

Cheese as a food souvenir in Sicily

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Abstract

Souvenirs are elements of territorial communication, and they are examples of the marketing strategy of destinations. Souvenirs are objects that allow us to remember moments we have experienced and places we have visited. Drawing on the close relationships between places and souvenirs, this paper analyses cheese as a food souvenir in the island of Sicily. The method is based on a qualitative design which includes visits and interviews with local sellers in the food markets and food shops in Palermo, with the objective to reveal how cheese is protected and promoted as a symbol of Sicilian culture and heritage from a marketing perspective. Results of the paper show that cheeses made in Sicily are pivotal in the cheese marketing, while Italian cheeses also find their commercialization space. International cheeses are only available as styled cheeses also made in the country. Theoretical and practical implications are described.

Keywords

cheese tourism, food heritage, Italy, Palermo, regional development, urban marketing

1. Introduction

The word souvenir comes from the Latin 'subvenire', which means 'to come to mind'. When we travel, we tend to purchase products to remember our trip. Postcards, mugs, fridge magnets and t-shirts are among the popular souvenirs sold at the touristic places of any destination. However, in recent years there is a growing interest on food souvenirs (see, for example, Elomba and Yun, 2018; Ho et al., 2021; Swanson and Timothy, 2012). While authors like Molz (2007) argue that "as moveable and collectable signs of different places and cultures, culinary experiences serve as convenient

souvenirs for round-the-world travelers” (p.88), this paper goes one step further and identifies food souvenirs as communication tools and promotional means of a place (de Mello and Ceretta, 2015). According to Suhartanto et al. (2018), “food souvenirs are tangible reminders of a travel destination and play an important role in the hospitality and tourism industry” (p.133).

Previous studies have revealed that the purchase of a food souvenir is part of the travel experience (Mossberg, 2007). “People like to be reminded of special moments and events, and a souvenir serves as such a reminder” (Gordon, 1986, p.135). In particular, food souvenirs are among the most preferred types of souvenirs (Swanson and Horridge, 2006) because they extend the tourism experience (Buczowska, 2014) in the post-travel stages. Among the tourists’ motivations to purchase them, Lin (2017) identifies the food souvenir as a gift, to preserve memory and as travelling evidence, while Altintzoglou, Heide and Borch (2016) highlight authenticity and taste, and local origin, as drivers of food souvenirs’ consumption. Tourists look for souvenirs which represent the culture and heritage of the places they visit (Anderson and Littrell, 1995; Gordon, 1986). In relation to food souvenirs, this refers to local traditional products (Brandrud and Clausen, 2011).

This paper departs from the understanding that a souvenir is a marketing element (Qi and Hong, 2011), and also a “messenger of the extraordinary” (Gordon, 1986, p.135). The study aims to understand the role of cheese as a souvenir in Sicily based on the example of the city of Palermo, the capital of Sicily, an island situated in the southern part of Italy, in the Mediterranean Sea. Marketing Sicily means to protect and promote Sicilian heritages and landscapes, and cheese is one of the main identity markers of Sicily (Betta, 2000; Todaro, Bonanno and Scatassa, 2014). In particular, the purpose of the research is to analyse the relationship between cheese selling and destination marketing in order to know the type of place making which is built from cheese souvenirs. While previous research has acknowledged the role of cheese as a food souvenir based on the perception of tourists (for example, Medeiros, Horodyski and Passador, 2017), this paper offers a retailing perspective based on cheese souvenirs to fill a research gap where the relationships between niche food souvenirs and tourism requires further research (see, for example, Lin, 2017).

According to Bessiere and Tibere (2013), visitors use to purchase food souvenirs in places where they have contact with food heritage, and the authors specifically acknowledge the role of specialist shops and markets as places where food souvenirs are sold. This is also supported by Cleave (2020), who says that “food often becomes a symbol of place, representing elements of its history and culture, whether it comes from a visit to a local market or producer” (p.14). In this sense, the value of food souvenirs also lies on the connection that is created when visitors engage with local vendors (see Vega-Vázquez et al., 2017). Drawing from the offer of cheese in food markets and food shops in the city of Palermo, this research adds texture to the conversations that place food souvenirs as marketing ambassadors and destination landmarks of places (see Fusté-Forné, 2020) from the perspective of the local selling of cheese in Sicily.

2. Literature review

Food tourism is defined as a type of tourism that allows visitors to experience a culture through food (Long, 2004), and to discover the cultural and natural idiosyncrasies of a territory (Fusté-Forné, 2019). Food consumption is an important part of the travel experience (Ellis et al., 2018; Mak et al., 2012), and food and beverage experiences represent a source of competitive advantages for destinations (Knollenberg et al., 2021). Tourists are often attracted by the local food they eat in relation to the destination where they eat it (Wong et al., 2019). In the context of food experiences, souvenirs

appear as part of the service provision (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019) and several previous studies highlight the relevance of souvenirs in the tourist market (for example, Lin and Mao, 2015).

