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Italian Cheese in the Global Heritage Arena

Cristina Grasseni

The Heritage of Transhumance

This chapter offers cultural anthropological insights into a longitudinal ethnographic investigation of the making of a heritage cheese. Cheese is here the chosen pivot of broader epistemologies of heritage that are acted on the ground, mediating personal, local, and scalar levels of agency. The story in brief: in order to achieve a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) for their mountain cheese *Strachitunt*, a number of stakeholders from a tiny alpine valley, Val Taleggio in Lombardy, mobilized the concept of *tipicità*. The discourse and performance of *tipicità* forms the back- and front-stage of what I call the heritage arena. *Tipicità* is a complex, often tacit semantic cloud that synergizes with other concepts: *patrimonio* ("patrimony"/heritage) but also singularity, and *eccellenza* (excellence). Heritage cheese, as I will show, becomes a dynamic process of meaning making as a marker of distinction through taste, as a normative sedimentation of specific traditional practices, and as a political conduit to the politics of food, for the stakeholders involved.

In my book *The Heritage Arena* (2017), I compared the cases of significant neighbors of Val Taleggio's *Strachitunt*: Bitto, Branzi, and Formai de Mut—partly or entirely produced in the Bergamasque uplands, and the transhumant cheeses Taleggio and stracchino—nowadays associated with the Lombard lowlands. Their divergent histories and uneven prestige and commercial fortunes place the story of *Strachitunt* in perspective. We should imagine these upland and lowland cheeses as complementing *Strachitunt* in a geography of opposites: the cooked and the raw, so to speak. All of them originate from a tradition of transhumant cheesemaking straddling peaks and plains, summers and winters, fresh grass and hay, craft and industry.

Made in the high-altitude summer pastures at the head of the Bergamasque valleys, Bitto, Formai de Mut, and Branzi triangulate different versions of one ideal type of upland cheese: cooked, fat, round-shaped, matured, high-prestige, yellowish 10-kilo wheels with a brushed-hardened crust similar to that of Parmesan or Grana. On the other hand, Taleggio and stracchino are, respectively, the PDO and non-PDO evolution of fresh, uncooked, square, whitish, soft, flowery-crust slabs of 2 kilos at most, made for common consumption and cheap markets. *Alpage*, or upland cheese,

is for the discerning and the affluent. Lowland cheese by contrast is the unassuming by-product of transhumance.

The soft, white square cheese stracchino (called *strachi* in Bergamasque dialect) originates in the historical context of transhumant dairy farming, which was documented among others in the second half of the nineteenth century by the first national survey of Italian agriculture after the unification of the kingdom (Jacini 1882). This production technique, covering a very broad area though pivoting around seasonal return trips to the alpine valleys, eventually achieved the distinction of the PDO as “Taleggio.” Unfortunately, Taleggio cheese failed its valley of origin—Val Taleggio—at least in the eyes of its residents and entrepreneurs, because it favored lowland large dairy producers who conclusively transferred the dairy craft to the lowlands, kept production abundant, and prices cheap.

In Italian food politics, geographic indications—and especially PDO—play a key role in supporting local and broader food economies. An unexploited “patrimony,” a lost “typicity,” Taleggio cheese looms large in the resentment of the people of Val Taleggio, a dwindling community of about 800 people who feel forgotten by history and marginalized by the dairy economy. Caught in the chasm between the “quantity economy” of cheap lowland cheeses and the “quality economy” of exclusive upland cheeses, the cheesemakers of Val Taleggio tried renaming the valley’s cheese as “Taleggio of Val Taleggio” or “stracchino of Val Taleggio”—but they were legally cautioned and effectively prevented from further qualifying the already-“protected” designation of Taleggio. They then turned to reinventing Strachitunt as the valley’s own cheese and claimed a PDO for their valley alone. A consortium of dairy farmers and cheese refiners was established in Val Taleggio in October 2002 to request a PDO for Strachitunt. It took them more than eleven years to obtain it, mostly due to appeals and conflicts with other producers in the neighboring lowlands, but it was eventually registered as an EU-wide PDO trademark in March 2014. But what was actually gained, and what was lost?

