

EXPLORING ITALIAN AGRITOURISM: A MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This article examines Italian agritourism's legal and operational framework, focusing on its role as a sustainable model for rural development. It explores the legal challenges and opportunities arising from the integration of agritourism with traditional agricultural practices, particularly in light of recent legislative amendments. The study highlights the sector's increasing multifunctionality, as agricultural enterprises expand beyond primary production to offer services that support social well-being and environmental conservation. The paper traces the historical evolution of agritourism from its emergence in the 1950s to its formal recognition under Italian law, with particular focus on Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code, which legally links agritourism to agricultural activities. Special attention is given to the role of regional legislation, notably the Decreto Sostegni-bis, in redefining the criteria that distinguish agritourism from other agricultural enterprises. Additionally, the article examines the diverse services agritourism enterprises provide – including accommodation, catering, educational programs, and recreational activities – which must remain ancillary to core agricultural operations. Sustainability is a key focus, as many agritourism operators increasingly adopt eco-friendly practices such as waste reduction, renewable energy use, and organic farming in response to growing consumer demand for responsible tourism. These initiatives not only promote environmental stewardship but also help preserve rural cultural heritage, positioning agritourism as a vital driver of both economic resilience and ecological sustainability in rural areas.

Keywords: agritourism, Italian law, sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

Italian agritourism represents a unique intersection of hospitality and agricultural production, providing visitors with an immersive rural experience while promoting the economic and cultural sustainability of farming communities (ISMEA, 2024)¹. Over the years, agritourism has become a vital tool for rural development, diversifying income sources for farmers and safeguarding traditional agricultural practices. The sector is characterized by its deep connection to primary agricultural activities, ensuring that hospitality services complement, rather than replace farming operations².

The legal foundation of agritourism in Italy is anchored in both national and regional legislation, which aims to balance the economic potential of rural tourism with the protection of agricultural land and

¹ In Italy, the number of agritourism establishments reached nearly 25,900 in 2023, marking a 5.2% increase from the previous year. This growth follows a 1.3% rise in 2021 compared to 2020 and a 3.3% increase compared to 2019. A similar positive trend is evident in terms of production value, which reached 1.16 billion euros – an increase of 45% compared to 2020.

² Italian agritourism has long been regarded as a benchmark model of sustainability due to its environmental, social, and economic benefits. For this reason, Italy's 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plan includes a specific rural development measure to support investments in multifunctional farms, with a particular focus on agritourism enterprises.

Accepted: 14.02.2025

Published: 31.03.2025

Cite as: Tedioli, F. (2025). Exploring Italian Agritourism: A Model of Sustainable Rural Development. *J. Agribus. Rural Dev.*, 1(75), 64–77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17306/J.JARD.2025.00017R1>



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resources. A cornerstone of this framework is Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code, which defines agricultural entrepreneurship and establishes the criteria under which agritourism activities are considered an extension of farming. Additionally, Law No. 96/2006 and subsequent regional regulations set specific criteria for the classification and operation of agritourism enterprises, ensuring adherence to agricultural principles. Recent amendments, notably those introduced by the Decreto Sostegni-bis, have further clarified these criteria, emphasizing the necessity of a clear, verifiable connection between agritourism and agricultural activities.

Beyond its legal framework, agritourism plays a crucial role in advancing sustainability. Many agritourism operators adopt environmentally responsible practices, including organic farming, waste reduction, and the use of renewable energy sources. These initiatives align with broader European Union policies on sustainable rural development, reinforcing the sector's role in ecological conservation and cultural preservation.

THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF AGRICULTURAL ENTERPRISES

Agriculture has increasingly evolved from its traditional role of food production to embrace a multifunctional approach that integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives. This transformation reflects the ability of agricultural enterprises to generate additional value through complementary activities such as agritourism, direct sales, educational initiatives, and renewable energy production – activities that contribute to the sustainability of rural areas while preserving their agricultural identity (Masini, 2012; Gorgitano, 1994).

Agritourism stands as a prime example of this multifunctionality (Galasso et al., 2016), offering farmers the opportunity to diversify their income while strengthening the link between agricultural production and tourism. Italian legislation, particularly Law No. 96/2006, provides a structured framework to ensure that agritourism remains an extension of agricultural activity rather than an independent commercial enterprise. In this context, the principle of connection and prevalence, as established by Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code, mandates that agritourism and related services be supplementary to core agricultural operations. This legal safeguard prevents the transformation of farms into

predominantly hospitality-driven businesses, preserving their fundamental agricultural nature.

The economic benefits of multifunctionality are evident: diversifying income sources enhances the financial resilience of agricultural enterprises, reducing their reliance on traditional crop and livestock production (Benozzo and Bruno, 2007). Additionally, agritourism promotes local products and short food supply chains, fostering closer relationships between producers and consumers, while also enhancing regional branding.

From an environmental standpoint, multifunctional agricultural enterprises play a crucial role in sustainable land management. Many agritourism businesses adopt eco-friendly practices such as organic farming, water conservation, and renewable energy use, aligning with broader European Union sustainability goals. These practices not only reduce the ecological footprint of agricultural enterprises but also improve their competitiveness in a market increasingly driven by environmental consciousness.

The social dimension of multifunctionality is equally important. Agritourism contributes to rural revitalization by generating employment, sustaining local economies, and preserving cultural traditions (for further information on this topic, Khater et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2021). Educational farm visits, hands-on agricultural experiences, and community-based events increase public awareness of the importance of sustainable agriculture, further bridging the gap between urban and rural communities.

By adopting a multifunctional approach, agricultural enterprises can successfully integrate economic viability, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility. Agritourism, with its diverse services and regulatory safeguards, exemplifies how modern agriculture can adapt to contemporary challenges while maintaining its essential role in rural development.

ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AGRITOURISM

The origins of agritourism can be traced to the mid-20th century when rural depopulation and industrialization began threatening traditional agricultural economies. In Italy, the post-war economic boom triggered a shift in labor dynamics, prompting many rural inhabitants to migrate to urban centers in search of better economic opportunities. This demographic shift led to the

abandonment of farmland and the decline of small-scale farming. In response to these challenges, farmers began seeking alternative ways to sustain their agricultural activities, ultimately leading to the development of agritourism.

