

## Cooperatives, Agri-Tourism and Food Trails: Promoting Sustainable Food Systems in Le Marche, Italy

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The growing recognition of the environmental and health costs of the post-war industrial-production food model has led to urgent calls globally to transition to more sustainable food systems (Lang and Heaseman, 2004; Willet et al., 2019). Future fixes or ‘innovations’ that are disruptive to the current model of food production have been proposed to address the challenge of achieving such ‘Great Food Transformation’ (Willet et al., 2019, p.448). Such disruptions toward sustainability can include, for example, alternative food networks or short food supply chains, a turn (or return) to local food or ‘glocalism’, refocusing on small-scale farming, emphasising biodiversity and exploring under-utilised species, and embedding social and ethical values into food supply chains (Hankins J. and C. Grassini, 2014; Renting et. al. 2003; Sethi, 2015). Underlying some of these strategies is the somewhat paradoxical idea of ‘traditional-innovations’ or innovations based on traditional food practices – an idea born from the realization that future fixes to the food system need to be both technological and anthropological (Belasco, 2008). Some authors have even coined the term ‘traditioventions’ to capture this concept (Cannarella and Piccioni, 2011). This trend can be seen in a range of alternative food models, strategies and marketing of food products. Prominent examples range from the Slow Food movement, founded in 1989 by Carlo Petrini, which aims to protect and promote traditional and local foods, to the more recent popular phenomenon of the ‘Pasta Grannies’, who share their traditional recipes via social media (Bennison, 2019). National agencies and international organizations have also recognized the great potential of food traditions to contribute to the three fundamental pillars of sustainable food systems: economic development, environmental protection, and social well-being (FAO 2019).

The idea is not without its challenges, however. It risks propagating a romanticized view of the past and reinforcing the notion that all food was healthy and natural before industrialisation and globalisation, and that all modern food is unnatural and harmful. This assumption has been challenged by historians, who have pointed out that improvements in humans’ health were due in large part to innovations in food safety, nutrition and food security (Laudan, 2001). Indeed, the modernisation of the food system has brought some impressive advantages thanks to processes like Pasteurisation, the advent of refrigeration, the cold chain, canning and preservation (Freidberg, 2009; Laudan 2001). Moreover, the quest for traditional foods raises questions about the very meaning of authenticity in culinary practices and dishes, which are often the result of

a hybridization process. These ‘creolizations’ also pose the question of whether re-creations of traditional products are possible in new and different contexts (Sassatelli, 2019). For example, in spite of schemes to ensure the protection of some products and practices, such as Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), questions of authenticity or cultural appropriation are still a source of debate for creations such as ramen, jerk, pizza and even poutine (Bilefsky, 2017; Ceccarini, 2014; Rahim, 2019).

In this paper, we enquire whether food ‘traditioventions’ can meet these challenges and hold up to their promise in real-life contexts. We present three case studies in Le Marche, Italy, a typically rural region knit together by small historically rooted *comuni* (municipalities). With its wealth of food traditions and its present need of socio-economic revitalization, in recent years Le Marche has been a lively participant in the wave of traditional-innovative approaches to food production and consumption that is sweeping Italy and other countries, with an underlying strategy of fostering rural development while improving the sustainability of regional agriculture. Because of its specific constellation of historical characteristics and present circumstances, Le Marche represents an especially significant and disruptive ‘laboratory’ for cross-fertilization of tradition and innovation in food and food systems.

We have focused on three related examples: 1) the work of *Rocca Madre*, a community agricultural cooperative with a commitment to social farming, which has been developing local short-chain organic products based on the reintroduction of heritage cultivars and the introduction of locally adapted mixtures of cereals; 2) *Agriturismo* sites, small farms where tourists can stay to experience local rural life; and, finally; 3) the *Comune of Montedinove’s* annual *Sapori ed Arte* food trail festival which, showcasing the region’s traditional dishes, exemplifies the hybrid approach of ‘traditioventions’ and suggests the disruptive potential of diverse local knowledge systems toward sustainability (Cannarella and Piccioni, 2011; Pereira et. al, 2019).