Strachitunt PDO can be considered a post-transhumant reinvention of a cheesemaking tradition that historically connected the alpine pastures and lowlands of northern Italy. In 1882, Stefano Jacini, in his parliamentary investigation on “the state of the art of Italian agriculture and the conditions of the rural class,” states that “the word *stracchino* derives from the small soft cheeses produced during the journey from the mountain to the lowland and vice versa. These *malghesi* make it swiftly in their resting stations, with milk from tired cows after their long journey” (Jacini 1882: 27). Transhumant herders were necessarily also skilled cheesemakers, as they would transform their milk in their seasonal stations, taking their herds from the upper pastures in the Lombard Alps for the summer grazing season to their lower reaches along the rivers Ticino and Adda. *Strac* means “tired” in Bergamasque dialect, hence *strachi* as a name for the cheese, the Bergamasque word for stracchino. Taleggio was nothing other than a stracchino cheese “of Val Taleggio.” What we know about the origins of strachi in all its forms is that it was cheese made by transhumant mountain peasants who could not even afford to heat their cows’ milk and would curdle it at milking temperature, hastily (*all’infretta*), in their makeshift abodes, on the trail of available grass.

Technically, like the stracchino of origins, Strachitunt is a raw milk cheese, namely an uncooked cheese made with unpasteurized milk. This is worked *a munta calda*, namely while still “warm from the milked cow.” It is furthermore a double-paste cheese, obtained from layering cold curd from the night before with warm curd that has been freshly renneted. It is manipulated in such a way as to allow natural molds to penetrate and nest in the fault lines between the two curds. As a result, Strachitunt is a blue cheese (*formaggio erborinato*), namely it develops molds inside the paste, which give it specific aromas and sometimes a sharp taste. Dry-salted and aged for seventy-five days, it is pierced twice during maturation, twenty days after casting and again after a fortnight. This allows the development of blue molds without inoculation, but solely as a result of interaction with the maturing environment. As a raw strachi, Strachitunt would belong to the family of lowland cheeses like Taleggio or stracchino. But as an aged, cylindrical, and heavy wheel it positions itself among nobler upland cousins. Matured even longer than Bitto PDO (at least seventy-five days vs. the seventy days of Bitto), Strachitunt is however produced all year round and not just in alpeggio. Its PDO protocol prescribes that it can only be produced in the four municipalities of Val Taleggio, a mid-mountain environment. Triangulating Taleggio and strachi, it adds a modern zest for uniqueness to the tectonic of the raw and the cooked, and combines it with the European obsession with pedigree: claimed as an upland, aristocratic precursor of Gorgonzola itself (just as strachi of Val Taleggio is claimed to be the precursor of Taleggio), it is the rawest of the raw: *a natural blue cheese*.

Calibrating the Raw

Calibrating this raw cheese to a “global hierarchy of value” (Herzfeld 2004) means negotiating and enforcing protocols of production. One of the most contested issues about geographic denominations regards their area of origin, namely the geographical boundaries within which protocols should be enforced. While there is substantial literature on this question (Brulotte and Di Giovine 2014; del Marmol, Morell and Chalcraft 2015; Fournier et al. 2012; Roigé and Frigolé 2012) I wish to go in depth here on how this is actually intrinsic to another fundamental but apparently different matter in cheesemaking, namely milk: its treatment, quality, and provenance. According to its PDO protocol, Strachitunt is *and must remain* a raw milk cheese, not only because of the consortium stakeholder celebrate its superior organoleptic qualities but also as a sure means to limit the range at which milk can travel within the boundaries of the PDO territory. Raw milk for Strachitunt is curdled *a munta calda*, namely while still warm from the milked cows. The procedural imperative to make cheese with warm milk without reheating it determines per se the very short distances it can travel. It can move from a shed to a creamery next door, or even from a borough to another within the same valley, but it cannot travel afar. In the present conditions of compliance with strict regulations about the hygiene of the creameries, raw milk cheese is sedentary by definition—an ironic result, considering that stracchino is originally a transhumant cheese.

Alpeggio, or *alpage*, is connected to—though not identical with—cattle transhumance. Still in the nineteenth century, transhumant trails could extend over hundreds of kilometers and be used in a seasonal cycle (Corti 2004). Transhumance has evolved over time and it is now virtually extinct in northern Italy—at least in the form described by historian Fernand Braudel in his *The Mediterranean at the Age of Philip II*. Nowadays only very few herders move all the way from peaks to lowlands and these tend to be mostly sheep flocks. Transhumance was only one of often highly professionalized forms of seasonal migration that could integrate the income of alpine families: for example, winter migration would be based on exercising salaried professions in urban areas, including the development of guilds of carpenters, lumberjacks, smithies, builders, decorators, stonemasons, and carriers (Viazzo 1989).