Souvenirs represent a part of the culture and heritage of destinations (Cave, Jolliffe, and Baum, 2013; Love and Sheldon, 1998; Trinh et al., 2014), which is materialized in a souvenir (Soukhathammavong and Park, 2019). It is this relationship between the marketed product (MacLeod, 2006) and the place that creates a meaningful connection between hosts and guests (Derrett, 2003). Gordon (1986) classifies souvenirs in different types, among which she highlights local products such as food products, which are also included in the souvenir categories identified by other authors (see, for example, Swanson and Timothy, 2012). In addition, Buczkowska (2014) define food souvenirs as culinary souvenirs, which include local food and beverage – such as cheese (see Medeiros, Horodyski and Passador, 2017).

In relation to tourism, the consumption of food souvenirs contributes to the memories of the visited place through the representation of a local product, which in turn is related to the feelings of belonging to the visited community through the appreciation of its culture (de Mello y Ceretta, 2015). Food souvenirs allow visitors to share moments they have experienced while traveling, as a way to evoke the sense of a place (Hazman-Wong and Sumarjan, 2016). For example, “souvenirs are key features in the tourism experience, and food and beverage have gained prominence in this function. Products such as the artisanal minas Serro cheese carry an inseparable value to the territory and have greater potential of tourist consumption” (Medeiros, Horodyski and Passador, 2017, p.361).

Special foods such as cheese, in the form of a food souvenir, are “touchstones of memory, reminders of place, time and others” (Morgan and Pritchard, 2005, p.37). This is demonstrated in previous research, which shows that food evoke memories (see Abarca and Colby, 2016), as illustrated in the case of cheese: “we all eat of memories, of what excites us, of what reminds us when we were younger. You like to eat what you had eaten a long time ago. Let’s eat a cheese because it reminds your town, the summer, or the people. And you find the taste even better!” (Fusté-Forné, 2020, p.185). In relation to the food tourist consumption of souvenirs, there are different aspects that engage visitors with the purchasing of food souvenirs, such as practical aspects like conservation and packaging. In line with this, Bessiere and Tibere (2013) suggested that traditional culinary products such as cheese are an example of authentic food souvenirs which can be easily carried by tourists.

Also, souvenirs do not escape from the authenticity debate (see Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Littrell, Anderson y Brown, 1993). However, this is not the objective of this study, which understands authentic souvenirs as elements that communicate the heritage of a place and the uniqueness of the destination (Durko and Petrick, 2016; Harrington and Ottenbacher, 2010). In line with Elomba and Yun (2018), “the features of the souvenir must provide a realistic reflection of the heritage area, destination, or values. The materials used for the souvenirs should be traditional or should derive from heritage area’s country” (p.107). This is clearly manifested in a piece of cheese which connects people and places through food (Sims, 2009), as a source of tourism experiences (Swanson and Timothy, 2012).

Every place has its own distinctive local examples of food and beverage, which have the potential to become authentic food souvenirs (Altintzoglou, Heide and Borch, 2016), influencing on the economic, environmental and sociocultural wellbeing of a destination (Bessiere and Tibere, 2013; Love and Sheldon, 1998). A food souvenir purchase embraces local food as a symbol of place because “souvenirs are portable items that can represent a society’s cultural heritage and reflect the main characteristics of a tourist destination” (Elomba and Yun, 2018, p.103). For example, in the French city of Dijon, “all the main souvenirs are food related, including Burgundy wine, gingerbread, cheeses, Dijon mustard and

aniseed candies” (Lin and Mao, 2015, p.21). How do cheese souvenirs negotiate the relationships between food tourism and place marketing in Sicily?

3. Material and methods

This research analyses cheese as a food souvenir in Sicily. The study is based on a qualitative design which included visits and interviews with local sellers in the food markets and food shops in Palermo, which is selected for the study because it is the capital of Sicily and the most visited city of the island (Statista, 2022). Specifically, visits were made to the markets of Capo and Ballarò, which are the most popular food markets in the city (Sgroi et al., 2022). Added to this, 8 specialist food shops, delicatessen and gourmet stores, were also included to provide a more robust picture of the type of cheese souvenir available in the city. Food shops capture the meaning a place attaches to food (Forte et al., 2022) and, in particular, to cheese (Fusté-Forné, 2020). These food shops were selected following the suggestions from a local food expert resident in Palermo. The objective of the interviews made to the sellers in the markets and the food shops was to know the cheeses sold in each of the places, their origin and any features the vendors thought interesting as part of the marketing of cheese as a typical food of Sicily to tourists. Drawing from direct observation and interviews with 12 cheese sellers (2 at Capo Market, 2 at Ballarò Market and 8 at specialist food shops) conducted during the month of July 2022, results reveal the features of cheese as a souvenir which allows visitors to capture the identity of Sicily and remember the travel experiences to the island.