### Methodology

Our ‘case study approach’ involved a combination of observations and semi-structured interviews with key participants in order to gauge some of the region’s gastronomic identity as presented through traditioventions. Data collection occurred in August and December 2019 and all participants provided verbal and written consent to having their names and organisations used (and if desired) de-anonymised. The key questions asked are

- Can you tell me generally about the origin of your project? How did it come about, and how did you get involved with it? What is your role in it? Who are some of your main participants / clients / customers?
- To what extent do you think it draws upon traditional food practices, and can you give examples?
- To what extent do you think it provides innovative ideas for food production/consumption/food systems? Examples?
- Do any of these innovations improve sustainability, e.g. reduce waste, reduce energy inputs, contribute to biodiversity, improve consumer health?
- What impacts do you think this has had (so far) on how people engage with food production/consumption/education or what impact do you hope to have in the future? In other words, what are your longer-term goals?
- What aspects of [your initiative] do you think are unique to Le Marche?

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### History and character of Le Marche and the Piceno

Le Marche, one of Italy's twenty administrative regions, is located in the central part of the Italian peninsula, between the Appennini mountains and the Adriatic coast. It is characterized by a contrasting terrain of small river valleys and parallel ridges of hills running from the mountains on the West to the coast on the East. We conducted our study in the southern part of the region, in the Piceno district, comprised of the valleys of the Aso and Tesino rivers and the hills in between. Whereas in the rest of Italy history and human geography have been defined since Roman times by the economic and cultural leadership of major cities, this area distinguishes itself for the historical absence of any large urban centre and the presence, instead, of numerous minor ones. The myriad of small towns and villages are typically located on hilltops and surrounded by agricultural land, and their socio-political history has been dominated until recently by small-scale land ownership and a sharecropping economy. The combination of these features have given the Piceno a peculiarly fragmented and interconnected rural-municipal character. (Gobbi 1987).

The Piceno is characterized by a high degree of anthropization. Generations of farmers have moulded and domesticated the territory, as the sharecropping economy subdivided it into tiny but virtually self-sufficient units of subsistence agriculture. The self-sustenance of the farms produced until recently a state of relative socio-economic isolation and technological stagnation. It attracted a great deal of criticism, especially in the context of modernizing campaigns which began with the creation of the Italian state in the late nineteenth century and persisted into the first half of the twentieth century.

Significant changes occurred only after WWII, brought in by sweeping national agricultural reforms, accelerating industrialization, and the general economic growth of the

country. But when it arrived, change was swift and radical. The face of the region was rapidly transformed. In the 1960s there began a massive exodus of population from the rural areas to the northern industrial centres and to local coastal towns. Some of the micro farms consolidated into larger properties, and the sharecropping system, which in 1951 represented 75% of the farming, practically disappeared (Egidi, 2010). Farm work was mechanized, the monoculture of cereals and other cash crops, such as wine and olives, was introduced, as well as intensive horticulture of fruits and vegetables in the valleys. As small industries and services began to prosper along the coast and in neighbouring areas, many farmers turned to agricultural-industrial part-time work to increase their income. Concurrently, although the average size of the farms increased slightly, the number of farms and the total surface of used farmland fell considerably. The number of active farmers dropped (from 60.2% in 1951 to 11.5% in 1981), and the rural population collapsed (from 50.6% in 1931 to 18.3 in 1981). The villages and towns of the interior became severely depopulated. A series of earthquakes in 2016 has caused further deterioration, irreparably damaging many ancient buildings and historic centres.

It is, therefore, in this context of socio-economic decline of the inland territory, against the backdrop of a widely and deeply felt loss of the old ways of life, that numerous new food-centred initiatives are emerging, with the simultaneous aims of revitalizing the local economy, valorising the natural and historical environment, and protecting cultural identities that are perceived to be under threat of extinction.

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### Results

#### *Case study 1: Rocca Madre*

Rocca Madre is a community agricultural cooperative founded in August 2016 that aims to spread sustainable agriculture and a model of economy integrated with ecology in the Valdaso. It currently has 90 members with different skills, cultural and work histories: doctors, teachers, pensioners, farmers, entrepreneurs, craftsmen, and the unemployed. They are subdivided into supporting members, conferring members (farmers who practice organic methods and give the cooperative some of their products), part-time working members, and user members. The activities range from the distribution of products through an outlet and farmers' markets, to providing information and training on issues such as: ethical and sustainable economy, the relationship of food and health, agriculture and the environment, lifestyle and climate change, global and local markets, biodiversity and cultural diversity. They also organize baking workshops and taste-education seminars, visits to companies, and festivals in the historic centres of the small villages of the Valdaso. The target audience are all the inhabitants of the area,

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including local administrators, young people, and students from local schools. *Rocca Madre* explicitly exemplifies the model of traditional innovations, as it aims to innovate on current methods of production, transformation and distribution but drawing on traditional products and practices.

