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VIABILITY OF TRADITIONAL CHEESE PRODUCTION: CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION LINKED TO BUSINESS PROFIT AND AS A TOURISTIC ASSET

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Abstract: Most of the times, the recuperation of cultural heritage is basically focussed on tourism purposes. However, this should not be the only option as there are examples in which heritage has meant a boost in the industry taking the tradition as a starting point. This way, it improves the revenues of the owners and facilitates the social development of rural areas. *Sabores de Tallante* is a phenomenal example of how an antique and unique knowledge has become a successful business and an asset to a whole village. The owner of the business has kindly provided, through meetings and informal interviews, the information necessary to develop a clear idea of how his business makes a difference in their little village and in its area of influence.

Keywords: Rural heritage; rural tourism, heritage recuperation; heritage preservation, tradition, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Casas de Tallante is tiny village that is under the administration of the city of Cartagena. The whole territory that forms Cartagena is subdivided into twenty-three *diputaciones*. At the same time, each one contains different units of population. *Campo Nubla* is the *diputación* to which *Casas de Tallante* belongs to. (Cartagena.es, n.d.) The total population of *Campo Nubla* is 313 inhabitants, and the population of *Casas de Tallante* is twenty inhabitants in 2022. (Cartagena.es, 2022) *Casas de Tallante* is placed in an area known as West Cartagena. This is an interesting area because the modern intensive agriculture of the rest of El Campo de Cartagena has not reached. The reason for which this area remains practically untouched is that it is out of the water supply from the canal Tajo-Segura which provides a huge amount of water for irrigation. Also, due to the physical conditions of the sheer territory, it makes growing vegetables much more difficult than in other flatter areas of El Campo de Cartagena.

As a proof of it, Image 1 shows the differences between both nearby areas: one from the traditional landscape populated with almond trees and another picture with all the machinery working to supply of fresh produce to most of the demanding European markets.



Image 1. (A) Traditional landscape. (B) Modern Agriculture in Campo de Cartagena.
Source: author.

Avoiding these changes of the industrialized agriculture in the territory has become the main distinctive asset of West Cartagena. A place where now lies the ownership of the tradition and heritage of the forgotten customs from Campo de Cartagena. They are undoubtedly remembered in any festivity that takes place in the area due to the interest of many cultural associations that take care of ancient customs with the support of the authorities of the Council of Cartagena (Cartagena de Hoy, n.d.)

In the western villages of Campo de Cartagena persists a profound tradition with ancient customs. This is the best place to study antique employments. (Berrocal Caparros, 2008:500). These traditions range from music, festival celebrations, religious services and traditions, ways of working in rural tasks and, how not, food and its production methods.

Yet, the inhabitants of this area are so conscious of the protection of their heritage that they have gathered to protest about the construction of a solar plant that would destroy the landscape which is kept as it was decades ago. Their claims have been heard, and the project has been moved somewhere else with fewer impact on the environment and scenery.

Surrounded by this idiosyncrasy, it is where the business *Sabores de Tallante* was born. In words of his current owner, Alfonso Pérez, the business was born from a situation close to bankruptcy of their company. The family has been livestock farming for fifty years until the prices for goat's milk started to decline. This meant that the business was not profitable anymore, and the closure was the option that the farmers were considering.

However, the owner decided to step up and start a new line in the business based on an old recipe to make fresh cheese. This recipe was transmitted orally for generations, and he received it from his grandmother. This was the turning point, and from this antique tradition, he has been able to develop a whole range of different cheeses that are now the basis of the business.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

HISTORICAL AND CURRENT SITUATION

As mentioned above, the entrepreneur farmer decided to change the direction of his business from goat's milk production to become a cheese maker. The change was a challenge because not only did he have to fight against all the odds changing the purpose of the business, but also, they had to be able to find a place in a market which is radically taken by big dairy corporations.

This is not a problem that occurs exclusively in Spain but in other countries all over the world. As John Lichfield mentions in his arti-

cle in *The Independent*, many French cheeses have disappeared due to the excessive regulations that led to the disappearance of the farmers without a second generation to follow the business because of the lack of profit and hard-working conditions. (Lichfield, 2005)

That is not particularly an issue that happens only in Europe. Cervantes Escoto, also investigated about the dairy farms in Mexico and their matters involving the artisanal production of cheese and disappearance of many producers due to the lack of interest by the farmers because of the low income and the lost fight against the mass production of cheese factories. (Cervantes, 2007:196-197)

From ancient times, from breeding cattle until the selling of the final product, being it either milk or cheese, required of the whole family collaboration, especially from the farmer's wife and children. Taking care of the livestock was something that could only be done partially during the day because the rest of the day was dedicated to commercializing and distribution of the goods. This is why either the wife or the children had to take care of the cattle. (Berrocal Caparros, 2008:512a)

Nowadays, the working system is not that different in small farms where most of the procedure is handcrafted. The farmer works seven days a week as the cattle needs to be taken care of: milking and having all the elements ready to start producing on the next working day. These aspects are key to the smooth run of the factory.