4. Results

As a result of data collection and data analysis, this section presents the main features that build the understanding of cheese as a souvenir in Sicily. It is obvious that cheese is not only a tangible product, and its purchase also includes the intangible connections with the cultural and natural environment where it is produced and sold. A cheese is a tangible and intangible souvenir. Results show that the cheese marketing in Palermo is locally centered, and traditional cheeses of Sicily are the most iconic based on the offer in food markets and food shops. However, results also show that Italian cheeses, especially from the Puglia and Toscana regions, and international styled cheeses, especially from Europe, are also relevant.

This section is divided in two sub sections. First, the authors identify the context of Sicilian cheeses based on secondary data, and second, empirical results are presented in relation to the cheeses which represent the Sicilian identity.

4.1. Production, economic and commercial aspects of historic Sicilian cheeses

The processing of milk since ancient times has undergone a constant transformation from its origins to the present day. In Italy, there are many types of cheese, some well-known, others less so or even unknown. This is all due to the development of local animal husbandry that has been stabilised since the origins of civilisation when humankind learnt to domesticate milk-producing animals: first sheep and goats and then cattle.

The history of Italian cheese is based on multiple characteristics, i.e. climatic, soil and cultural differences in each region of Italy that can particularly enhance attributes such as taste and aromas typical of a specific production area. It can be said that every area of Italy has a geographical environment that includes both natural factors (climate, environmental characteristics) and human factors (production techniques handed down over time, craftsmanship, savoir-faire). These

factors, combined, make it possible to obtain a product that is inimitable outside a specific production area. In Sicily, the cheese-making tradition has very ancient roots, as evidenced by the extensive existing bibliography and the literature. For example, Homer wrote in the *Odyssey*: ‘Sitting, he milked the bleating goats in turn, and, having made the lambs mothers, he curdled half the milk and placed it in woven baskets’. In the classical Greek world, the first cheese chart was created, which was a subdivision of types according to the origin, taste and use. Among them, there were Sicilian cheeses, which were highly appreciated by the Greeks. In some 14th-century banquets and luncheons, we find them mentioned and esteemed for their taste.

The top three kinds of Italian cheese are: Grana Padano, Parmigiano Reggiano and Gorgonzola are worth a total of 3.5 billion euros in production (Ismea Mercati, 2022), which have gone beyond their original production boundaries to conquer the international markets, resulting in a flourishing sector, both technically and economically, throughout Italy. Italy is the world’s third largest exporter of cheese and dairy products in 2020, behind Germany and the Netherlands. Currently, more than a third of national cheese production is directed to foreign markets. The export propensity of Italian cheeses has progressively increased over the last five years, reaching 34.5% in 2020. France, Germany and the USA are the top three destination markets for Italian cheeses, together accounting for more than 46% of export value. Hard and fresh cheeses are the most exported types – together they account for almost three quarters of total volumes. In Italy, production is particularly concentrated in the North: four regions (Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Veneto and Piedmont) account for 80% of the total cow’s milk delivered in Italy, registering 5,379, 4,930, 3,519 farms for cow’s milk production respectively. In 2020, in particular, the South concentrates 16% of the national herds with 715 farms oriented to milk production against 25,915.

From a commercial point of view, the cheese chain consists of three levels comprising producers, wholesalers and distributors. Producers are mostly represented by breeders and processors, characterised by small and medium-sized production. In particular, several cheese factories are located in marginal areas, i.e. areas within the territory characterised by a strong agricultural and rural exodus, the high average age of entrepreneurs and a lack of urban infrastructures capable of competitively connecting economic activities. These aspects are especially prevalent in southern Italy, where livestock activity is mainly developed in hilly and mountainous areas. The role of the wholesaler, who is responsible for purchasing large quantities of products from small companies and selling them directly to retail shops or the large-scale retail trade (GDO), remains fundamental.

In recent times, several producer-breeders form groups, associations, and consortia with the aim of both concentrating supply and having greater bargaining power vis-à-vis large-scale organised distribution and placing products directly in traditional sales outlets. The marketing of these products has several problems linked to management and planning difficulties and the constant change in consumer tastes that vary according to subjective criteria, making it complicated to adapt supply to final demand. The shortcomings of the various stakeholders lead to the inadequate promotion of the products and poor income for producers. Ismea Mercati’s SWOT analysis (2022) points out some strengths, including a strong economic relevance of the supply chain in the national agro-food system, excellent recognition and positioning of ‘Made in Italy’ dairy products in the main outlet markets, high know-how in terms of management, technology and digitalisation in national farms, especially in the most productive areas. Weaknesses include production costs that are on average higher than those of foreign competitors due to structural and natural constraints, a strong concentration of production in some areas of the country, especially in the North with a high environmental impact, a strong fragmentation of the breeding system and strong regional and territorial disparities, a considerable pulverisation of the

processing system, especially in the Centre-South, which reduces the willingness to invest in innovation and high bargaining power of the large-scale retail trade.