The first informal agritourism initiatives emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, as farm owners began welcoming guests seeking an authentic rural experience³. These early forms of agritourism, though unregulated, played a crucial role in demonstrating the potential of integrating tourism with agricultural practices.

Agritourism was formally recognized in the Italian legal system in 1973 with the law of the Autonomous Province of Trento⁴, followed by similar initiatives in Veneto⁵ and Campania⁶ in 1975. However, without national recognition, these regulations primarily aimed at promoting tourist hospitality offered by agricultural entrepreneurs in a business separate from their agricultural activities. In the same period, the European Community issued Directive No. 268/1975 “On Agriculture in Mountain and Less-Favoured Areas”, which acknowledged the link between agricultural activities and tourism or craft activities as a means of supporting farm incomes.

Recognizing the economic and cultural potential of agritourism⁷, the Italian government introduced Law No. 730/1985, which provided a legal definition and established initial guidelines for its operation. This law laid the foundation for future regulatory frameworks, ensuring agritourism remained closely tied to farming activities.

Over time, agritourism evolved from a niche activity into a structured industry, supported by comprehensive legislation. The 1990s and early 2000s saw regulatory refinements, culminating in Law No. 96/2006, which

remains the primary legal framework for agritourism in Italy. This law clarified the conditions under which agritourism could operate, reinforcing its agricultural connection and ensuring hospitality services remained secondary to farming.

In recent years, agritourism has expanded in response to rising consumer demand for sustainable, experience-based tourism. The sector has benefited from European Union rural development policies, which promote agritourism as a means of preserving cultural heritage, supporting local economies, and encouraging eco-friendly agricultural practices. A growing emphasis on sustainability has led many agritourism businesses to adopt initiatives such as organic farming⁸, renewable energy integration, and biodiversity conservation.

Today, agritourism is vital to Italy’s rural economy, blending tradition with innovation. The sector continues to adapt to modern challenges while staying true to its core mission: enhancing rural livelihoods, preserving agricultural landscapes, and fostering meaningful connections between visitors and local communities.

THE CONNECTION CRITERION ACCORDING TO ARTICLE 2135 OF THE ITALIAN CIVIL CODE

The regulation of agritourism is governed by Law No. 96/2006⁹, which establishes the basic legal framework while delegating specific regulatory aspects to the regions¹⁰.

Agritourism activities are defined as accommodation and catering services provided by agricultural

³ This form of tourism, often referred to as rural tourism, has been a key driver of rural development and an important source of income.

⁴ No. 11 of 20 March 1973 (*Interventions in favour of agritourism*).

⁵ Veneto Regional law of 31 January 1975, no. 21.

⁶ Campania Regional law of 5 June 1975, no. 53.

⁷ In particular, these measures aim to protect and enhance the unique resources of each area, promote the continuation of human activities in rural areas, support soil conservation initiatives, and restore rural architectural heritage. They also encourage the production of high-quality traditional products and the preservation of local food and wine traditions.

⁸ Agritourism’s contribution to the organic farming sector is significant, particularly in terms of the number of businesses involved. More than one-quarter of agritourism enterprises (26.6%) have adopted organic production methods, compared to just 7.4% of all agricultural businesses. Although agritourism establishments make up slightly more than 2% of all farms in Italy, they account for nearly 8% of those engaged in organic farming. (*Cf. Agriturismo e multifunzionalità. Scenario e prospettive, cit. 39.*)

⁹ This regulation also integrates into national law the growing interest expressed by the European legislator, most recently in Regulation (EC) No. 1698 of 20 September 2005.

¹⁰ For more information on the relationship between national and regional legislation on agritourism, see Italian Constitutional Court decision No. 339/2007, which declared certain provisions of Law no. 96/2006 unconstitutional for being overly detailed and infringing on regional prerogatives and competences.

entrepreneurs¹¹, including those operating in corporate form¹², using their own farm in connection with agricultural, forestry and livestock activities (Tolino, 2016; Paoloni, 2009; Picchi, 2008). As a result, agritourism is a complex sector, involving the production of goods and/or services that would typically confer entrepreneurial status under Article 2195, paragraph. 1, no.1 of the Italian Civil Code. However, due to its link with primary agricultural activities, agritourism qualifies as an agricultural enterprise under Article 2135, paragraph. 3 of the Civil Code (Albisinni, 2006; Carrozza, 1983; Cossu, 2003; Masi, 1973; 1978).

Agritourism¹³ is classified as an agricultural activity on the condition that the use of agricultural premises for agritourism purposes remains secondary to and closely linked with the primary activities of farming¹⁴, forestry and livestock breeding¹⁵.

¹¹ Agritourism activities can be carried out by agricultural entrepreneurs and their family members, with the possibility of employing temporary, permanent and part-time workers. However, landowners, usufructuaries and tenants who have rented the land – as well as any type of commercial entrepreneur – are excluded from engaging in these activities. Those working in agritourism are classified as agricultural workers for social security, insurance and tax purposes. The use of external services is permitted only for complementary activities and services.

¹² Notably, if these activities are conducted by companies (or equivalent entities) not entirely composed of farmers, they are classified as commercial enterprises.

¹³ The regulation of this matter is overseen by Law No. 730 of 1985, later amended by Legislative Decree No. 228 of 2001, and most recently revised by Law No. 96 of 2006.

¹⁴ Court of Cassation, 14 January 2015, No. 490, (*Dir. giur. agr. amb.*, 2016, 2), with a note by Tolino, which states that:

“The assessment, in practice, of the requirements for the connection between agritourism activities and agricultural activities, as well as the prevalence of the latter over the former, must be conducted in light of Article 2135, paragraph 3, of the Civil Code, with the additional provisions of Law No. 96 of 20 February 2006 on agritourism regulation, given that the latter constitutes a parahotel activity that is not limited to the provision of meals and beverages. Consequently, the assessment of its connection with agricultural activity cannot be confined to the predominant utilisation of raw materials sourced from farming. Instead, it must encompass the incorporation of farm facilities (such as guest reception areas) and supplementary resources (both technical and human) that are typically employed in agricultural operations.”