Besides, the distribution of the final product was a challenge not only in the current days but also in the past. As mentioned by the author's grandfather (born in 1915), and corroborated in a published article from Berrocal Caparrós, cheese distribution had to be done by the farmer himself with the use of a bicycle. The farmers had to travel every day from their working place in the countryside to the nearest villages and especially to Cartagena to sell his products, milk and cheese. (Berrocal Caparrós, 2008:512b)

Decades ago, this artisanal cheese was typically sold mainly during the summer as the goats increase their production during the warmer months of the year. So, the fresh cheese was produced in the morning and sold in the late afternoon (Berrocal Caparrós, 2001:520)

Nowadays, distribution is not much easier. As mentioned by Alfonso Pérez, this gourmet cheese is rarely sold outside their area of influence, even though it is a high-quality product that has won several prizes at a national level. The cheese is sold within the Region of Murcia and neighboring provinces. Some orders come from other points in Spain, but they rare and done via their website.

Alfonso Pérez stated that having a good product is key but being able to sell it has a supreme importance. The most difficult thing is to show to the potential customers that they are producing artisanal products that can compete with quality and a reasonable price against mass production factories.

During the pandemic of Covid-19, Carrefour bet for local and kilometer zero products. Then, *Sabores de Tallante* started to sell their products in their stores for the whole Region of Murcia. These politics applied during the pandemic by this big supermarket chain, supposed an increase in sales for the company which would not have happened without the Covid-19.

Alfonso explained that the problem is that, nowadays, cheeses from all the trademarks in Spain are providing good quality products. So, how to transmit that added value of the rural sector of an artisanal product? Being able to communicate this particularity of the product is what makes the potential customers value the extra price, artisanal make and traditional flavour.

Sometimes, a way of commercialization that allows the valuation of the so called “heritage products” either by locals or by artisans is something like the direct purchase from the place of elaboration. This is a model of distri-

bution that goes united to tourism (Espeitx, 2004:206). And this is possible at *Sabores de Tallante* but, unluckily, only the local population and a few customers interested in cheese production do know about the existence of this artisanal cheese factory.

It is known that tourism is a relevant economic activity but also that the cultural heritage is seen as a resource to attract visitors (Espeitx, 2004:200a). The “feeding heritage” appears in all the leaflets, TV ads and touristic guides to promote the touristic attractiveness of the place. (Espeitx, 2004:200b) A way of commercialization that allows the value of the heritage products either by locals or by artisans, as the purchase directly from the place of elaboration is a model united to tourism (Image 2). (Espeitx, 2004:202)



Image 2. Product range at the front of the aisle in a local supermarket. Source: author

Also, these small companies need the help of the local businesses by offering these products to their customers. However, the presence of these cheeses in bars, restaurants and shops in Cartagena and its surrounding towns is close to zero. This is stated by Alfonso Pérez as one of the biggest controversies in the area.

These businesses are not especially prone to promote local food to those who come from different countries and that are very keen on tasting new delicacies from the places they visit. What they usually offer to their customers are the most well-known *manchego* cheeses from far away areas, leaving the local production totally aside.

This has profound dissimilarities with what Fusté mentions as it was researched that in Catalonia the cheese is an active and attractive mean of promotion. (Fusté, 2016:245) There, they have been able to build a trend in promoting their cheese production that differs from business to business, to be interesting for tourism uses.

Yet, it needs to be considered that to obtain a product described as gourmet, it must be based on the high quality, artisanal elaboration, and limited availability (Richard, 2018:187). The consumers worldwide value the flavour and the quality and for this reason they are willing to pay a higher price.

The base for all these cheeses is the murciano-granadina breed. This animal is known because it is extraordinarily adapted to the environment, which involves living in a very dry area where rain is scarce and where the chance of being fed with grass is low. However, this breed has been able to adapt to this environment, apart from providing a very good yield in milk production with an excellent proportion of fat in the milk that makes it ideal for cheese production.



Image 3. Logo Murciano-Granadina 'breed.
Source: Acrimur's website

In order to regulate the breeding and the purity of this race (Image 3), it has been created a National Association (ACRIMUR) to monitor if there is a distinction between this breed and the rest. So, ACRIMUR is an organization that not only certifies but also provides farmers a series of tips to facilitate the proficiency running of their businesses (Acrimur, n.d.).

