

Visitors Can Tour 'Big Food' in Indiana

M.L. JOHNSON, Associated Press

FAIR OAKS, Ind. (AP) — Farms around the nation have tried to capitalize on consumers' interest in how food is produced with tours showcasing organic vegetable production, urban agriculture and animals that graze on lush pastures.

The mammoth industrial farms that produce most of the food that most Americans eat, however, remain largely off-limits.

An exception is in northern Indiana where tourists can visit a high-tech dairy farm, tour a massive creamery where cheese and ice cream are made and see piglets born on a hog farm. The collection of properties known as [Fair Oaks Farms](#) [1] draws as many as 500,000 visitors per year.

Fair Oaks includes 10 dairy farms with 37,000 cows and a 2,400-pig farm on about 19,000 acres (7,700 hectares) about 70 miles (113 kilometers) south of Chicago. It opened to the public in 2004 and most visits start at the Dairy Adventure Center, where you can wander through a series of exhibits and see a short film on dairy farming before boarding a bus to a farm.

You'll see animals while you're there, but none of the farm tours involve contact with them because of concerns about diseases that visitors might carry on their shoes, clothing, skin or hair. Germs that don't threaten people or pets could be harmful to the cows or pigs.

The dairy bus passes a digester, one of two where manure is turned into biogas to power the farms and their fleet of trucks. It rolls into a barn, driving down a wide center aisle with cows in pens on each side. Most cows lay in stalls lined with sand that cushions their bodies. The stalls are defined by bars on each side, the rear is open, allowing the cows to back out into common areas with more space to move around.

One end of the barn has a separate pen for cows about to give birth, and it's possible see them in labor, perhaps with a calf's hooves beginning to emerge.

Fair Oaks provides other opportunities to witness birth as well. A barn near the Dairy Adventure Center provides theater-style seating for visitors to watch cows deliver their calves behind glass walls. A traffic light outside provides updates, with orbs that say "soon," "hooves" and "head."

Fair Oaks' pig farm, which opened last year, has rooms where visitors can look down from a landing through glass and see sows in labor or giving birth. Employees do regular presentations, bringing minutes-old piglets into a glass booth with an intercom system that allows visitors see the baby up close and ask questions.

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Among the more interesting facts: Piglets are born with their eyes open and begin moving immediately. They tussle and romp before falling asleep on heated mats.

In other rooms, you might see farm workers trying to breed sows, clipping dried unbiblical cords from days-old piglets and trimming the needle-sharp points from piglets' eye teeth to keep them from hurting the sows or each other.

Parents who take young children should be prepared for blood and workers reaching into animals to pull out piglets or calves that have gotten trapped. The most disturbing operations, such as castration and euthanasia, are done out of sight of the public, however.

The dairy bus tour includes a stop at a milking barn with an enormous dairy-ground. Cows entering the milking parlor amble onto a rotating platform, where workers connect suction cups to their udders. Within two rotations, the cow has finished being milked. The equipment is disconnected, and she uses a second gate to leave the parlor.

Fair Oaks uses the milk to produce cheese, yogurt and ice cream sold in its cafe. A steakhouse is under construction, and exhibits focusing on pork, corn and other common crops are expected to open in the fall.

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Links:

[1] <http://fofarms.com/>