Traditional agricultural practices that it has resumed or is trying to resume are organic replenishment of soil fertility through green manure; agrarian rotation of cereals and forage crops; and the use of seeds for specific and territorial adaptation, in particular, pre-industrial varieties typical of the territory. One example is Jervicella, which is an ancient wheat variety, as well as mixtures of ancient varieties of wheat, barley, and other cereals that have evolved in the area, such as the 'evolutionary population of Aleppo' also called 'Ceccarelli' after Salvatore Ceccarelli, the agro-geneticist who developed it at the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas in Aleppo, Syria. Perhaps most importantly, they promote and support the self-production of seeds by farmers, although it is a problematic objective for two reasons. First, there are technical difficulties related to the small size of the farms concerned and the consistency of the necessary investments (harvest storage environments; means for collecting and cleaning the seed). *Rocca Madre* is trying to build a cooperating network of farmers to jointly make these investments. Second, there are also bureaucratic and regulatory difficulties. Within current legislation, farmers can reproduce their own seed and plant it for self-consumption only. For the harvest to be marketed and enter the food supply chain, even if just locally (small restaurateurs, bakers, pizza makers), the variety must be inscribed in the regional register, and must be identified and declared on the label. The manufacturer assumes all responsibility for the declaration, but there arise problems with the standards of identification for varieties, such as Jervicella, that are subject to local adaptations, and even more for mixtures of ancient cereals, whose defining feature is precisely the evolutionary adaptation to field-specific environmental conditions. For these kinds of crops, the cooperative is awaiting new regulations for organic agriculture set to roll out in 2021.

*Rocca Madre* is also inspired by traditional local markets to enact transformative disruptions of food processing and distribution practices, aimed to revitalize the local economy with a view to environmental and social sustainability. The goal is to promote high-quality local food and rebuild vital relations between the rural and the urban. The cooperative is therefore creating local short supply chains that connect agricultural producers to urban processors and consumers. *Rocca Madre* produces organic wheat, transforms it into flour and pasta, and supplies local bakers, pizza makers, and small restaurateurs. It also organizes farmer's markets where consumer and producer can meet. In addition to 'territorialising' consumption, this rural-urban partnership aims to guarantee fair and stable incomes for local farmers and small processors, thus

promoting prosperity and well-being. The products are transformed through traditional practices that guarantee food quality. The wheat is ground in stone to keep all the components of the grain, the bread is leavened with 'mother yeast', that is, a handmade sourdough starter, and all the ingredients are produced by the members with organic methods. Thus, *Rocca Madre* reclaims old knowledge and virtually abandoned traditions to disrupt the agro-industrial model.

But old knowledge and practices are not just resurrected and replicated. They are selectively re-appropriated for new purposes and re-interpreted in the light of new knowledge. The most important example in this regard is the practicing of active biodiversity. The recovery of old crop varieties is not a nostalgic return to the past but a conscious intervention directed at preserving biotypes at risk of extinction, bringing together a multiplicity of biotypes, and generating biodiverse populations capable of naturally adapting to new environmental and climatic contexts. Biodiversity is not only part of the cultural and natural heritage of the area but also a strategic resource for the future. It is, furthermore, a multifunctional resource, as it serves to combat climate change, to reorganize agriculture, to enhance food and lifestyles, and to generate new economic opportunities. The centrepiece of *Rocca Madre*'s active biodiversity strategy is the adoption of the mixture of cereals called Aleppo or Ceccarelli, as described above. It is a population of 700 varieties of seeds developed by Salvatore Ceccarelli in order to activate biodiversity as a response to adverse environmental and climatic conditions. Brought to Italy in 2009, it is now cultivated in small areas in Sicily, Molise, Tuscany, and Marche. In addition to their uniqueness, high-quality, and higher market value, the locally-evolved mixtures are viewed by their promoters as generative plant communities, capable of generating human communities by allowing farmers to participate in the seed selection process and fostering networks for the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

#### *Case study 2: Agriturismo*

An example of late-modern dynamics linking food traditions and cultural heritages is the growth of rural tourism (Bessière, 1998). Agriturismo – a form of hospitality that offers tourists the opportunity to stay at farmhouses to experience life and foods of the farms – has been regulated by regional and national legislation in Italy since the late 1970s. In Le Marche as elsewhere, *agriturismo* has proven to be a successful strategy to supplement the income of farming families and strengthen the regional economy. The current administrative framework, dating to 2011, emphasizes the possibility for farmers to sell their farm foods and wines directly to guests and retailers, and to manage in-house restaurants (Regione Marche, 2020). The rising popularity of organic food and 'farm-to-table' food chains have also contributed greatly to the growth of *agriturismo* in this as in other areas.