It has also been created a certification for the cheeses of Murcia (Quesos de Murcia, n.d.). This organism controls that the goats are correctly adapted to the environment and whose feeding and breeding are according to the norm. This way, they can provide high quality products, always in relation to the geographical area (Espejo Marín, 2001:99).

As seen in Figure 1, the production of goat's milk is scarce in Spain. It represents just 5.6% of the whole production in 2021 according to the data obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Farming (Fenil, n.d.).

Out of all this production, the Region of Murcia points out for being one of the areas in which more goat's milk is produced and transformed. In fact, the Region of Murcia acquires goat's milk from other nearby provinces in which they have a higher production, but it is not there where the manufacture finally happens.

This manufactured product is rarely consumed out of the areas of influence in which the cattle are bred. Being the Region of Murcia, South of Castilla-La Mancha, eastern provinces of Andalucía and provinces of Extremadura where this milk and cheeses have a bigger market (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, n.d.).

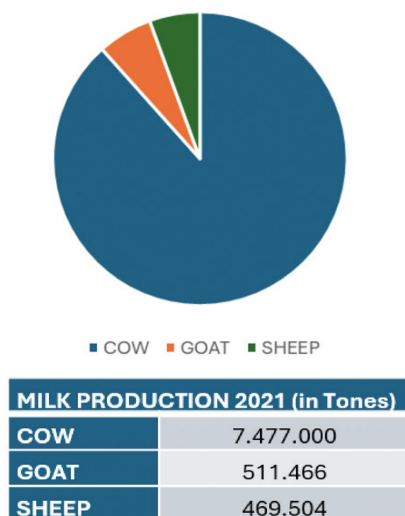


Figure 1. Chart and graph of milk production in 2021. Source: Ministry of Agriculture.

Despite all these facts, it was during the last decades of the 20th century that other types of milk different from cows, spiked up. Basically, motivated by the industrial production as most of these kinds of milks are focussed on the production of cheese (Espejo Marín, 2001:84) So, it should be considered that the goat's milk production was even lower by the end of XIX century and early decades of the XX century, basically destined to local consumption.

CHEESE AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

On the one hand, the feeding culture of a determined society becomes a potential heritable commodity and very often, it becomes a cultural heritage in the framework of the development of tourism (Espeitx, 2004:193)

Contrary to what we can expect the consumers search for this type of distinctive product far from the global mass production that leads to the homogenization of the feeding behaviours for a huge percentage of the world's population.

For a vast part of the society, especially in Mediterranean cultures, food is not only a way of feeding but also a way to celebrate, a

form of joy. Food has always been a factor of sociability. Food has also created bonds and formed part of the social relationships. These aspects are hugely amplified when it comes to a context of leisure, especially when this time also corresponds to cultural acts and, therefore, cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage is frequently related to social identities in a quantity in which it supposes a mutual recognition between generations for the members of a society, an own sense of collectivity. (Santana 2003: 5)

In previous centuries, the cultural heritage only had a value regarding its artistic values. Just the works that showed creativity from the human being deserved to be preserved.

In 1985, it was issued the Spanish Law for Historical Heritage (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 1985) that contemplates the concept that needs to be preserved all the sites and constructions with artistic, paleontological, archeological, ethnographic, scientific or technical interest. Nonetheless, the bibliographic and documental heritage, archeological sites, as well as, natural sites, parks and gardens, with anthropological or historical value.

Regarding the immaterial heritage, Spanish Law contemplated the protection since the Law from 1926 (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 1926) which attended the artistic richness referring to the typical and picturesque. Nevertheless, it was not until 2015 when under instances of the UNESCO, Spain issued the Law for the protection of the Immaterial Heritage (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2015). It is now when the Spanish law protects the gastronomy, culinary elaborations and feeding. Additionally, the Law also mentions the use and exploitation of natural landscapes as Immaterial Heritage.

Meanwhile, UNESCO classifies that cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our

ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (Unesco, n.d.).

The production techniques mean that they are a piece of knowledge shared by the whole society in which they are embedded. It is worth mentioning the loss of some techniques due to modern regulations. Although it is currently forbidden by the sanitary authorities, the farmers used to use the guts of a still breast-fed goat to get the rennet for the cheese (Berrocal Caparrós, 2001:521). These guts facilitate the enzymatic process to degrade the proteins that make the cheese.

After all these statements, it can be concluded that what *Sabores de Tallante* provides to society is not only good quality cheese, but it helps to protect the knowledge, the traditions, the natural sceneries, and the product itself. The production techniques of these products, the way of elaboration or cooking must be part of the valued technical knowledge of any society (Espeitx, 2004:198).