This assertion is corroborated by the precedent set by the Court of Cassation on April 10, 2013, in case No. 8690.

¹⁵ Court of Cassation, 13 April 2007, No. 8851.

Thus, interpretation plays a key role in determining the specific characteristics that an activity must exhibit to be regulated as an agricultural enterprise based on its connection to the main agricultural operation (Alessi, 2011; Buttaro, 2019; Germanò, 2016; Jannarelli and Vecchione., 2009).

For agritourism to exist in the technical sense, the activity must be carried out by an agricultural entrepreneur and remain linked to primarily agricultural operations. This criterion, outlined in Article 2135, paragraph 3 of the Civil Code, stipulates that a service activity is considered related only if it is conducted with the “*predominant use of the farm’s equipment or resources normally used for the agricultural activity in question.*” Specific legislation further defines the scope and characteristics of agritourism in greater detail.

The connection criterion is essential in distinguishing agricultural activities from commercial ones ensuring that only those meeting this requirement fall within the legal framework governing agricultural enterprises. If agritourism activities – regardless of whether they are conducted by an agricultural entrepreneur under Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code (in any of the legal forms in which an agricultural enterprise may be conducted) – fail to meet the connection requirement, they cannot be classified as agricultural activities.

REGIONAL COMPETENCE AND THE INNOVATIONS INTRODUCED BY THE “DECRETO SOSTEGNI-BIS”

Within the framework of these general principles, Article 4 of the aforementioned Law No. 96/2006 delegates to the Regions the authority to establish criteria, limits and administrative requirements for agritourism activities. This delegation aims to adapt regulations to the diverse rural and socio-economic contexts across the country.

The Regions are specifically empowered to:

- Regulate the restoration of existing buildings used by agricultural entrepreneurs for agritourism activities
- Establish criteria, limits and administrative requirements for conducting agritourism activities (for further information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the agrotourism sector, see Zanetti et al., 2022)¹⁶;

¹⁶ The legislative instrument designated as Decree-Law No. 73/2021, which was subsequently amended and converted

- Define criteria for evaluating the relationship between agritourism and agricultural activities, ensuring the latter's predominance
- Set health and hygiene requirements for buildings and equipment used in agritourism operations
- Regulate procedures for issuing agritourism qualification certificates, including the may organization of preparatory courses.

Importantly, the recently introduced *Decreto Sostegni-bis* has effectively removed the reference to working time from Article 4, paragraph 2 of Law No. 96/2006, which establishes the fundamental criteria for defining the relationship between agritourism and agricultural activities. Furthermore, the legislation specifies that individuals engaged in agritourism are considered agricultural workers, even when assessing the interconnection between agricultural and agritourism activities.

The Regions set the administrative procedures for regulating agritourism activities. While there are some regional variations, the procedure generally consists of two phases. The first phase involves verifying the requirements to ensure agritourism activities are connected to and complement agricultural operations. The second phase requires submitting a declaration of activity to the Municipality, along with a health assessment.

As a result of these legislative amendments, the criteria used by regional legislation to determine whether agricultural operations take precedence over agritourism are no longer based on objective parameters. Consequently, in the absence of uniform national provisions, each Region may establish its own criteria for defining the connection between agricultural and agritourism activities.

Reception Activities

At this juncture, it is useful to provide a concise overview of the activities that can be conducted within agritourism. The primary function of an agritourism enterprise is to offer accommodation, either in lodgings¹⁷

into Law No. 106/2021, contains “Urgent measures related to the COVID-19 emergency, for businesses, employment, youth, health, and local services”.

¹⁷ The service is provided by over 82% of agritourism companies (ISTAT data from 2015). However, this figure drops to 45% when only establishments that combine accommodation

or open spaces designated for camper stays (ISMEA, 2024)¹⁸.

Regional laws determine the maximum number of guests or camping pitches permitted for each agricultural enterprise engaged in agritourism camping. These limits may vary based on the total farm area. Additionally, regional regulations establish the minimum required services in designated camping areas, such as lighting, shading, water and electricity outlets, sanitary facilities, and chemical toilet disposal. In general, the requirements for agritourism camping align with those for lower-category campsites, classified as one-star, at the regional level. To accommodate sanitary facilities, the construction of new dedicated structures may be permitted; otherwise, existing farm buildings must be utilized.

All reception activities must primarily rely on instrumental goods essential to the associated agricultural activity¹⁹. However, current regulations allow agricultural entrepreneurs to provide these services using external assets – i.e., assets not directly instrumental to agricultural activity – provided they do not become the predominant factor.

According to Paragraph 3 of Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code, two key criteria must be observed: prevalence and connection. Prevalence requires that the

with dining are considered. Furthermore, the law recommends that during renovations for accommodation creation, the internal characteristics of buildings should be preserved, especially where they exhibit specific features related to the use of materials or construction methods typical of the area.

¹⁸ According to AgrieTour data, in 2023, demand exceeded 4 million arrivals and 15.5 million overnight stays for the first time, with 58% of visitors coming from abroad, primarily from Germany, the Netherlands, and France. The accommodation capacity of the nearly 21,000 agritourism establishments offering lodging includes 297,233 beds, evenly distributed between rooms and independent accommodations, with an average of 14 beds per establishment. Agri-camping consists of 14,482 parking spaces across 1,557 authorized establishments. As for restaurant services, approximately 12,800 agritourism businesses provide 520,000 seats, with an average of 41 seats per establishment.

¹⁹ Decree-Law No. 152 of 6 November 2021, converted into law (L. 233/2021), introduced various support measures for the tourism sector, including agritourism. In particular, Article 1 of the decree provides incentives in the form of a tax credit and non-repayable grants aimed at agricultural enterprises engaged in agritourism activities. These incentives are intended to improve infrastructure, promote innovation, and support the resilience of businesses in the tourism sector.

value of assets used for agricultural purposes exceeds that of assets used for accommodation and hospitality. Connection mandates the assets employed for accommodation and hospitality be regularly used in conjunction with agricultural activities.