One of our key participants, BL, manages an agritourism with direct sale of olives and olive oil. She complained that the present framework of regulations and administrative support to agriculture, which includes agritourism, organic farming, and quality certifications, distributes costs and benefits unevenly. In her experience as a small agricultural entrepreneur, the bureaucratic procedures to obtain permits, certifications, and financial help are costly and discouraging. The regulations demand substantial investments of money and time, and are often perceived as unreasonable. The processing of olives, for example, requires specially designed spaces that are subject to a plethora of safety specifications and sanitary norms. Olive oil, in addition, must be bottled in authorized facilities. BL claimed that traditional methods and small-scale production become impossible under these conditions. The current safety and sanitary regulations put small producers at a great disadvantage, while favouring large producers and industrial methods. Organic farming, for example, is subject to frequent inspections and random quality samplings. But since violations are sanctioned with fines, BL argued that the present regime of quality controls guarantees only the quality of products from small producers, who cannot risk the sanctions. Large-scale operators, in contrast, often find that for them it is more lucrative to market fraudulent products at low prices and therefore pay the fines rather than follow the regulations. In these conditions, even agritourism cannot provide sufficient incentive for most young people to work in the agricultural sector.

### Case study 3: Montedinove Sapori ed Arte

*Montedinove Sapori ed Arte* is an annual food festival which features a food trail where local residents and tourists wend their way through the streets of the village Montedinove, stopping at various points to sample traditional dishes prepared by local residents. (See Figures 1 and 2). It was first conceived in 2000, when the Montedinove *Pro Loco*, (a citizens' committee dedicated to organising activities of promotion 'for the place') decided to organize an event to attract tourists, support the local economy, and revive traditional food practices. The event would take place annually in the peak tourist season, in August, and aimed to be different from the usual *sagra*, a type of food festival that is common in the area. While a *sagra* offers a single 'typical' dish prepared and served in one place, the Montedinove event, named *Montedinove Sapori* would be a *passaggiata enogastronomica*, showcasing not only a menu of local 'ancient' dishes and local wines but also the quaint streets and piazza of the village. The purpose was dual: to boost the touristic appeal of the event, and to maximize the involvement of the local population in organizing and running the event, thereby protecting disappearing traditions and strengthening the local cultural identity. Later, the *passaggiata enogastronomica* was complemented with exhibits of local artists, street vendors of handcrafts (e.g., *merletto a tombolo*, a type of



Figure 1. Flyer (front) advertising the Montedinove *Sapori ed Arte*, 2019.

handmade lace, and handmade straw baskets), music shows, and exhibitions of street artists, and the event became *Montedinove Sapori ed Arte*.

One of our key participants, EM got involved at first as a native of Montedinove and long-time member of the *Pro Loco*, and later as the president, a position she held for six years. She explained that *Montedinove Sapori* aimed to attract visitors, both natives and tourists, from the nearby coastal towns of the Adriatic *riviera*, just like the *sagre* in the Piceno typically do. But it also aimed to revitalize local food practices that had largely been abandoned since the national economic boom of the 1960s, which entailed a massive emigration and radical transformations of foodways. Its realization relied heavily on the collection of living memories of senior native women. During the interview, for example, EM called on a 94-year-old woman, renowned for her cooking expertise and good memory, to help recall the recipes, ingredients, and procedures that had been considered for the food trail offerings.

Crucially, the organizers viewed the revitalization of local food traditions as a way to counteract at the same time economic decline, the dispersion of cultural identity, and the loss of food quality, three problems they perceived as inextricably connected. They aimed to offer a more 'authentic' alternative to the conventional *sagre*, which they saw as consumeristic operations. They endeavoured to rely as much as possible on direct provisions from local producers, for example oil, wine, meat, cheese, pasta, and



Figure 2. Flyer (back) advertising Montedinove *Sapori ed Arte* (2019) and map of dishes (*Percorso Enogastronomico*) and sights of interest (*Percorso artistico*).

other ingredients, even though the price was higher than that of large-scale distribution products.