In this context, quality certification favours production systems and the economy of the territory while protecting the environment, because there is an indissoluble link both with the territory of origin and with local biodiversity. At the same time, EU certification gives consumers greater guarantees with a higher level of traceability and food safety than other products. Historical Sicilian cheeses originate in traditional production systems from which a set of factors defined as 'biodiversity traits' arise. Some of them have a relevant significance: raw milk that includes all the peculiarities of the territory; the use of natural curds; the use of traditional equipment (wood, copper, etc.) indispensable for the natural concentration of autochthonous dairy micro-organisms; the maturing and ripening of the cheeses in natural premises that guarantee a cool, ventilated and sometimes humid environment. (CORFILAC, 2022). The island of Sicily boasts several recognised cheeses, including Caciocavallo Palermitano, Pecorino PDO, Provola dei Nebrodi PDO, Vastedda del Belice PDO, Piacentinu Ennese PDO and Ragusano PDO, which this study confirms they represent the most meaningful Sicilian cheese souvenirs.

4.2. Retailers place cheese in Sicilian destination marketing

The food markets in Palermo have an orientation towards a tourist profile, and they promote a traditional Sicilian cheese (Figure 1) which is featured by Caciocavallo or Pecorino. As it is observed in Figure 1, cheeses are often flavoured by local ingredients, such as pistachio or olives, and also species like pepper and saffron. This is observed in all the food stalls and the food shops visited and it is a feature that defines cheese as a food souvenir. The use of herbs (to produce the *formaggi aromatizzati*), wine (and other alcoholic beverages such as Moscato) and truffles is also common to flavour the final product, such as the *pecorino al tartufo*.



Fig 1. Sicilian cheeses sold at the Capo Market. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)

The six Sicilian cheeses more commonly sold as a food souvenir in Palermo are Cacciocavallo Palermitano, Pecorino, Provola dei Nebrodi, Vastedda del Belice, Piacentino Ennese, and Ragusano. These six cheeses are explained in a more detailed way below. However, the cheese marketing of the city is also based on many other local cheeses, such as the traditional Sicilian cheeses elaborated in the Madonie, a mountain region located in the north-western of Sicily. Artisanal cheeses from Sicily also found in this study are Tuma Persa and Maiorchino, a traditional Sicilian cheese which is scarcely sold in the retail points.

In addition, popular Italian cheeses are also found in the food markets and the food shops, such as Burrata, Grana Padano, Gorgonzola, Mozzarella, Parmeggiano Reggiano and Ricotta, this latter in different versions such as those with pistachio, with chili pepper or baked (Figure 2), and also with almond. There are also many examples of white and smoked cheeses such as Scamorza and Ricotta, and cheeses from near towns such as Corleone (Figure 3). The food stalls located in the markets also offer tastings of local and regional types of cheeses (Figure 4) to allow visitors to know the product before they purchase the cheese as a food souvenir.



Fig 2. Local varieties of cheeses sold at the Capo Market. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)



Fig 3. Regional cheeses sold at the Ballarò Market. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)



Fig 4. A cheese tasting at the Ballarò Market. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)

Added to the international renowned Italian cheeses, the selling points are also home of other Italian cheeses. This is the case of Pecorino Toscano or Taleggio cheese, from the Northern region of Toscana; Stracchino, a fresh cheese from the Northern areas of Italy; and Fontina Valdostana, made in the Aosta Valley, in the Italian Alps. The region of Puglia is also an area of origin of cheeses sold in Palermo with examples like Burratina, Canestrato or Straciatella pugliese, all of them from the Puglia region. The Pecorino Sardo, from the Sardinia, is also available in the food shops.

In relation to the international cheeses, these come from the European countries. In two of the gourmet stores, the sellers affirmed that most of these international cheeses are handmade in Sicily, and they are inspired in the European tradition of cheesemaking. This is the case of Switzerland (Emmental, Gruyere and Raclette), but also examples of cheeses from England (Cheddar and Stilton), France (Brie and Roquefort), Spain (Manchego), and the Netherlands (Leerdammer). While these cheeses are only available in the food shops, not in markets, this shows the local-global connections that appear in the cheese marketing strategy of Palermo.

Caciocavallo Palermitano

Caciocavallo Palermitano is a typical spun-paste cow's milk cheese with distinctive organoleptic characteristics that give it a strong territorial and historical identity. This is one of the cheeses more commonly found in the food stalls and the food shops. The cheese-making tradition in the area of origin of Caciocavallo Palermitano production has ancient roots, as evidenced by a multitude of historical events. As far back as 1412, there was already talk of this cheese being eaten not only at dinners and banquets but also by nuns, who kept it as a prized product. Caciocavallo Palermitano was considered a food of high nutritional value, and it was used as a bargaining chip for the payment of rent. The production area of the cheese includes not only the entire Palermo area, but also some municipalities in Agrigento (Cammarata, Casteltermini, San Giovanni Gemini, San Stefano Quisquina) and Trapani (Alcamo, Buseto Palizzolo, Calatafimi, Castellamare del Golfo, Custonaci, Erice, Gibellina, SanVito Lo Capo and Valderice).

