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## RE-TOOLING FOOD HERITAGE: REVITALIZING COMMUNITIES AND LANDSCAPES

### ABSTRACT

Crafting futures is the most ambitious and timely challenge for food heritage. This requires re-tooling the notion of heritage as not only memory of the past, meaning of the present, and legacy for the future, but also as an act of re-imagination, re-articulation, and re-production of food and its conditions of possibility.

I will interpret the conference theme, ‘revitalizing foodways and food heritage’, in the light of a longitudinal ethnography with mountain cheese-makers in the Italian Alps.<sup>1</sup> Building on ongoing anthropological research on food, solidarity, and the reinvention of heritage in Europe, I propose a critical exploration of their nexus. Cheese is my chosen entry point to bring to the surface broader discourses and practices around food heritage that shape local communities and landscapes. In particular, I will describe the ‘heritage arena’, namely the competitive market for traditional producers, and its recent, post-Covid-19 developments.

The story of my case study in brief goes like this: in 2014 the cheese-makers of a tiny valley in Lombardy, Val Taleggio, obtained an EU Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) for one of their mountain cheeses, *Strachitunt*. I will show how this strategic choice is part of a dynamic process, re-tooling and revitalising food heritage, not only for local economies, but also for working landscapes and more broadly, for

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to this study: Cristina Grasseni: Re-tooling Food Heritage: Revitalizing Communities and Landscapes. In Anikó Báti and Patricia Lysaght (eds.): *Living Eating Habits, Revitalized Foodways and the Concepts of Tradition and Food Heritage*. Budapest: ELTE RCH Institute of Ethnology – Museum of Ethnography, 2025. pp. 23–34.

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future-making. This process harnesses the discourse and performance of *typicity*, of patrimony, and of locality: as markers of distinction, as boundary-making tools, as keywords articulating a vision for sovereignty over one's future.

In my book I compared the stories of significant neighbours of *Strachitunt*: Bitto, Branzi and Formai de Mut – which are partly or entirely produced in the mountains north of Bergamo, and Taleggio and *stracchino* – which are nowadays associated with the Lombard lowlands – but originate in transhumant traditions of moving herds from the uplands to the lowlands and back again.<sup>2</sup> The divergent histories, uneven prestige and commercial fortunes of these cheeses put the story of *Strachitunt* in perspective. All of them originate from a tradition of mobile dairy husbandry and cheese-making, straddling peaks and plains, summers and winters, fresh grass and hay, craft and industry. Made in the high-pastures of the valleys north of Bergamo, Bitto, Formai de Mut and Branzi are variations of one ideal-type upland cheese: cooked, fat, round-shaped, made in the summer and matured in the winter; yellowish 10-kilo wheels with a brushed and hardened crust – high-prestige, similar to Parmesan or Grana. On the other hand, Taleggio and *stracchino* are respectively the certified and non-certified versions of fresh, uncooked, square, whitish, soft, flowery-crust slabs of two kilos at most, made for common consumption and cheap markets.

Upland cheese is for discerning and affluent markets. Lowland cheese is the unassuming by-product of transhumance. In fact, this soft white square cheese, called *strachì* in the Bergamasque dialect, was documented in the second half of the 19th century in the first survey of Italian agriculture after unification under one kingdom, in 1882. Count Stefano Jacini stated that 'the word *stracchino* derives from the small soft cheeses produced during the journey from the mountain to the lowland and vice versa. These [herders] make it swiftly in their resting stations, with milk from tired cows after their long journey'.<sup>3</sup> *Strac* means 'tired' in Bergamasque dialect, hence *strachì*, the Bergamasque word for *stracchino*. Transhumant herders were necessarily also cheese-makers. They would transform their cows' milk while stopping on the journey taking the cattle from the upper pastures of the Lombard Alps, after summer grazing, to the lower reaches of the rivers, for the winter. They