A key distinction between agritourism and conventional tourism is the opportunity for guests to engage in various stages of food production, fostering a closer connection with the farming family and rural community.

The Revenue Agency²⁰ (Costato, 2008) has clarified that to meet the normality requirement, assets used for providing goods and services to third parties must be consistently and reliably employed in agricultural activities. However, according to the author, a more appropriate approach would be to assess whether the assets and resources allocated for accommodation and hospitality could also be employed in carrying out the agricultural activities conducted by the business.

Furthermore, Article 2, letter d) of Law No. 96 of 2006 outlines the potential activities of agritourism, which include, *inter alia*, recreational, cultural, educational, sporting, hiking, and horseback riding activities.

Subsequently, Article 4, paragraph 5, stipulates that these activities may be carried out independently of hospitality services and the provision of meals and beverages, provided the connection requirement is respected. Should this requirement not be met, the provision of the relevant goods and services may only be regarded as supplementary and ancillary to the agritourism experience and cannot serve as the basis for charging specific fees. This means that if the goods and resources involved in these activities do not meet the criteria of prevalence and normality, the services provided through them cannot be deemed connected. As a result, if such services are provided to third parties, they will be classified as commercial activities. However, the legislation allows for the provision of these services exclusively to guests of the agritourism establishment, ensuring that they remain part of the agricultural and agritourism activity (Ferrara, 2018).

Finally, it is worth noting that by the end of 2023, the national regulatory framework for agritourism was further strengthened with the introduction of the National Identification Code (CIN) by the Ministry of

Tourism. This measure, established under Article 13-ter of Decree-Law No. 145 of October 18, 2023²¹, was designed to address unauthorized hospitality practices and promote fair competition. The Ministry now assigns a National Identification Code (CIN) to agritourism establishments offering accommodation through a dedicated automated procedure. This new code replaces the previous regional codes and will be incorporated into a new national database of rental properties. It must be prominently displayed outside the establishment and, as with the previous Regional Identification Code (CIR), must be included in all advertisements, regardless of platform, and communicated across various online portals.

Catering Activities

In agritourism, the serving of meals²² and beverages is permitted, with the primary goal of utilizing the farm's own produce²³ as well as goods sourced from local agricultural businesses²⁴. Additionally, the organization of product tastings, including wine pouring (Pedrabissi and Vasta, 2024)²⁵, is allowed.

²¹ Decree-Law No. 145 of October 18, 2023 (Regulation of Tourist Rentals, Short-Term Rentals, Tourist Accommodation Activities, and the National Identification Code), later converted into Law No. 191 of December 15, 2023.

²² It should be noted that agritourism catering can be provided to three distinct groups of visitors: first, to overnight guests only (accommodation, camping); second, to both overnight guests and guests who come to the farm just to eat; and third, only to external guests without the associated provision of accommodation or camping services.

²³ Foods and beverages produced, processed and transformed on an agricultural farm, as well as those derived from raw materials sourced from the farm and obtained through external processing, are considered to be of the farm's own production.

²⁴ This encompasses alcoholic and superalcoholic products, with a particular predilection for those bearing the DOP, IGP, IGT, DOC, and DOCG labels or included in the national register of traditional agri-food products.

²⁵ The term "wine tourism" (*enoturismo*) refers to all activities related to the knowledge of wine carried out at the place of production. This includes visits to cultivation, production, or exhibition sites of tools used for vine growing, wine tasting, and the marketing of the winery's wine products, often in combination with food, as well as educational and recreational initiatives within the wineries. If wine tourism activities are carried out by an agricultural entrepreneur, either individually or in association, they are considered ancillary to agricultural activities under the third paragraph of Article 2135 of the Italian Civil Code.

²⁰ Revenue Agency Circular No. 44 of 15 November 2004, Paragraph 3.

Current regulations do not include catering²⁶ and banqueting²⁷ services as part of the agritourism business offerings, even when products produced on the farm are used²⁸.

Restaurant services within agritourism serve several key functions: First, they are directly linked to the farm's core agricultural activities by offering specialties made from the farm's own produce. Second, they help promote the local agricultural sector by incorporating products from other nearby farms.

More specifically, the restaurant service in agritourism can be characterized as follows:

1. It establishes a clear connection to the company's agricultural activities by the serving of products that are either unprocessed or processed.
2. It supports the promotion of the surrounding area's agricultural products by incorporating them into its own offerings.
3. Furthermore, it enhances locally crafted food products by utilizing and transforming regional agricultural products. This is achieved by complementing the predominant use of the restaurant's own products with those from local agricultural businesses.

The regional regulations establish a comprehensive framework for applying the aforementioned general principles, outlining the necessary criteria and setting minimum percentage quotas for the three previously defined categories. Additionally, they specify the maximum percentage quotas for products that are either not locally available or do not align with the regional agricultural production landscape.

Similarly, the direct sale of farm produce or “0-kilometre” products (Agnoli, 2010), as well as the potential establishment of “farmers’ markets” under Italian

Ministerial Decree No. 301 of 2007²⁹, can be viewed within the same framework as the catering business.

Finally, it's important to note that “farmers’ markets” are typically small markets where producers (farmers) sell their own products, usually fruits and vegetables. These markets promote a short supply chain, meaning direct sales from producer to consumer, which sets them apart from neighborhood markets, where the sellers are intermediaries rather than actual producers.

Educational and sporting activities

In recent years, following the rise of educational farms, an increasing number of farm holiday centers have begun offering recreational, cultural and educational activities. Many have also opened their doors to schools and groups to promote and share rural culture and knowledge of agricultural production.

These farms can provide a wide range of complementary courses. These may include agricultural-related subjects such as vegetable gardening, tasting sessions, or beekeeping, as well as rural crafts and culinary arts, with opportunities to organize cooking courses. Additionally, courses on the natural environment may form part of the educational offerings. Some agritourism establishments also provide internships or courses in a variety of disciplines, including languages, music, yoga, painting and more, broadening the educational and recreational options available to guests.