The dairy cattle breeding systems practised in the Caciocavallo Palermitano production area are extensive and semi-extensive, based on the use of forage resources and natural pastures in the hills and mountains, where there is the presence of typical Mediterranean scrub. In particular, mountain areas are characterised by a more humid and rainier climate, where unique biodiversity predominates. In certain cases, pasture feeding is supplemented with hay and concentrates depending on the qualitative and quantitative availability of green grass and the needs of the cows, which are higher in the case of more productive breeds. There are four milk-producing breeds in the Caciocavallo production area, belonging to the Cinisara, Modicana, Bruna and Pezzata Rossa Italiana breeds. The milk produced by these animals is sold either to dairies or processed directly on the farms following the traditional cheesemaking technique using wooden utensils.

The cheese has a parallelepiped shape, with a square cross-section and slightly rounded corners, and a colour ranging from ivory to straw yellow. The aroma is delicate and light in the first few days of ripening, intense as the cheese matures. The flavour is acidulous, slightly savoury and barely piquant in the first few months of ripening and intense and piquant as ripening progresses. Furthermore, Caciocavallo has no protection mark and therefore no production regulations for cheesemakers. It is believed that there may be 30-40 producers who still make cheese using the traditional technique. Marketing is not in associated form but is carried out by individual companies that sell the product directly to retailers or final consumers. While there are no sales to the large-scale retail trade of products obtained by the traditional process, Caciocavallo has emerged as the most common cheese sold as a food souvenir in Palermo, as observed in the figures above.

Pecorino

Pecorino PDO is the oldest cheese in Sicily, and probably in Europe. Historical mentions date back to the 9th century BC, in one of the most famous passages of Homer's *Odyssey* when Ulysses meets Polyphemus. Later Aristotle and Pliny extol its unique taste. The latter in particular, in his work *'Naturalis Historia'*, drew up a cheese list in which sheep's milk cheese from Agrigento was mentioned among the best. It is a semi-cooked, pressed sheep's milk cheese. The quality and organoleptic characteristics of the milk used in its production are closely linked to the pasture and take on a particular character. Botanical species influence the cheese production component by modifying its aromatic composition. The geographical area of sheep breeding, milk production, processing and maturing of Pecorino Siciliano PDO cheese is within the territory of the Region of Sicily. The Sicilian territory is suited for the production of this product where there is a Mediterranean climate but there are different microclimates. In this sense, the coastal areas are hot, arid and windy while inland has a temperate and humid climate. All the farmers who produce milk to become Pecorino Siciliano PDO are extensive farmers who produce milk all year round. However, PDO production is linked to the availability of green pasture, so the cheese year runs from mid-October to late May.

The peculiarities of this product lie in several factors: the method of obtaining the cheese, which involves raw milk and feeding the sheep on pasture, traditional processing methods in wood, moulding in reed baskets and maturing for at least four months. The cheese is cylindrical, white to straw yellow with a sweet flavour and distinct pasture aromas, slightly spicy in the 'Pepato' type. The number of sheep in Sicily is 907,313 (BDN). In Sicily there are a total of 11,827 census farms, for the production of Pecorino Siciliano there are 22 dairy sheep breeders with an average consistency of 400 sheep per farm. By 2021, the number of milk producers for PDO production is 28. There are 14 active cheese makers and 15 cheese ripeners. The quantity of milk produced by the 22 breeders of the PDO is around 545,064 liters, and the milk processed into Pecorino is 486,548 liters. In the 2021 cheese year, the quantity of Pecorino Siciliano is 5,263 wheels for a total of 50,137 kg. As far as the marketing of the product is concerned, all the dairies carry out several types of sales, namely direct sales, to the large-scale retail trade, and wholesalers.

These data highlight both the richness of Sicily's agro-alimentary heritage, particularly in the dairy sector, and its weaknesses such as the lack of cooperation between the various producers and the absence of marketing strategies oriented toward the promotion and commercialisation of these typical products. In this particular scenario, food and wine tourism can be a significant input to enhance these foods characterised by a multitude of flavours, aromas and traditions. As a result of this study, we have observed that Pecorino is one of the Sicilian cheeses which has a more relevant power within the connections of food identity and tourism attraction.

Provola dei Nebrodi

Another Sicilian cheese which is commonly sold at food markets and food shops in Palermo is Provola dei Nebrodi. Provola dei Nebrodi PDO is one of Sicily's oldest cheeses, whose peculiarities have been handed down through generations to the present day. In 1988, Giuseppe Martorana in *'I Vistimara'* mentions Provola dei Nebrodi, describing both the uniqueness related to the importance of the spontaneous essences and flora cultivated in the area of origin and the ability of the master cheesemakers to use cheesemaking and ageing processes handed down through generations. The production territory of Provola dei Nebrodi includes: in the province of Catania the municipalities Bronte, Castiglione di Sicilia, Maletto, Maniace, Randazzo; in the province of Enna the municipalities Cerami, and Troina; in the province of Messina the municipalities Arcara Lifusi, Basicò, Capizzi, Caprileone, Caronia, Castel di Lucio, Cesarò, Ficarra, Floresta, Frazzanò, Galati Mamertino, Gioisa Marea, Librizzi, Longi, Malvagna, Mirto, Mistretta, Mojo, Alcantara, Montalbano

Elicona, Montagnareale, Monta d'Affermo, Naso, Patti, Pettineo, Piraino, Raccuja, Reitano, Roccella Valdemone, San Fratello, San Pietro Patti, San Teodoro, Sant'Angelo di Brolo, Santa domenica Vittoria, Santo Stefano di Camastra, Sinagra, Tortorici, Tripi, Tusa and Ucria.