2 Grasseni, Cristina: *The Heritage Arena* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017).

3 Jacini, Stefano: *Atti della Giunta per la Inchiesta Agraria e sulle condizioni della classe agricola. Volume VI, Tomo I, Fasc. I. Relazione del Commissario Conte Stefano Jacini, Senatore del Regno, sulla DECIMA CIRCOSCRIZIONE (provincia di Pavia – meno i circondari di Voghera e Bobbio – Milano, Cremona, Mantova, Como, Sondrio, Bergamo e Brescia)* (Rome: Forzani e C., Tipografi del Senato, 1882), 27.

could not even afford to heat the milk, and would curdle it at milking temperature, hastily, in makeshift stations.

This production technique, covering a very broad area though pivoting around alpine valleys, eventually achieved a geographic indication in 1979 as ‘Taleggio’ cheese. Unfortunately, through, the protocol of production for Taleggio cheese granted rights to an area as big as half of northern Italy, straddling Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto. Taleggio cheese failed its valley of origin – Val Taleggio – at least in the eyes of its residents and entrepreneurs, because the protected denomination commercially favoured lowland, large dairy producers who kept production abundant and prices low. An unexploited ‘patrimony’, a lost ‘typicity’, Taleggio cheese failed to deliver distinction for its valley. It failed to deliver an exploitable unique selling point for the local cheese-makers. This failure looms large in the memory of the people of Val Taleggio, a dwindling community of about 800 residents, who resent having been forgotten and marginalised by the dairy economy they gave their name to.

All of these cheeses are connected by the history and eventual disappearance of transhumance. But transhumance is appropriated strategically by each, in different, innovative ways. The production of heritage-value for *Strachitunt* cheese was an extended process that brought future-making to the fore, aligning socio-economic actors to obtain a Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) for their valley *only*. This pivotal moment is only one in a longer history, during which Val Taleggio lost ‘cultural ownership’ of their Taleggio cheese. In effect, the valley’s consortium fought for a cheese of their own by another name. They researched the history of *strachi* – a humble transhumant cheese – and won a PDO for *Strachitunt* (which is, they claim, a very specific type of round-shaped *strachi* made during the summer season in the high pastures of their valley, *only*).

Geographic indications play a key role in supporting food economies, in Italy and beyond. Therefore, the cheese-makers of Val Taleggio claimed a PDO for *another* cheese, from their valley *only*. They re-invented *Strachitunt*. A consortium ‘for the safeguarding of Strachitunt cheese’ was established in October 2002, but it took them more than eleven years to obtain a PDO, mostly due to appeals and conflicts with other producers in the neighbouring valleys and lowlands. The EU-wide PDO trademark for *Strachitunt* was eventually registered in March 2014.

The public audition for the protocol of production of *Strachitunt* in 2010 showed how economic and political actors compete and sometimes converge to define heritage-food in the contemporary market, speaking at once to national and European regulators, as well as to very local competition. Cast as distant and inscrutable, European normative agencies magnify and heighten very local but very real animosities. This was a veritable war, a war of the cheeses, fought with press-releases, telefax, appeals to the regional government and the Ministry of Agriculture, archival research, public testimonies, and counter-research. For the few hundred people involved, the cause of obtaining a Europe-wide protected denomination for *Strachitunt* was believed to make the difference between becoming a dying valley or following in the footprints of other local producers, such as the 'Bitto rebels' – heritage cheese-makers who fought bitterly, and, commercially, won, with the help of Slow Food, against larger consortia.

The metaphor of the arena (both a theatre and a fighting ground) allows me to dwell on the rhetorical and practical ways in which people pragmatically balance authenticity and anachronism, opportunistic choices and passionate identification in heritage, as both a medium and a tool to reproduce themselves as meaning-making beings. The entrepreneurs, farmers and administrators of Val Taleggio lay claim to their cheese as a form of sovereignty over local resources. To fight and negotiate for a geographic indication was in this case a political strategy of future-making. The war metaphor underlines how the reinvention of cheese as a heritage item is a process to which many competing actors concur – key local producers, food journalists, local and regional politicians and civil servants.