Moreover, sporting activities, such as trekking and horse-riding³⁰ can be arranged, aimed at promoting the local landscape and its rural heritage, often through agreements with local authorities.

²⁶ A catering contract is an agreement between two parties whereby one party, the caterer, agrees to provide food and beverages to the other party, the consumer, at a specified location on a periodic basis. This activity typically involves the supply of prepared meals to corporate cafeterias, educational establishments, public entities and similar organizations.

²⁷ The term “banqueting” refers to the provision of meals at home for events such as banquets, weddings, and fairs. In addition to the provision of food, the term encompasses the setup of tables and buffets, the provision of table service, and the necessary tables, chairs, linens, cutlery, and dishes for delivering the service. It also includes the subsequent cleanup.

²⁸ Please refer to Cass. 30 September 2019, No. 24271.

²⁹ The decree regulates the methods of marketing agricultural products by promoting the so-called “short supply chain”, understood as “the direct link between the world of production and that of consumption, which, in addition to bringing economic benefits to both parties, emphasizes the link with the production area and supports what is today increasingly appreciated as territorial and multifunctional agriculture.”

³⁰ The concept of “horse tourism” or “rural horseback riding” encompasses a diverse array of activities centered around the utilisation of horses in rural settings. These activities frequently encompass horseback riding tours through rural landscapes, equestrian instruction, trail riding, and other equestrian-related pursuits that facilitate the exploration of natural environments and engagement with rural communities.

However, these activities fall outside the strict parameters of agritourism³¹, as they are not directly connected to the core agricultural operation nor primarily designed to enhance the local territory. They must be offered exclusively to the guests of the agritourism establishment (ISMEA, 2016). Additionally, these activities cannot generate independent revenue, as doing so would cause the income to lose its designation as “agricultural income”³², leading to significant fiscal implications. These recreational activities, while valuable, do not fulfill the requirements outlined in the Framework Law on agritourism. Therefore, they should be seen as supplementary services provided to guests. This is especially relevant for “wellness” activities, which may involve amenities like swimming pools that cannot be considered part of the regular agricultural operations.

From a fiscal perspective, agritourism benefits from streamlined tax rates. A flat rate of 25% is applied for determining taxable income, and a 50% rate applies to VAT on accommodation services paid to the Treasury. However, taxpayers have the option to opt out of these simplified rules by selecting a different approach in the VAT return. This option is binding for three years and remains in effect unless revoked. A reduced rate of 10% applies to accommodation, camping, and catering services, while the standard rate of 22% applies to recreational and cultural activities (such as horseback riding). For payments received from guests, a fiscal receipt or a “talking” receipt (itemizing the various services and their respective amounts) must be issued.

Sustainable Activities

As environmental awareness continues to rise, the agritourism sector is increasingly embracing sustainable

practices³³. In response, many operators have adopted concrete measures aimed at reducing the environmental and social impact of their operations, while also keeping tourists informed about the steps taken.

One prominent model is “organic agritourism,” which prioritizes the preservation and enhancement of the local environment through organic farming methods and green building practices. Key sustainable practices embraced by Italian agritourism operators include minimizing resource waste³⁴, generating energy from renewable sources³⁵, applying organic farming and breeding techniques, reducing waste³⁶, improving accessibility for individuals with disabilities, educating guests about the environmental policies, promoting sustainable transportation, cutting plastic consumption, and employing sustainable management practices.

These eco-conscious initiatives reflect a broader shift in agritourism toward greater environmental stewardship, responding to the growing demand for more sustainable travel options among consumers.

THE AGRITOURISM-AGRIVOLTAICS SYNERGY: A MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agritourism and agrivoltaics are two increasingly interconnected components of sustainable and multifunctional agriculture. Agrivoltaics³⁷, which integrates agricultural

³³ The main standards for implementing an environmental management system are: ISO 14001 – Certification of the Environmental Management System and Regulation (EC) No. 1221/2009 (Eco Management and Audit Scheme).

³⁴ The generation of waste is associated with the utilization of resources in the context of agro-tourism activities. These include, but are not limited to, energy, water and heat consumption.

³⁵ A significant decision for operators is to implement systems for self-generation of energy from renewable sources, such as photovoltaic systems, solar thermal installations, and biomass facilities. Over time, these investments can result in substantial financial savings, partly due to the availability of state incentives.

³⁶ The process of composting, in particular, allows for the transformation of organic waste into fertilizer, thereby serving as an effective method to reduce the amount of waste generated and convert it into new resources for production.

³⁷ In Italy, the terms *agrovoltaico* and *agro-fotovoltaico* are widely employed, while in English the equivalents are *agrivoltaics* or *agro-photovoltaics*. In German, the term is *agri-photovoltaik*; in French, it is referred to as *agrivoltaïque*, *agrivoltaïsme*, or *agri-photovoltaïsme*; and in Japan, the concept is known as solar sharing. The concept of agro-photovoltaics was first introduced in

³¹ The following activities are examples of those that a farmer may choose to offer as part of their agritourism business: a) sports fields: the equipment provided for tourists typically supports outdoor sports, such as tennis, volleyball, basketball, beach volleyball, five-a-side football, bocce, and so forth. Golf is also becoming a popular pursuit, though it is less common due to the extensive land area and high maintenance requirements associated with it. b) archery: this may include courses designed for simulated hunting archery. c) swimming pools. It can be observed that the majority of agritourism businesses engage in these activities, particularly those that lack distinctive tourist, environmental, or artistic attractions and thus must devise alternative strategies to enhance their appeal.

³² In this manner, agritourism would become a commercial enterprise.

production with solar energy generation, offers agritourism enterprises the opportunity to reduce energy costs while enhancing their eco-friendly image. This, in turn, attracts visitors who are particularly sensitive to environmental concerns. At the same time, agritourism facilities can showcase agrivoltaic technologies, demonstrating how traditional agriculture can coexist with energy innovation. This synergy not only supports the transition toward a more sustainable development model but also opens new economic opportunities for agricultural businesses, enabling them to diversify income sources and strengthen ties with the local community and territory.