EM and her collaborators had no prior formal training in tourism marketing and hospitality, and their expertise in traditional cuisine derived solely from living experience and personal contacts with older generations. They knew that similar food-trail events existed in other parts of Italy, especially in the North, but did not know much about them and did not follow any model. They learned along the way, improving year by year. In 2012, EM took a training course in tourism marketing offered by the provincial administration to strengthen her competence. At first, EM and their collaborators simply tried to reproduce the traditional home cooking of the chosen dishes as they were remembered by the elderly, but they soon learned that the old practices needed to be updated to be adapted to larger-scale preparation and public distribution in outdoor spaces. Thus, they modified the provisioning, transport, preparation, and distribution to conform with sanitary and safety standards. They confronted many challenges to reconcile the protection of old food ways with compliance with new regulations and bureaucratic requirements. They learned, for example, to apply the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) system, in order to locate and equip safe working spaces, and to secure the traceability of all the ingredients. Eventually, they started renting a professional moveable kitchen. EM recognizes the need for high standards of safety and hygiene, but she also

points out that the regulations entail high costs and, in some cases, tend toward pointless bureaucratic excess. She notes that, to a certain extent, there is a contradiction (*'controsenso'*) between the goal of preserving traditions and the need to abide by ever-changing rules.

### Discussion & Conclusion

Our case studies confirm the promising potential of food 'traditioventions' to help set the basis for more sustainable food systems by mobilizing tangible and intangible resources at multiple scales, from the transnational to the deeply local. Our study

complements an already rich body of literature, as we analysed cases that do not involve – or involve only indirectly and occasionally as narrative resources – great chefs, famous restaurants, renown cities, or mass media, but the actions of ordinary people in their immediate localities. As several authors have argued, food traditions are not carved in stone but are living cultural constructions, which result from performative and discursive practices, and thus contain both elements of continuity and change. They transmit shared knowledge and values across generations, and are invested with symbolism and emotional power, which allows them to produce and reproduce communities and cultural identities. But they do so through selective re-interpretations and adaptations, in ongoing dialogues within and between social groups, and between social groups and their material environments (Cannarella and Piccioni, 2010; Sassatelli, 2019; Parasecoli 2019). The elements of change and reinvention do not detract from the authenticity of food traditions, and therefore do not undermine their symbolic power, because the meaning of authenticity is not fixed. Rather, it is negotiated among the relevant groups for the purpose of connecting the present to their projected visions of the past and of the future (Parasecoli, 2019).

A more serious challenge for 'traditioventions', as they become increasingly popular and people crave more of these kinds of experiences and products, is to remain viable and reach their goals. This often requires adherence to nationally and internationally recognised standards and systems of safety in order to be able to be legally allowed to trade, which can be a challenge not only for 'scaling up' and

expanding across space and time, but also for ‘scaling out’ and attempting to diversify into new functions (Pitt et. al., 2016, p.4). There can be burdens of costs, training, time and access to the relevant information, as well as keeping up with changes to regulations and standards (Pansiello and Quantick, 2001; Worsfold and Griffiths, 2003). There is increasing recognition for the need to support smaller-scale businesses, and ‘grassroots’ or community-led food projects which have a strong ethos of sustainability at their core. For example, the UK Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland have created kits and guidance for implementing HACCP-based food safety management systems tailored to catering and retail sectors, farmers’ markets, the charity sector (i.e food hubs, community kitchens) (Food Standards Agency, 2020a; Food Standards Agency, 2020b; Food Standards Scotland, 2012). In addition to its ‘Quality Mark’ assurance scheme, Bord Bia recently introduced its ‘Origin Green’ sustainability programme (the ‘world’s first’) designed to support farmers, food producers, retailers, and foodservice operators, although the applicability of such programmes, schemes and tools to smaller-scale ‘traditioventions’, and their overall impacts on shifting from the post-war industrial-productionist model to an ‘ecological health model’ and on meeting the UN SDGs remain to be seen (Bord Bia, 2020; Lang et. al., 2001). These considerations show that while regulatory systems can pose potential barriers to changing the food system through traditioventions, they also present opportunities. It is therefore vital to foster open dialogue around how legislative frameworks, standards and policies can be reshaped from potential obstacles into supporting infrastructures for food traditions reimagined as future fixes.

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