The trope of a performed drama allows me to expand this group of stakeholders into a broader 'imagined community' of cheese-makers, cheese-mongers and cheese *eaters* (including local consumers, but also exporters and mediators, designers and marketing experts, food activists and connoisseurs). This is consistent with scholarship underlining the transition, in heritage-language and practice, from an expectation of communities 'bearing' cultural heritage to one of 'participating' in it.<sup>4</sup> As an example, I quote an audio-recorded public speech by the President of the Consortium for the Safeguarding of *Strachitunt*cheese in 2006:

What is a consortium? It is a group of entrepreneurs who represent the entire value and supply chain of one product. These entrepreneurs have realised that

4 Adell, Nicolas – Bendix, Regina – Bortolotto, Chiara and Tauschek, Markus, eds.: *Between Imagined Communities and Communities of Practice* (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2015), 8.

they own a product, which has been handed down to them from previous generations and that they can make. They consider this product unique, and in danger of being imitated. A consortium is an institution that preserves something that can be *reinvented*. Those who make this product somewhere else, in a different guise, under different conditions, *invent* it. This is a fundamental distinction. We can do a few things to make our product in slightly updated ways, with new tools and everything that innovation has offered us in recent decades. But we are not *inventing* anything. We are *reinventing* something that already existed, maybe dwindling, but continuously. We give it a new image, new clothes, and a tipicity [*una tipicità*]. If we'll be able to do so, we'll make it *consistent*, and we'll put it back on the market.

Typicity here is not a synonym of tradition. It designates both environmental and historical circumstances but it is intrinsically dynamic, broader and by definition strategic. Precisely because of its intrinsically strategic character, however, this reinvention is ongoing: it is constantly re-pitched and re-performed in relation to the actors' reciprocal repositioning.

Pierre Bourdieu, talking about 'the field of cultural production', explains that it is structured around the distribution of specific properties associated with success (such as literary prestige). Michael Di Giovine adapts Bourdieu's analysis of 'positions and position-takings'<sup>5</sup> to 'fields of heritage production'<sup>6</sup>. These mediate and connect the social production of recognition (such as tipicity, for food) with the very serious business of making a living, for the socioeconomic actors involved. Following Appadurai, the politics of authenticity and the politics of connoisseurship are but two of the forms that 'politics', understood as 'the link between regimes of value and flows of commodities', can take. His use of the word 'arena' pertains specifically to how 'large scale exchanges' interact with 'more humble flows of things'.<sup>7</sup>

While this was a strategy for revitalisation of the patrimony, community, and working landscape of the valley, the certification profoundly transformed the heritage of *Strachitunt* (as it did with Taleggio cheese more than thirty years before). *Strachitunt* PDO is a post-transhumant reinvention of a cheese-making tradition that historically connected alpine pastures and lowlands. From an almost lost recipe, a remnant of transhumance, *Strachitunt* was made into a cheese made *all-year-round* in Val Taleggio, both high up in the pastures and down in the village

5 Bourdieu, Pierre: *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 30.

6 Di Giovine, Michael: *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

7 Appadurai, Arjun: 'Commodities and the Politics of Value', in Appadurai, Arjun ed.: *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

cooperative. This innovation included the reinvention of this cheese as a patrimony of the entire community (not only of the economic stakeholders that are directly involved).

This only worked as a result of active and continuous re-positionings, including commercial tactics, symbolic politics, and the pervasive performance of a culture of gastronomic discernment (sensorial, historical, genealogical, geographic, agronomic and culinary). Against this elaborate backdrop, heritage is performed. Cheese-makers perform their own roles, showcasing hand milking, or curdling, or cheese-tasting; at tourist venues, professional fairs, and eco-museum installations (for example, at the Slow Food Salon in Turin, or during free educational workshops in the valley). In the cultural mobilisation of food as heritage, the aspects of guardianship and reinvention are conjoined.