Agrivoltaics involves installing suspended or integrated solar panels on agricultural land, enabling renewable energy production without disrupting farming activities. Unlike traditional ground-mounted photovoltaic systems, which occupy farmland and limit its use, advanced agrivoltaic systems are designed to preserve and even enhance agricultural productivity³⁸. Elevated

the early 1980s by Adolf Goetzberger, who was then director of the Fraunhofer Institute for Solar Energy Systems (ISE) in Germany. In his seminal publication *Potatoes under Panels* (translated from the original German title), Goetzberger outlined the theoretical possibility of combining agricultural production with solar energy generation, utilizing the same space in a complementary manner. This approach, which was revolutionary at the time, laid the groundwork for the development of the advanced agrivoltaic systems that are known today. A couple of decades later, Italy emerged as one of the pioneers in the practical application of the agrivoltaic model. In Apulia, one of the first agrivoltaic systems in Europe was constructed, with a total capacity of 1 MW, marking a significant milestone in the field of renewable energy and the integration of agriculture and solar energy.

³⁸ Agrivoltaic modules must meet specific technical and regulatory criteria to qualify as advanced systems under Italian legislation. According to Ministerial Decree No. 436 of December 22, 2023, the panels must be installed on elevated supports at a minimum height of 2.5 to 3 metres above the ground. These supports must not utilize concrete foundations or other structures that are difficult to remove, ensuring the reversibility of the installation. Furthermore, the construction methods must guarantee effective compatibility and integration with agricultural activities, providing support for plants or systems such as parcel irrigation, mobile or partial shading, and crop protection. Spacing criteria are also mandated to enable continuous cultivation of the land beneath the panels. The implementation of monitoring systems is obligatory, following guidelines established by the Council for Agricultural Research and Analysis of the Agricultural Economy (CREA) in collaboration with the Energy Services Operator (GSE). These monitoring systems evaluate the impact of the installation on crop productivity, water conservation, and overall agricultural

and spaced structures allow crops to grow beneath the panels while ensuring compatibility with agricultural machinery. Additionally, the microclimate created under the panels helps preserve soil moisture and provides protection for crops against extreme weather events.

The adoption of agrivoltaics in agritourism enterprises offers numerous advantages. First, it allows operators to lower energy costs, improve water resource efficiency, and generate additional revenue by selling surplus energy back to the grid. Furthermore, the production of renewable energy enables agritourism businesses to obtain sustainability certifications, boosting their appeal to a growing market segment that values environmentally responsible travel.

From a tourism perspective, integrating agrivoltaics can become a unique and attractive feature of agritourism facilities. As more travelers seek authentic and sustainable experiences, an agritourism facility that utilizes clean energy and promotes innovative practices can position itself as an ideal destination for responsible tourism. Visitors can engage in educational activities such as guided tours of agrivoltaic installations or workshops on renewable energy, enriching the experience offered by the agritourism enterprise.

Moreover, this synergy strengthens the connection between agriculture, the local community, and the surrounding territory. Agritourism businesses that adopt agrivoltaic solutions become models of sustainable development, demonstrating how tradition and innovation can coexist. This approach can attract the interest of investors, institutions, and consumers, fostering the creation of virtuous local networks and increasing environmental awareness.

An essential aspect of this integration is the regulatory framework governing agrivoltaics within agritourism enterprises. Italian legislation supports the development of renewable energy in agriculture, offering incentives such as subsidized loans and non-repayable grants. The Consolidated Renewable Energy Law (Testo Unico FER) (Tedioli, 2024)³⁹ and the Ministerial Decree on

functionality, ensuring compliance with hybrid land utilization principles.

³⁹ Legislative Decree No. 190 of November 25, 2024, titled “Regulations on Administrative Regimes for Renewable Energy Production” (“Testo Unico FER” or “Decree”), entered into force on December 30, 2024. From that date, the Regions will have 180 days to align with the provisions of the Decree.

Agrivoltaics (December 22, 2023⁴⁰) establish specific criteria for the installation of these systems, including minimum height and spacing requirements between panels to ensure land remains suitable for agricultural purposes.

In addition, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has allocated substantial resources to advance agrivoltaic systems, aiming to promote ecological transition without compromising the agricultural designation of the land⁴¹. Agritourism enterprises can take advantage of these support mechanisms to invest in innovative energy infrastructure, further reducing the environmental impact of their operations.

Agrivoltaics also plays a vital role in enhancing the resilience of agritourism businesses in the face of climate change. By generating renewable energy on-site, businesses reduce reliance on conventional energy sources, stabilize operational costs, and mitigate the risk of energy price fluctuations. Moreover, agrivoltaic installations can contribute to biodiversity conservation by creating shaded microhabitats that support diverse plant and animal species, aligning agritourism even more closely with sustainability principles.

In summary, the agritourism-agrivoltaic synergy provides a tangible solution to contemporary energy and climate challenges, while also opening new economic and cultural opportunities. This integration transforms agricultural enterprises into hubs of sustainability and innovation. By adopting agrivoltaic systems, agritourism facilities enhance their competitiveness, optimize resource efficiency, and offer additional value to their guests. In a global context where ecological transition

is increasingly central, the fusion of agritourism and agrivoltaics represents a winning strategy for promoting a development model that respects the environment, preserves rural traditions, and ensures new growth opportunities for both the agricultural and tourism sectors.

COMPARING AGRITOURISM REGULATIONS IN EUROPE

The Italian agritourism model is deeply rooted in a regulatory framework that ensures a strong link between tourism and primary agricultural activities. This legislative approach is designed to preserve rural identity through strict regional regulations. However, a comparison with other European countries reveals a range of regulatory strategies – some more flexible, as seen in France and Spain, where agritourism serves as both a support mechanism for agriculture and a driver of broader economic and tourist development.