The origin of Provola dei Nebrodi is attributed to the areas of the Nebrodi Mountains that extend between the provinces of Messina, Catania and Enna where there is a climate characterised by long, fairly harsh winters and mild, non-sulky summers. The farming system is of the extensive type in which the main source of the food supply is represented by the grazing of spontaneous permanent and annual forage essences and by cultivated grasslands. The livestock heritage is represented by the Sicilian breeds, but over time some breeds have been introduced, such as the Alpine Brown, Friesian and Pezzata Rossa. For the production of Provola dei Nebrodi, there are 23 dairy cattle breeders with an average herd size of 40 head. The cheese has a classic pear shape, cream-coloured tending to straw-coloured that becomes more or less golden yellow as it matures. It is made with raw milk and a traditional processing system using wood in which a biofilm rich in autochthonous dairy microorganisms is formed. It has a pleasant, mild flavour for fresh cheeses and as the ripening process progresses there is a tangy, savoury hint.



Fig 5. Provola from the Madonie sold at a food shop. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)

The total number of farms with a herd producing this cheese is 5, which also have a maturing centre. There is only one dairy without a breeding farm but with a maturing centre, and only one milk producer. In the territory, there is about 30,000 head of cattle and about 420 tons of milk used for the production of Provola dei Nebrodi PDO, with a total of 41,000 kg of provola produced in the year 2021. Almost all producers sell directly on the farm, GDO, specialised shops, local markets and restaurants. While there is no collective marketing strategy for Provola dei Nebrodi, there is widespread individual marketing and a lack of cooperation between producers. However, in the selling places analysed,

both the original Provola dei Nebrodi and Provola-styled cheeses are often purchased by visitors as a food souvenir such as for example those versions of this cheese made in the region of the Madonie (see Figure 5), one of the cheese areas in the island of Sicily.

Vastedda del Belice

Vastedda del Belice PDO is also one of Sicily's oldest cheeses. In the past, it was only made during the summer from the end-of-lactation milk of ewes raised in particularly productive areas belonging to local breeds. In particular, sheep farming in Sicily in the area where this cheese is produced predates the arrival of the Phoenicians. According to historical materials, the Greek archaeology professor, Christos G. Doumas, stated the coming of domesticated sheep dates back to the time when Aegean society was still engaged in hunting and gathering, in the 9th millennium BC. The area of production of PDO, sheep breeding, milk production, processing and cheese packaging of Vastedda del Belice PDO cheese is included in the territories of the following municipalities: in the province of Agrigento: Caltabellotta, Menfi, Montevago, Sambuca di Sicilia, Santa Margherita di Belice and Sciacca. In the province of Trapani: Calatafimi, Campobello di Mazara, Castelvetro, Gibellina, Partanna, Poggioreale, Salaparuta, Salemi, Santa Ninfa and Vita. In the province of Palermo: Contessa Entellina and Bisacchino limited to the hamlet of San Biagio.

The climatic factors of the cheese production area are different from other areas of Sicily the average annual temperature is 16°C, with a minimum of 9°C and a maximum of 35°C. Vastedda del Valle del Belice PDO is a pasta filata cheese made from whole, raw sheep's milk from Valle del Belice's breeds. The rearing system is extensive with grazing all year round. The main fodder used in sheep breeding is Sulla, an invaluable resource, instead of grasses of vetch-oats and clover in the spring period. The size of this breed in the area of origin is around 60,000 thousand heads. The uniqueness of this product lies both in the fact that it is the only pasta filata sheep's cheese and in the peculiar characteristics of the area in which the sheep are reared, combined with the artisanal technique of stretching the matured cheese and the equipment used during the cheese-making process, give rise to a unique product.

This cheese is predominantly found in the gourmet stores. It has a compact shape similar to a round flatbread, ivory white. The aroma and flavour are typical of fresh sheep's milk cheese with slightly acidulous and never spicy notes. The number of farms producing this cheese is 10, of which 7 have their cheese factory. The quantity of milk produced in the production area stands at 5 million liters, of which 200,000 liters are destined for PDO production. The quantity of Vastedda produced is 30,730 kg. In this case, the producers adhere to the Consortium for the Protection of Vastedda del Belice PDO for promotional activities, and the association 'L'arte de Curatoli' (in the Sicilian dialect, *curatulu* is the shepherd who also knows how to process milk) is responsible for marketing and concentrating supply, and the producers also participate in fairs such as Cheese and the Salone del Gusto.