Claiming control of a cheese as heritage falls nothing short of advocating sovereignty over a valley, according to the political alliances at hand, pre-existing rivalries, and margins for manoeuvring. Entire localities are called into play in the moral labour of properly harnessing, or 'valorizing', one's heritage. 'Valorizing' involves a number of social actors (not only dairy farmers, cheese-makers or refiners but also public administrators, consumers' associations and tourist entrepreneurs, for instance). It requires that they cooperate to identify, describe, study, safeguard, extol, reproduce and market specific items of tangible and intangible heritage. Local politicians, entrepreneurs and activists skillfully trade in the most viable currency of the moment (whether European PDOs or Slow Food Presidia).

Entrepreneurs and administrators choose divergent paths to 'valorize' their cheeses. Small and fiercely territorial geographic indications such as *Strachitunt* coexist with other forms of safeguarding other niche productions in the same area. Some opt for the distinction of hard-core authenticity, with support of powerful associations such as Slow Food – as in the case of Bitto. Others use more malleable but less distinctive quality certifications such as quality trademarks bestowed by local chambers of commerce. Others linger between quantity and quality, caught in the chasm, without being able to leverage sustainable prices.

Rethinking livelihoods through heritage, especially in the mountains today, is not just a question of marketing but of political imagination. It calls for the added value of heritage to be made evident and relevant not only to consumers, but to 'communities'. The result is a skillful *and* precarious reinvention of the everyday,

often dependent on selling ambivalent notions, including the very concept of community.

One occasion during which the purchase of notions such as community and solidarity, rather than distinction, became evident, was during the Covid-19 pandemic. The emergency facilitated a convergence – between food activists and heritage food producers. Just as Corona was breaking out in Bergamo, the Consortium for *Strachitunt* happened to hold a conference in Val Taleggio bringing together representatives of Bergamo's solidarity economy networks and of other cheese consortia. They had made an exceptional financial and communication effort, inviting a broader-than-usual palette of speakers, from environmental scientists to environmentalist organisations, from representatives of international associations of craft cheese makers to spokespersons of alternative food networks.

The mission of the three-day meeting was to rethink local cheese production in the name of future-making, weaving together and mingling diverse and even contradictory keywords and networks: the Made in Italy and sustainability, family, territory and global networks. The prickly question was, whether geographic indications were not beginning to look like straitjackets, tying producers too much to their consortia and to boundary-making, rather than creating new alliances.

Now, the area of production for *Strachitunt* is very close to the town of Bergamo, which headlined in world news in the Spring of 2020 as a European hotspot in the Covid-19 pandemic. On the first day of the symposium, 21 February 2020, Covid-Patient number 1 was identified in Lombardy. On 23 February, patients were in hospital with grave symptoms. A strict lockdown was enforced on March 8th nationwide, thus impeding the logistics of distribution and consumption for many small-scale producers such as those of Val Taleggio. But on the eve of lockdown, these speakers and conference participants had woven networks which turned out to be crucial just weeks later.

Local producers suddenly had to think beyond quality certification and specialist shops to reach their customers. In Val Taleggio, the cooperative of producers appealed online to local consumers of the surrounding province, via Facebook, Instagram and simply via Whatsapp groups and mailing lists, asking them to buy their cheese in the name of solidarity.

Through the conference participants, me included, the cheese-makers connected with pre-existing solidarity economy networks active in the area, who responded by commissioning about five hundred collective orders within a matter of weeks. These activists are known locally as Solidarity Purchase Groups and are comprised of citizens who want to consume responsibly, for example from local producers through short food chains. They organise collective bulk-orders and they have been active throughout Italy since the 1990s. I happened to have been a member when I was living in Bergamo.<sup>8</sup>

Previously, these groups had not been interested in heirloom productions *per se*, precisely because they are often marketed at high prices and through a discourse of excellence and distinction. They are, therefore, perceived as niche and elitist, often associated with gourmand circles. In a sense, the logic of distinction of geographic indications and Slow Food Presidia runs counter to the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist inclinations of solidarity economy.