In France, agritourism legislation is notably dynamic and multifunctional, allowing for a more balanced integration of agricultural and tourism activities. The *Loi d’Orientation Agricole* of 2006⁴² played a key role in promoting agricultural diversification by enabling farms – including those operating “*Fermes auberges*” (farm restaurants) and “*gîtes ruraux*” (rural lodging) – to generate up to 50% of their revenue from tourism, provided they maintain active agricultural production (Dubois and schmitz, 2011; Marcotte et al., 2006). This framework offers greater flexibility in business management, fostering innovation and diversification while preserving the core agricultural identity. Complementing this flexibility is a certification system, such as the “*Bienvenue à la ferme*” label, which promotes authenticity in services and guarantees high-quality offerings.

⁴⁰ Decree No. 436 of December 22, 2023, concerning the Support Scheme for Photovoltaic Systems on Agricultural Land (so-called “Innovative Agrivoltaic”) – the Implementation of Article 14, Paragraph 1, of Legislative Decree No. 199/2021; Mission 2, Component 2, Investment 1.1 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)

⁴¹ The provisions of Ministerial Decree No. 63/20241, in conjunction with the Operational Rules of the GSE (*Gestore dei Servizi Energetici*), delineate the eligibility criteria and incentive mechanisms for agrivoltaic projects. To qualify for funding, installations must meet agricultural and landscape sustainability requirements, including a minimum elevation of photovoltaic panels between 2.5 and 3 meters above the ground level, and sufficient spacing between modules to enable continuous cultivation underneath. These technical criteria are mandatory for all operators seeking access to NRRP funds, which provide non-repayable grants covering up to 40% of the installation cost.

⁴² The *Loi d’Orientation Agricole* of January 5, 2006, has had a positive impact on the growth of rural tourism in France, encouraging agricultural businesses to adapt to the needs of the tourism market. The “*fermes auberges*” and “*gîtes ruraux*” have become sought-after destinations for tourists seeking authentic experiences related to nature and local gastronomy. Furthermore, the possibility of receiving tax incentives and EU funds has stimulated the modernization and professionalization of agricultural businesses involved in tourism activities. This legislation represents a milestone in the evolution of the French agricultural sector, allowing agricultural businesses to diversify their activities through tourism, enhancing economic and social sustainability, while simultaneously ensuring the protection of natural resources and the improvement of the rural landscape.

This certification not only validates the authenticity of the tourist experience but also opens the door to fiscal incentives and European funding aimed at promoting short supply chains and enhancing local production. A distinctive feature of the French model is its ability to integrate agritourism with the direct sale of local products, fostering a direct connection between tourists and producers. This connection not only helps valorize gastronomic heritage but also contributes to the economic sustainability of agricultural enterprises.

Spain's agritourism framework is less uniform, as regulatory powers are delegated to the 17 autonomous communities, each defining its own criteria for rural tourism. This decentralization has created a fragmented landscape with significant regional differences. In Catalonia⁴³, for example, agritourism establishments must ensure that at least 60% of the food served comes from the same agricultural enterprise. In contrast Andalusia's, regulations are more relaxed, prioritizing experiential tourism – such as hiking and outdoor activities – even without agricultural production requirements. Consequently, Spain adopts a more diversified agritourism model, where recreational and cultural activities, such as cooking classes or participating in grape harvests, often take center stage in the tourist experience. While Spanish regulations do not impose strict requirements on agricultural production, they encourage a strong connection to the territory by promoting activities that allow visitors to immerse themselves in local culture and traditions, while also enhancing the rural landscape. In some regions, agritourism is viewed as a key resource for revitalizing less developed rural areas. To support

this, fiscal incentives and grants are available to agricultural businesses that diversify their tourism offerings.

When examining agritourism models across Europe, it's interesting to note the approach taken by Germany. While less detailed than the French or Spanish frameworks, Germany has developed a model that emphasises the integration of tourism with agriculture. Agritourism in Germany⁴⁴ falls under the broader category of “rural tourism”, where farms are free to offer hospitality, yet the focus remains on immersing visitors in daily agricultural activities, such as fruit picking or animal care (Egger, 2009).

A notable example can also be found in the Netherlands⁴⁵, where agritourism is closely linked to environmental sustainability. Here, there is a strong emphasis

⁴⁴ In Germany, agritourism is primarily regulated by the Federal Rural Tourism Law (*Landtourismusgesetz*), which is part of the broader tourism legislation. One of the key regulations concerning German agritourism is the Law on Rural Tourism and Agritourism Accommodation (*Gesetz zur Förderung des ländlichen Tourismus und der ländlichen Unterkunftsbetriebe*), which promotes the development and diversification of tourism activities in rural areas. At the local level, the *Länder* (federal states) may adopt specific regulations that define in detail how agritourism operates, including quality standards for accommodations and related agricultural activities. In some regions, such as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, there are incentives and support programs for agricultural businesses that engage in tourism activities. Additionally, the German Agricultural Law (*Agrarrecht*) establishes that agritourism activities must be complementary to the primary agricultural business, with some flexibility to allow agricultural enterprises to diversify without compromising their primary agricultural function.

⁴⁵ In the Netherlands, agritourism is primarily regulated by the *Wet op de Ruimtelijke Ordening* (Spatial Planning Act), which outlines the general regulations for land use, including the possibility for farms to engage in tourism activities. Specifically, the law allows for the diversification of agricultural activities, such as agritourism, but stipulates that these activities should not compromise the primary agricultural function. Furthermore, there are specific regulations for “boerderijcamping” (farm campsites) and “agrarisch toerisme” (agricultural tourism), which are governed by local regulations established by municipalities and provinces. These regulations include criteria such as the requirement to maintain the primary agricultural activity and ensure that tourism activities complement the farming operation. Agritourism in the Netherlands can also benefit from tax incentives, particularly for promoting sustainable farming practices and integrating tourism activities within the rural context. The most relevant law for agritourism in the Netherlands is the *Omgevingswet* (Environmental and Planning Act), which regulates land use and compatible activities, including agritourism.