Piacentino Ennese

Piacentino Ennese PDO is a pressed cheese made from sheep's milk with the addition of saffron and peppercorns obtained using traditional techniques and equipment. The most important feature is the addition of saffron to the milk during the cheesemaking process. This gives the cheese a unique color which is observed in the final cheese called *Piacentino Ennese allo zafferano* (Figure 6). Saffron is a crop that has an excellent capacity to adapt to the Enna area, capable of having aromatic components that make the cheese's bouquet intense and unique. The origin of this cheese is said to have some connection with the city of Piacenza, in fact, the historian Corrado Barberis, an expert in rural sociology, stated that cheesemakers who had experimented with the use of saffron in cheese production came from

Piacenza. The area of milk production, cheese-making and maturing of this product includes the entire territory of the municipalities of Enna, Aidone, Assoro, Barrafranca, Calascibetta, Piazza Armerina, Pietraperzia, Valguarnera and Villarosa in the province of Enna.

The environment in which Piacentino Ennese is born is one of the characteristics that give the product its uniqueness, in fact, in the fodder species used to feed dairy sheep, particular terpenes play a fundamental role in shaping the aromatic profile of this typical cheese. The cheese is cylindrical with reliefs obtained by placing it in a reed basket. It has a more or less intense yellow colour due to the presence of saffron. It has a delicate smell with a slight aroma of saffron, a slightly salty taste and a mild spiciness in the first months of ripening that tends to intensify.

The farming system is extensive and based on free-range grazing with integration in cowsheds during the winter period. Piacentino Annese PDO is produced with milk from indigenous Sicilian sheep breeds such as the Comisana, Pinzirta, Valle del Belice and their crossbreeds. There are approximately 1,240 sheep farms in the province of Enna. The number of heads amounts to 125,722. There are 18 sheep dairy farmers with an average number of 100 sheep per farm. The total number of dairy farms is 20 and the number of dairy farms is about 5. In the Annese territory, sheep milk production is estimated at 2,115 tons. As of 2021, 36,862 Kg of Piacentino Annese PDO were produced, for a total of 8,965 wheels (see CORFILAC, 2022).



Fig 6. Piacentino Ennese, and Sicilian cheeses, sold at a food shop. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)

However, of the Piacentino producers who are members of the Consorzio di Tutela, 3 companies sell the cheeses to large-scale retail trade and wholesalers and 5 sell directly on the farm, to specialised shops and local supermarkets. There is no collective marketing strategy for the cheese, but Consorzio di Tutela has initiated coordination activities for the definition of the basic price and participation in events to promote the product. A common characteristic of this

typical cheese remains in widespread individual marketing which is a challenge in the process of protection and promotion of this unique cheese.

Ragusano

Ragusano PDO is one of the oldest cheeses in Sicily whose name derives from the area of production, the province of Ragusa. For example, in 1808, Abbot Paolo Balsamo in his works describes Ragusano as cheese and ricotta products as among the best in Sicily. Filippo Garofalo also mentions the fame and deliciousness of cheese and ricotta from the Ragusa area. The production and processing area of the milk used to make Ragusano cheese includes the entire territory of the municipalities of: Acate, Chiaramonte Gulfi, Comiso, Giarratana, Ispica, Modica, Monterosso Almo, Pozzallo, Ragusa, Santa Croce Camerina, Scicli and Vittoria, in the province of Ragusa and the municipalities of Noto, Palazzolo Acreide and Rosolini in the province of Siracusa. Ragusano cheese is produced with whole raw cow's milk during the foraging season that runs from November to May. The feed consists mainly of more than 100 spontaneous essences and grasslands of the Hyblean plateau, this high plant biodiversity contributes to enhancing the sensory and aromatic characteristics of the cheese. The Hyblean territory is characterised by hilly areas with few mountainous areas, and the climate has mild winters and summers with temperate temperatures typical of Sicilian coastal areas.

Processing is traditional with wooden utensils characterised by biofilms rich in unique microorganisms that are essential and characterise the final product. The rearing system is extensive with integration in stables. Ragusano is a semi-hard pasta filata cheese produced exclusively with milk from the Modicana breed of cow and is parallelepiped in shape with a square cross-section. The flavour is pleasant, mild and delicate, not very spicy in the first months of ripening and tending to spicy and savoury in later ripening. The total number of farms producing Ragusano cheese does not exceed 35. Usually, the breeders are also cheesemakers, by 2022 there were 41 milk producers, 12 cheesemakers and 9 active ripeners (see CORFILAC, 2022). At present there is no consolidated marketing strategy and 70% of the producers sell directly to the large-scale retail trade and the hotels, restaurants and catering sector at the same time. While the previous cheeses were often found in the selling points, Ragusano was only available in some of the retail points analysed, being the least common among the most important Sicilian cheeses.