On the one hand, food activists wish to express solidarity with farmers, and food producers, including heritage ones, *who abide by certain values* – for example, small scale, ecological sustainability, animal welfare, fiscal transparency etc.<sup>9</sup> Heritage cheese producers on the other hand compete for premium prices on a global market using notions of excellence, authenticity and singularity, especially in the context of the European system for Protected Designations of Origin. Food activists are not necessarily moved by the distinctive quality or cultural heritage of the food their local territories produce, and this is sometimes a missed chance.

Vice versa, self-organised networks of alternative food procurement are often overlooked, if not disdained, by heritage marketing. The glossy brochures and websites only celebrate the distinction and excellence of culinary production, not their accessibility, or fairness of their conditions of labour. Also in terms of lifestyles and personal connections, there is not too much of an overlap between the entrepreneurial world of PDO consortia and chambers of commerce on the one hand, and the ethical and critical consumers engaging in direct provisioning and short food chains on the other even in a small place like Bergamo.

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8 Grasseni, Cristina: *Beyond Alternative Food Networks. Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

9 Siniscalchi, Valeria and Harper, Krista eds.: *Food Values in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

However, the Covid-19 pandemic emergency urged an open and non-elitist communication, to broaden and diversify distribution channels, which was emphasised and enabled also by the local (digital) press. The breaking down of global logistics under lockdown brought about novel appreciation of local, inhabited, productive agricultural landscapes. The working landscape of Val Taleggio could be viewed anew, as a valued resource for a broader constituency. Marketing had to compromise with the language of locality and solidarity. The semantics of heritage shifted, in this period, from one of mountain cheese as 'dairy excellence' to one of mountain cheese as genuine, local, produced by farmers close-by and in need of help.<sup>10</sup>

The groups who literally bought this semantics of proximity and thus began to support local economies, were driven by a process of identification with the popular and ecological roots, rather than by the distinction, of mountain cheese. However, this emotional identification with local foods glosses over a lingering contradiction. Heritage foods should and do embody folk knowledge – the ecologies and histories of local territories; but they have sometimes become inaccessible to popular consumption because of their price, their niche availability and logistics, and a marketing style based on social distinction.

While this is often the only viable strategy for a sustainable business in the highly competitive and often ephemeral market of the 'heritage arena', it makes it all the more pertinent to evaluate the potentials and limits of the convergence of socio-economic actors coming from these diverse networks and ideologies. They supported each other in times of urgency, as happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, but this serendipitous, temporary, and evanescent solidarity has not changed the nature of their structural relations, dominated by the market.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, some of the emergency-driven solidarity-wave was subsequently lost to digital marketing, which was appropriated and conventionalised by supermarket chains and other types of platform economies. In any case, the pandemic did not, in the long-term change the nature of market relations based on reciprocal convenience rather than on the resilience of local economies. For example, in the case of Val Taleggio, the producers' appeal to local consumers deployed digitally-enabled forms

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10 Grasseni, Cristina: 'From branding to solidarity: the COVID-19 impact on marketing Strachitunt cheese from Val Taleggio, Italy', *Acta Geographica Slovenica* 62/2 (2022), 75–85.

11 Strasser, Susan ed.: *Commodifying Everything. Relationships of the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

of direct sale, which worked very well in the immediate situation, but did not develop them into more complex forms of community-supported agriculture or participatory certification, which would require lengthier processes of negotiation and a deeper synergy on goals.

