Fresh fruits and vegetables, farm animals, corn mazes, country stores, peach stands

### Trail 1

Blueberries, Vidalia® onions, canoe rentals, farm markets, U-pick, farm tours



### Trail 17

Lighthouses, farm to table restaurants, oyster farming, microbreweries

## Download the Free App