⁴³ The regulation governing agritourism in Catalonia is primarily found in *Ley 13/2002*, of June 21, on Tourism of Catalonia, which established the legal framework for tourism in the region, including rural tourism and agritourism activities. This law, in combination with other regional regulations, defined the criteria for regulating rural accommodations, including agritourism and rural houses. Additionally, the *Ley 4/2008*, of April 24, on the Improvement of the Quality of Tourism in Catalonia introduced further provisions related to the quality and certification of rural tourist establishments, promoting sustainability and quality tourism in rural areas. At a more specific level, local regulations in Catalonia stipulate that agritourism establishments must produce a significant portion of the food they offer to guests, with the required percentage of agricultural production varying depending on the type of tourism activity. These criteria were established to ensure that agricultural activity remains a central component of agritourism establishments.

on ecological land management and environmental education, with tourists actively participating in sustainable agricultural practices. Similarly, the growing focus on sustainability in Scandinavian countries like Sweden⁴⁶ and Norway⁴⁷ has shaped their agritourism models. In these countries, agritourism is often set in pristine natural landscapes, and regulations promote the integration of tourism with environmental education and the adoption of eco-friendly lifestyles.

Ultimately, agritourism models across Europe reflect the cultural diversity and varied economic and social priorities of each country. While Italy follows a more rigid

approach centred on agriculture, France and Spain favor more flexible models that encourage multifunctionality and diversification. Meanwhile, Germany and the Netherlands place greater emphasis on blending agriculture with environmental sustainability, presenting a vision of rural tourism that extends beyond simple hospitality. Despite these differences, these models share a common goal: fostering a harmonious relationship between agriculture, tourism, and sustainability, while adapting to the unique territorial and cultural characteristics of each country.

CONCLUSIONS

Italian agritourism stands as a model of sustainable development, successfully blending tradition, innovation, and environmental responsibility. Over the past few decades, the sector has evolved by diversifying its offerings to meet emerging tourist demands, while simultaneously emphasizing the value of both territory and high-quality agri-food products. However, to sustain its growth and maintain a competitive edge, agritourism must strengthen its role as a steward of local heritage. This can be achieved through enhanced collaboration with local stakeholders – from agricultural enterprises to public institutions – creating a more integrated and competitive offering that positions agritourism as a true driver of territorial development. Several establishments are already investing in more sophisticated hospitality services, such as high-end dining and wellness experiences akin to those found in luxury hotel spas, demonstrating that agritourism can evolve without sacrificing its rural identity.

Furthermore, Italy can benefit from valuable comparative insights drawn from international models to elevate service quality. For instance, France's "*Bienvenue à la ferme*" certification system guarantees high standards and promotes the authenticity of rural experiences through fiscal incentives and access to European funding. This approach could be adapted to the Italian context. Similarly, Germany's focus on integrating educational and participatory activities, such as fruit picking and animal care, has proven successful in providing visitors with immersive hands-on experiences. These examples suggest that expanding interactive elements within agritourism could strengthen its ties to the land and enhance the appeal of high-quality agri-food products.

⁴⁶ In Sweden, agritourism is primarily regulated by general rural tourism regulations and sustainable agriculture laws. One of the key laws is the *Lag om landsbygdsturism* (Rural Tourism Act), which governs tourism activities in rural areas, promoting the integration of agriculture and tourism. The law allows agricultural businesses to develop tourism activities, such as accommodation and catering, provided that these activities are closely linked to the primary agricultural functions. In practice, agritourism in Sweden mainly develops through concepts such as "gårdshotell" (farm hotels) and "bondgårdsbesök" (farm visits). Agricultural enterprises must ensure that tourism activities do not interfere with agricultural production but instead promote diversification and sustainability. Additionally, many Swedish agritourism initiatives are supported by public incentives and funding, particularly related to environmental conservation and biodiversity promotion. Swedish agritourism is also influenced by the European Union agricultural policy, as Sweden is subject to the common regulations of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy), which provides funding for supporting and diversifying agricultural enterprises through tourism activities, provided they align with sustainability and environmental preservation goals.

⁴⁷ In Norway, agritourism is regulated by various laws related to rural land management and agricultural activities. One of the main laws governing the sector is the *Plan- og bygningsloven* (Planning and Building Act), which allows agricultural businesses to diversify their activities, including tourism, as long as they do not compromise the primary agricultural function. The law stipulates that tourism activities must be compatible with rural landscape management and sustainable agriculture. Additionally, the *Landbruksloven* (Agriculture Act) sets guidelines for sustainability and the management of natural resources, including incentives for activities that promote rural tourism as part of agricultural diversification. In practice, agritourism in Norway includes activities such as rural hospitality, experiential tourism (e.g., hiking and traditional cooking courses), and direct sales of agricultural products. The Norwegian government also provides financial incentives and support for agricultural initiatives that integrate tourism as part of a strategy for sustainable rural development. These policies align with the European Union's rural development goals, which Norway participates in through specific agreements.

Technological innovation will be pivotal in shaping the future of agritourism. The adoption of digital platforms for reservations, management tools, and advanced marketing strategies is already transforming the sector, improving operational efficiency and extending its reach both domestically and internationally. However, it is crucial that digitalization complements, rather than detracts from, the authenticity of the rural experience. A seamless integration of modern technology with traditional practices is essential to preserve the unique essence of agritourism. Simultaneously, the sector must confront pressing challenges, such as climate change, which impacts crop yields and natural resources, and the growing competition from other tourism sectors. To thrive, agritourism must continuously adapt to the evolving expectations of travelers who increasingly seek authentic and sustainable experiences.

Agritourism in Italy not only safeguards rural and cultural heritage but also emerges as a powerful tool for territorial development and a model for responsible tourism. By integrating sustainable agricultural practices – such as organic farming and agrivoltaics – alongside high-quality tourism services, this sector demonstrates how economic, environmental, and social objectives can be harmoniously achieved. The future success of Italian agritourism will depend on its ability to innovate continually while remaining true to its core values of sustainability and authenticity. It will also require the adoption of best practices from international models to enhance service quality. In sum, Italian agritourism is positioned to lead the future of tourism, setting a global benchmark for sustainable rural development.

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