5. Discussion

This paper has studied the characteristics of cheese selling in Palermo to understand the role of cheese as a souvenir in Sicily. Results show that cheese as a food souvenir is a marker of Sicilian identity. Cheese has been of vital economic importance in the culture of every people (see Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2020), and cheese tourism has gathered a growing interest in recent years (Dias, 2022; Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban, 2019; Fusté-Forné, 2015), also in Italy (Marcoz, Melewar and Dennis, 2016). In this sense, "cheeses convey the identity of a region. The origin of milk, the pastures, the land, the cheesemakers and the traditional recipes transmit the ways a cheese is produced and consumed. This background links to food tourism practices, particularly to cheese-oriented tourism" (Fusté-Forné, 2020, p.177). Cheese tourism, as a niche form of food tourism, does not only contribute to the creation of a destination competitive advantage (Knollenberg et al., 2021) but it also has a meaningful impact on the creation of memories (Stone, Migacz and Wolf, 2019).

Cheese is a food souvenir (Gordon, 1986) used as a marketing element (Qi and Hong, 2011) in destination management and marketing. The value of cheese as a food souvenir is increased when visitors engage with local vendors (see Vega-

Vázquez et al., 2017). While previous research has analysed cheese as a food souvenir based on the tourist perception (Medeiros, Horodyski and Passador, 2017), this paper has analysed its characteristics from the supply side – the vendors. Results show that quality certification is an essential attribute in cheese marketing processes, and the use of cheese as a souvenir is the result of the link between the product (cheese), the territory where it is produced (natural factors) and the traditional making process (cultural factors).

Cheese marketing in Palermo includes a large offer of cheeses. First, historical Sicilian cheeses are commonly available in the retail points. These are Cacciocavallo Palermitano and Pecorino, but also Provola dei Nebrodi, Vastedda del Belice, Piacentino Ennese, and Ragusano. The offer also includes other artisanal Sicilian cheeses, which are unique of the island, such as the Maiorchino, and also examples of celebrity cheese from other parts of Italy, specially from the North. In addition, the cheese offer also includes cheeses whose making use local products (for example, pistacchio and olives) and spices (for example, pepper). Some of these products, such as saffron, gives the cheese its final colour, as it happens with the Piacentino Ennese. Results also show that there is a different marketing strategy between food markets and food shops, markets being more centered in a tourist profile with 'only' cheeses 'Made in Sicily' and shops offering a more diverse range of cheeses without losing the locally made.

This research has demonstrated that cheese souvenirs in Palermo provides the cultural and natural background embedded in milk production and cheese making in Sicily, and has also showed that the majority of the popular cheeses sold in the retail points have a quality label. This is in line with previous studies that highlight that a distinguished identity and the identification of origin are among the most relevant attributes of food souvenirs (see Horodyski et al., 2014). In this sense, "an authentic souvenir should be able to convey a unique meaning or feeling to the tourist about the society the souvenir represents" (Elomba and Yun, 2018, p.107). The quality label contributes to the engagement of visitors with local heritages and local landscapes.



Fig 7. Local and national cheeses and meat products sold at a food shop. (Source: Francesc Fusté-Forné)

How is a Sicilian place marketing communicated through cheese tourism? The relationship between cheese selling and destination marketing observed in this research shows that cheese souvenirs communicate a strong Sicilian identity, linked to a quality product, and also embedded as part of a broader food tourism consumption which include other products, such as sauces or salumi (see Figure 7) which shows that a piece of cheese is also part of a broader food landscape. A souvenir generates a strong feeling of place attachment (Elomba and Yun, 2018), which in this case is an example of place marketing. As observed at the beginning of this paper, food souvenirs are not only reminders of an experience (Swanson and Timothy, 2012), but they also encapsulate the values of authenticity and *terroir* attached to local traditional products (Brandrud and Clausen, 2011).

6. Conclusion

This study analyses cheese souvenirs from the perspective of vendors. Food souvenirs are a source of tourist satisfaction (Suhartanto et al., 2018) which requires that future studies analyse the role of cheese food souvenirs in Sicily from the perspective of visitors. This would allow to understand whether or not cheeses available at food markets and food shops meet visitors' expectations, and to explore the motivations to purchase them as a souvenir. Future research may also analyse the importance of social media in the sharing of food souvenirs (Wong et al., 2019) through pictures (Cleave, 2019), and also study the relationship between travel and online food souvenirs (Seaman and Schroeder, 2022; Yuan et al., 2022).

This would provide a more robust picture of the cheese marketing in Sicily, and would not only be useful to understand the drivers of cheese tourism consumption, being local origin one of the most relevant in general food tourism consumption studies (see Altintzoglou, Heide and Borch, 2016), but also to provide guidance to food tourism management and marketing. The understanding of visitors' familiarity (Swanson and Timothy, 2012) with the local products is also crucial to capture the meanings embedded in a food souvenir purchase which, in turn, has also a potential influence on future food behavior (Stone, Migacz and Wolf, 2019) as a source to improve the economic, environmental and sociocultural wellbeing of people and places through food practices.

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