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VIII. QUALITY, SAFETY AND AUTHENTICITY OF PRODUCTS

The Safeguarding of Agricultural Food Production in Harsh Environments and the Optional Quality Term “Mountain Product”. The Piedmontese Mountain (North-West Italy) Cheese Makers’ Opinions

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Abstract. The importance of food production in rural areas, specifically for the mountain areas, has been confirmed by the European Union with the introduction of the Optional quality term “Mountain Product”. However, are stakeholders interested in the use and implementation of this new European tool? Aim. This paper aims at investigating into the answers to this question. The data was collected with the scope of knowing what the needs of cheese makers are, so as to further develop their important activities. Material and Methods. Firstly, a Piedmontese mountain area was taken into consideration and, secondly, some producers of Piedmontese traditional cheeses were chosen as samples. They were provided with a semi-structured questionnaire to gather information on their opinions about this EU commercial tool and real needs.

Keywords: Optional Quality Term, Mountain Product, Piedmont, Cheese makers, Traditional cheeses
Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the European Union has introduced and implemented numerous tools for the enhancement of food products. During this period, various authors verified the opportunities and advantages available according to the Geographical Indication. On the one hand evidencing positive results (Bouamra-Mechemache and Chaaban, 2010; Tiberio and Diniz, 2012; Ismea Qualivita, 2013), whilst on the other, highlighting some negative factors e.g. the evanescent difference between Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) in some cases (Lamarque and Lambin, 2015), or the low diffusion of Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) (DOOR Database; Varese, 2016) disapproved for the weak tie with the territory (Peira, 2014).

Literature Review

With the EU Regulation No. 1151/2012, the European Union introduced a series of new tools for the enhancement of food products in rural areas, under the group name of Optional Quality Term (OQT). The following Commission Delegated EU Regulation No. 665/2014 indicated the conditions of use of the optional quality term ‘mountain product’ to support the implementation of a mountain value chain (Santini et al., 2013). This new OQT is a tool aimed at promoting local development, maintaining the production activities in mountain areas and redistributing wealth, whilst, at the same time, promoting the territory.

Since the introduction of the “mountain product” term it has been properly defined and officially regulated. Moreover, it brought to light some critical elements including whether the potential stakeholders saw an effective need for this term (Bonadonna and Rosati, 2015). The initial preliminary analysis on this issue underlined that the primary food producers wanted a change in how information as
to the European initiatives is disseminated and that they showed a scarce interest in
the implementation of a labelling scheme, in particular for the supply chains with
complicated requirements such as breeding (Bonadonna, 2016).

In fact, the EU Delegated Regulation 665/2014, Article 1, stipulates that
“The term ‘mountain product’ may be applied to products made from animals that
are reared for at least the last two thirds of their life in those mountain areas, if the
products are processed in such areas” or, in alternative, “the term ‘mountain
product’ may be applied to products made from transhumant animals that have been
reared for at least one quarter of their life in transhumance grazing on pastures in
mountain areas”. Moreover, Article 2 specifies that “feedstuffs for farm animals
shall be deemed to come essentially from mountain areas if the proportion of the
annual animal diet that cannot be produced in mountain areas, expressed as a
percentage of dry matter, does not exceed 50% and, in the case of ruminants, 40%”.

In this context, the authors decided to analyze the producers’ perception
related to the “mountain product” term to obtain suggestion from the potential direct
users and an elevated value supply chain was identified.

**Material and methods**

The identified sample for the survey is made up of six cheese factories
localized in Piedmontese mountain areas. They produce traditional cheeses of the
Piedmontese Alpine Arch, based on the Italian Ministerial Decree (DM 350/99),
which is dedicated to Italian Traditional Foodstuffs. In fact, the selected cheese
factories produce Toma della Valsesia, Toma Biellese, Maccagno, Toma del Lait
Brusc, Nostrale d’Alpe and Toumin del Mel, all of which are indicated in the
National List.

A semi-structured telephone survey was implemented so that both the
questions and their order could be changed according to the individual interviewed
in line with other authors (Pitrone, 1984; Fideli & Marradi, 1996). The questions
covered: the location of milk producers that supply the cheese factories, the satisfaction of regulation requirements, the perception of OQT “mountain product”. The interviews were done from September to November 2015.

Results and discussion

The cheese factory sites are located in mountain areas, even though some of the milk suppliers that provide the supply chains to produce cheeses are not always in mountain territories. In fact, there is only one cheese factory that is supplied by exclusively mountain areas. However, the others related that they have a mixed supply, i.e. 60%, 50%, 48%, 10% respectively and one has no mountain suppliers at all.

Before the interview, only 1/6 cheese makers knew the OQT “mountain product”. Four producers thought that this tool was useful for most milk suppliers. One producer believed he was able to implement the “mountain product” term easily. In fact, he set-up his own tracking systems that allows for a separation of the milk batches and to trace the internal path. However, it is the supplier’s tracking systems that causes the problem here, as the supporting material used by his milk producers rises more than a few doubts! Another producer said that his suppliers do not produce fodder in agreement with the requirements established according to law. Indeed, he is of the opinion that the implementation of the European scheme is more difficult; in any case, he said that he intends to introduce some mountain products in his proposal.

Two producers believed that the “mountain product” term could be used for 100% of their production, whilst another two believed it covered 15% and 10% of their production respectively. The remaining 2 producers were unable to define the quantity but they thought that a part of products could take advantage of the OQT “mountain product” term.
Four cheese makers declared that this OQT was very useful for their production and activities. One producers suggested to survey the milk makers and the consumers’ perception before evaluating the European labelling scheme “mountain product”.

All of the 6 producers declared that they were willing to pay the internal control system costs and 4/6 were also willing to pay for the external controls necessary to verify the supporting documentation. One of these declared that he would have paid up to 3% of the product value. Moreover, in this context, the Rural Development Programme set-up by the Piedmont Region dedicates funds to cover the cost of implementation of such quality schemes.

**Conclusion and limitations**

The valorization of mountain foodstuffs is an issue that has involved all mountain operators. Further complexities have been identified at a European and national level. These include the lack of regulation as to the pre-existing symbols and terms dedicated to mountain areas. Another point was the permission for process operations that take place outside the mountain areas, which is allowed provided that the distance from the mountain area in question does not exceed 30 km (EU Delegated Regulation No. 665/2104, Art. 6) (Bonadonna and Rosati, 2015). However, there are some authors who strive to meet the mountain operators’ needs e.g. the need to recognize the mountain products through a unique mark (McMorran et al., 2015).

As we are aware that our small study sample may limit the credibility of the results, we believe that this study should be extended to all stakeholders, consumers included, if it is to be successful at a European level. Overall, the interviewed operators had a positive perception of OQT “mountain product” and all of them considered the tool implementation into their entrepreneurial strategies.
Moreover, another limitation is that the sample size does not allow for a wide perception of whether all the European cheese makers will and/or can respect the regulation requirements. Indeed, we are now taking steps to disseminate this study to include all milk producers in our Piedmontese territories.

References