In a paradoxical symbolic inversion of the politics of (food) identity, practices that were historically a ticket for the world are currently a powerful symbolic device for marketing *locality*. Of Val Taleggio, which in the sixteenth century was a remote mountain backwater of the vast Republic of Venice bordering with the Dukedom of Milan, Governor Antonio da Lezze desolately observed how

[T]hese valleys don't enjoy revenue of any sort. . . . They do not reap wheat nor corn, but most of these people travel the world, to Italy, mostly to Rome and Venice, keeping themselves busy trading goods, working in inns, or as coppersmiths, tinkers etc. They do not return to their homeland but once every two or three years, staying only for six months. (da Lezze [1596] 1988: 508)

Among such itinerant crafts were metal-working, logging, and carpentry, which made their bearers professional seasonal migrants. Cheesemaking and dairy farming were residual, subsistence activities unless mobilized for transhumance. Connecting with outside the valley, for example in the form of transhumant farming, was part of the local repertoire. Only the clueless stayed behind, firmly rooted in their turf, as the normative imaginary of geographical indications currently prescribes. So goes da Lezze: "Those who stay in the village are poor people, and tend their own cattle, the richest having up to 25 cows. These, at winter, descend to the Milanese plains. . . . In Taleggio there are 500 cattle, 100 among horses and mules, 200 sheep" (da Lezze [1596] 1988: 510, 512). Now that local cattle are even fewer, there is no need to descend to the Milanese plains to feed them—and hay and grass can in any case easily be imported by truck.

By contrast, *alpeggio*—the summer grazing season spent by cattle (and occasionally goat) herds on the high pastures, which are otherwise covered by snow during the harsh mountain winters—is heavily praised as a traditional tastemaker of local cheeses. Often the word "transhumant," referring to cattle, is used for the *alpeggio*, even though this generates confusion, as cow breeders take only short summer trips to the closest higher pastures. Notably, *alpeggio* entails more limited cattle movement than original transhumance trails—which took place practically all year round, following fixed routes and visiting well-stocked stations. Nowadays the *alpeggiatori* are mostly mountain farmers who drive herds from the village stables to the upper pastures, while they make hay in the meadows around the village to stock up for winter. Or by converse, they

can be breeders from far away, attracted to the high summer pastures more by the EU subsidies to incentive this traditional grazing practice, than by considerations of ecological continuity. While nowadays the high pastures are either private properties or municipal land, pastures in the high grounds could be "commons" in the past—the shared regulated and inalienable usufruct of a community, with formal covenants regulating access and obligations to maintenance work. Some of these regulations—*statuti* or *regole*—would be granted to individual communities by a higher authority, for instance a duke or other feudal sovereign. Even when the high pastureland was held as a "common," access to it was historically highly regulated, as land and grass are key economic and ecological resources (McNetting 1981: 89). Crucially, with long-distance dairy transhumance gone, the families of cheesemakers eventually settled down in the richer plains, investing in large-scale dairy creameries, leaving the bothersome business of making upland cheese during the *alpeggio* to the (other) mountain people.

This contextualizes Val Taleggio within a complex historical and geographical scenario of competing and partly overlapping cheese productions, each claiming distinction for their tradition, and the urgency of survival for their communities of producers. *Alpeggio* is often claimed as the common heritage of the dairy breeders of the Bergamasque valleys and proudly celebrated by local historians and scholars. This calls for a timescape of "structural nostalgia" (Herzfeld 2005: 147): a lost time of plenty of which successive generations reminisce. While we do not have evidence here that the previous generation in turn had been reminiscent of a more wholesome era before themselves (*à la* Herzfeld), modern entrepreneurs collectively perform as present witnesses to the relics of pristine times, and competitively claim to be true heirs to those. This is precisely the cultural work of heritage, namely harnessing history (in this particular case, a nostalgic perception of history as natural repository of lost values) as a form of value addition.