The concept of feeding culture is referred to as the whole framework of practices and knowledge, values and beliefs, techniques and representations about what, when, how, with whom and why do people eat in a certain society. (Espeitx, 2004:195a). With this definition in mind, it can be assured that there is heritage in every traditional cultural expression (Espeitx, 2004:194). This is why becoming heritage means considering one's own identity and allows the whole collectivity identifying themselves from other society groups. This way, it could be interpreted that heritage is equal to a collective symbolic identity. Therefore, the construction of heritage is also the construction of a collective identity (Espeitx, 2004:195b).

METHODS

There have been three different ways of approaching this work. First, it was a personal and casual encounter with the owner's sister at a supermarket during a commercial promotion of their cheeses and a conversation with this lady supposed the spark that has led to the interest about this company.

On the other hand, there has been a profound investigation about the literature regarding cheese production and promotion from a heritage point of view in the area of Campo de Cartagena, which is far from being a frequent theme to investigate about.

Besides, the researcher was able to attend a team building of a company dedicate on the export of produce for relevant supermarkets in The United Kingdom. When this team building was held, the employees had the chance to learn how rural life in this area was not so many decades ago, before the arrival of the water from the Canal Tajo-Segura.

These mentioned meetings took place before the pandemic of Covid-19 during the autumn in 2019 and winter in 2020.

And finally, and most useful method, being a frequent customer of their business, provided the chance to have extensive conversations about all these details with the owner, who extremely kindly attended to all the petitions made. These two encounters and conversations, face to face, provided careful and detailed information, not only from the company but also from the social-economic importance that this small company supposes for this village in terms of employment, apart from the relevant care of the environment and social development.

These other meetings took place once the restrictions started to ease. The first one was in spring of 2021 when it was still compulsory to wear face masks, but some social contact was possible. The last one took place during the winter of 2023, once all the restrictions have been lifted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to Daugstad, the modern tourist requires the personal experience of being part of the scenery, feeling it in a very personal way (Daugstad, 2008:413). Besides, the tourists try to find the chance to acquire the local goods from source (Kastenholz et al, 2012:208)

Nevertheless, in Cartagena the interest is focussed on the vast patrimony of the city centre, on the attractiveness of the coastline and on the many golf resorts along the area. This leaves little space for the tourism in inland areas, only attracting tourists keen on the rural environment.

To complement the offer for rural tourism, there is an ethnology museum nearby with lots of example of rural life. This is the Puertos de Santa Barbara museum (Región de Murcia, n.d). There, they count on a rather extensive collection of pieces related with the social-economic structure of the ancient society. Devices used for the food production, and the artisan's methods from the past are also part of the maintenance of a social and economic structure that is environmentally friendly, protects a heritage and modernizes the tradition. It is based on the local development as a main objective taking in consideration the Cultural heritage of the area of Cartagena and Mazarrón, where the coastal visitors could acquire cheese as a souvenir for all these holidaymakers.

However, this museum has so fewer visitors that it is rarely in service. It only opens eight hours a week. This makes difficult the touristic promotion of this remote area. Definitely, not the best way to promote the rural tourism from the local authorities.

Francesc Fusté explains that the cheese can act as the main touristic asset in some areas of Spain. (Fusté, 2016:245). This tourism becomes a dynamiting factor in the economy. Although the tourism attached to the cheese production could be attractive to some peo-

ple, it is also believed that it is a rare object, being just an anecdote within the massive movement of tourism in Cartagena.

To cite a couple of exceptions to this statement, the cheese from Cabrales, in the north of Spain, counts on a foundation to promote the product and the tourism, visiting the caves in which the cheese is matured (Fundación Cabrales, n.d.).

Another good example that gave a step further in the protection and promotion of the product, it is the gorge where the Cheddar cheese is produced. These cheeses belong to the National Trust (National Trust, 2021) and they represent an example of tourism related to this site and product.

Nonetheless, there are examples that are not related with cheese, but it makes the most of the mass tourism of the area. This product is the anchovies (Anxoves de L'Escala, n.d.) from L'Escala (Girona). Ancient product already consumed by the Greeks and Romans that lived in the area centuries ago, have been able to use the frequent tourists in the area to increase their sales and the knowledge of the product, expanding the fame of this delicate product.

Contrary to what happens with the local cheeses in Cartagena, bars and restaurant in Cabrales, Cheddar and L'Escala offer the local delicacies, as a way to increase their benefits by promoting the local production and, therefore, making their cultural heritage profitable for everyone involved in the supply chain of these unique products.