'Crafting futures' for food heritage would require re-tooling local markets to help re-produce relevant communities and working landscapes.<sup>12</sup> If we consider the multiple convergences between local economy networks and heritage food producers, we notice how many stakes they have in common: a shared commitment to transparent chains of production and distribution; the recognition of the added value of local foods; the pledge to find ways of a fair retribution to producers through adequate prices; the awareness of cultural and environmental sustainability; and the intention to provide a protected environment for local economies; so that they can benefit their communities. The ways food activists and heritage food producers go about this goal, however, diverge.

Heritage marketing operates through circuits of added-value creation: through certifications, geographical indications, and premium prices. On the other hand, local-economies' activists tend to operate through grassroots circuits of ethical consumption, self-provisioning, and homesteading. Food heritage actors need to choose whom to ally with, and what it means in practice to strategise in terms of revitalising communities and landscapes.

In my previous work on the transformation of animal husbandry in the Alps, I investigated the standardisation of dairy farming and witnessed how upland cheese-making was being driven away from high-pasture mountain-huts to lowland creameries.<sup>13</sup> The introduction of EU-wide hygiene protocols at the end of the 1990s was one of the many ways in which artisan cheese was being repositioned by the global forces of a 'field of production.'

Reinventing *Strachitunt* meant calibrating its 'ecology of production,' a phrase I borrow from Heather Paxson,<sup>14</sup> to the increasing pressures to standardise procedures, environments and operations. But it further entailed a symbolic

12 Grasseni, Cristina: 'Crafting futures through cheese-making in Val Taleggio (Northern Italy)', *Gastronomica* 23/1 (2023), 51–64.

13 Grasseni, Cristina: *Developing Skill, Developing Vision. Practices of Locality at the Foot of the Alps* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009).

14 Paxson, Heather: *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

calibration, namely the transformation from a perceived ‘traditional’ yet everyday foodstuff into a distinctive item of ‘food heritage’. Local production systems had to be *calibrated* to normative, commercial, and communicative expectations that have purchase both on international economic circuits and on very local arrangements.

This does not mean that the alpine cheeses I am talking about have suddenly begun to sell on international markets – though some of them do, and have done for some time. Rather, it means that they had to be entirely refashioned *as if* such potentiality was at hand. The arena they choose as audience, although in practice very local, is symbolically, rhetorically and normatively global. In the valleys of Bergamo, the local dairy industry has historically invested in certifications and designations, inculcating the distinction of mountain cheese also with the help of celebrity chefs and food journalism. *Strachitunt* was heralded as the ‘unique selling point’ of Val Taleggio with gustatory and moral suasion from a number of paladins: initially Slow Food, then the valley’s own Eco-museum, eventually the PDO certification that was 11 years in the making.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unexpected windfalls and a new aperture in terms of visibility and contacts. Novel alliances include the UNESCO creative cities network, which enlists Bergamo for Gastronomy. *Strachitunt* also featured in 2021 among the local heritage cheeses representing Bergamo at the annual cheese expo *Forme*, with the imaginary title of ‘European capital of cheeses’. Since 2020, then, some entrepreneurs have mobilised a discourse of ‘solidarity’, relying less on the exclusivity of tradition and more on the importance of keeping localities alive. They pledge the capacity to ‘innovate’ and ‘adapt’ while salvaging the peculiar, superior material *and moral* qualities of their cheeses. A discourse of guardianship and sustainability with added attention to communication has matured in the realisation that their entrepreneurial role requires responsibilities beyond selling, and beyond cheese.

Food heritage requires continuous recalibrations within specific ‘fields of production’, which include place-based designations as one of – but not the only – major force fields. The heritage arena articulates and shapes both the marketability and the political capacity of food to mobilise resources and passions, fostering conflicts. But it is alliances, in the rural valleys of the Italian Alps, that determine the very serious business of economic viability, ecologic continuity, and even demographic survival.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ‘This speech was delivered as a keynote at the 2024 SIEF food conference, drawing on research published in Grasseni (2021) and Grasseni (2022). The author is grateful to the conference organizers and volume editors for the invitation and editorial engagement’.

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