Despite the exception of scarce examples, the recuperation of the artisanal tradition as done by *Sabores de Tallante*, does not correspond to an increase in the tourism of the region. Although the company offers the possibility of a guided tour, it is more inclined to let their product be known and a way to spread the word in the area about their production. Also, it is a proper way to spread the knowle-

dge of the former ways of living in Campo de Cartagena to scholars that visit the factory in order to do a tour during a day out of the classroom. *Sabores de Tallante* is also providing this service.

Besides, the company has been able to provide a wide range of new products that have nothing to do with the traditional fresh cheese from Campo de Cartagena, new cheeses and even desserts, are now a part of the business to being able to provide a more extensive range of products for different customers 'taste.

This diversity has increased the movement of *premiumization* of the products, by adding new ingredients and flavours, producing limited editions of certain products, choosing recipes and methods of artisanal elaboration, and highlighting specific places of origin. It has been checked that there is a higher valuation and popularity of cheeses of local production, being the cheeses with *origin denomination* very appreciated and with higher aggregated value. (Quezada, 2013:3). Alfonso and his team at *Sabores de Tallante* have been able to expand their offer through research, by adding new ingredients to the traditional cheese. So, new flavours lead to new customers. It is clear that tradition needs to be taken care of but there is no tradition if there is not an economic viability apart from the cultural one. The flavours need to be adapted to the current flow of the public if the goods and production methods are aimed to be preserved.

Curiously, the owner is aware that his act to save the company and transform the milk farm into a gourmet cheese factory, has not only got having an economic viability but also, the recuperation and protection of patrimony that involves the cheese and the method of production. Besides, he has revitalized the area providing a new industry with twenty employees, that is environmentally friendly, non-polluting and that facilitates the renovation of the working soil as the goats make the

cleanliness of the fields and helps to manure the fields for the traditional agriculture of the areas based on plantations of almond and carob trees.

Undoubtedly, the company has given a new vitality to the village as there is constant movement of employees and, what is more, there is a new family living in the village. For this, Alfonso has stated that he feels proud to help Tallante by having this young new family moving to his village because they work for the cheese factory.

The owner has also mentioned of his pride for having sent his sister to the International Cheese Festival celebrated in Oviedo, Asturias, in 2021. "I am so proud that such a small village and our creation are represented in such an important cheese festival."

The goals of this company are of a great value. They have been able to present a new economic opportunity in an area in which all the efforts of the authorities are inclined to heavy industrial production and touristic development. They are providing, by preserving their cultural heritage, a business that enriches the economic and social development of Tallante. They are an excellent example for many other areas in the world that feel the pressure of globalisation.

It is considered that there are still some steps to follow to increase the business opportunities of the company. It has been suggested to the farmer that their website could be also translated into different European languages such as English, French and German. Given the near distance to some touristic points like El Portús or Mazarrón which during the winter are mainly the place of residence of many Europeans. That would be a great chance not only to sell but to increase the visits to their factory and the chance to have orders from these citizens once they are back in their countries of origin. The company counts with a delivery service to the orders done via website.

Finally, the author considers that due to the difficulties of taking the tourists to the rural areas, it would be worthy to take the products to the tourists. It should be considered the idea of the creation of a shop nearby the port of Cartagena, where the cruises with thousands of visitors arrive weekly, to promote the local products such as cheeses from Sabores de Tallante, wines from Bodegas Serrano or traditional cakes from the bakery of Pozo de los Palos, the last one to be using the woodfire oven after eight generations.

It is also considered that local and regional authorities should provide of funds to the local bars and restaurants to support, promote and offer local products. A distinctive touch that could add more attractions to the already existing ones.



Image 4. Family members of Sabores de Tallante. Source: company's website.

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BOLETÍN OFICIAL DEL ESTADO, 1926. Ley de 1926. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-1926-8543>

There is no better way to finish this article than using their own words translated into English.

“We elaborate an artisanal cheese, only with local products. We transmit the popular knowledge and the tradition. We do not make up anything. We are able to get to the people the flavour as a part of our cultural heritage.” (Sabores de Tallante, n.d.)

“For more than fifty years we have been dedicated to livestock farming (Image 4) and for six years elaborating dairy products made of milk from our own goats, with the same care, tradition and handcraft that our parents did. There are very few secrets for the key to obtain artisanal gourmet cheeses. What is it? That our goats live happily.” (Sabores de Tallante, n.d.)

“They eat in the fields, listen to music and have all the best possible care. This is why our cheeses have been awarded, and they are for your family and ours” (Sabores de Tallante, n.d.)

“Natural...? Naturally!” (Sabores de Tallante, n.d.)

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