So, for example, tourist brochures systematically present transhumant cattle herders as authentic specimens of timeless tradition. Less benignly, agricultural consultants also argue that family-run dairy farming businesses with just a few cows and goats are remnants of preindustrial times and should be encouraged to die out. And they routinely are, either through unsustainable requests for audit paperwork and structural requirements, or by monetary incentives to cull small herds and pack up business: a practice infamously known as *abbattimento*—culling—as productive livestock are sent to the abattoir because their husbandry is uneconomical or simply uncompetitive.

John Agnew has noted how in a geopolitics of uneven socioeconomic power distribution, certain geographical areas become associated with essential attributes of time, relative to other geographical "blocks": thus "modernity, confused by some with the United States, becomes a social model to which other 'less developed' societies can aspire" (1998: 46). Within a stereotypically "backward" Italy, hence, Alpine dairy farmers would appear even more exotic and "primitive." Marginal cheesemakers and family farmers feel that they are indeed the survivors of an era: prematurely culled, persuaded into bankruptcy, or cornered into foreclosure. Naturally then, their economic plight assumes also broader significance in a politics of identity for which heritage food is the main conduit.

The Politics of Identity through *Tipicità*

The public audition for the establishment of a PDO production protocol for Strachitunt cheese, held in Val Taleggio in October 2010, was a heightened collective event that showed how economic and political actors compete and sometimes converge to define heritage food in the contemporary market. As I witnessed the succession of “witnesses” called up to speak out for or against the PDO as in a public trial, chaired by an envoy of the national Ministry of Agriculture, it became apparent how each was speaking at once to national and European regulators, as well as to very local competitors. Cast as distant and inscrutable, European normative agencies in fact had become very real magnifying glasses for very local but very real animosities.

For local cheesemakers it was important to determine the pedigree of their cheeses, including which Bergamasque valley produced which cheese back in the sixteenth century. *Tipicità* had become their language of food heritage. By making Strachitunt, tasting it, naming it, selling it, eating it, and celebrating it, the entrepreneurs, farmers, and administrators of Val Taleggio had found a distinctive way of talking about their valley as a community, and to lay claim to cheese denominations as a form of cultural property. *Tipicità* is therefore here eminently a political conduit. But it is also of course much more than that, as the politics of identity reaches deep.

Hygiene regulations and the nitty-gritty of animal husbandry form the normative and environmental substratum of cheesemaking as a heritage enterprise. The “war of the cheeses” that unfolded around Strachitunt was certainly opportunistic and strategic like all wars, but, as any drama, displayed powerful symbolic moments both individual and choral—such as the public reading of the PDO protocol, but also at a number of moments over the years leading up to this milestone. Each time, the drama was inevitably at once orchestrated and heartfelt by all involved, and the language of *tipicità* came to the fore:

What is a consortium? It is a group of entrepreneurs that represent the entire value and supply chain of one product. These entrepreneurs have realized that they own a product, which has been handed down to them from previous generations and that they can make. They consider this product unique, and in danger of being imitated. A consortium is an institution that preserves something that can be *reinvented*. Those who make this product somewhere else, in a different guise, under different conditions, *invent* it. This is a fundamental distinction. We can do a few things to make our product in slightly updated ways, with new tools and everything that innovation has offered us in the latest decades. But we are not *inventing* anything. We are *reinventing* something that already existed, maybe dwindling, but continuously. We give it a new image, new clothes, and a typicality [*una tipicità*]. If we'll be able to do so, we'll make it *consistent*, and we'll put it back on the market. (Sagra dello Strachitunt, Pizzino di Val Taleggio; October 20, 2006, audio-recorded public speech by the president of the Consortium Strachitunt)

Tipicità is not a synonym of terroir, as it designates both environmental and specific historical circumstances for local and regional craft productions that are intrinsically

dynamic. To make sense of it, I use two metaphors, one of drama and one of war, conflated in one conceptual image, that of the arena. The war metaphor underlines how the reinvention of cheese as a heritage item is a process to which many competing actors concur: key local producers, influential food activism groups, local and regional decision-makers, and media figures. The drama metaphor highlights how the power relations and the strategic interactions among them are played out as political and cultural performances, often very public, which allows them to claim moral representation and political responsibility for an entire community. The concept of the arena indicates “either a battleground or a stage or theatre” (Buijtin, van Ophem and Casimir 2013: 16). The trope of the drama allows me to linger on the linguistic and symbolic practices of *tipicità* that turn a “community of practice” of cheesemakers, cheesemongers, and cheese eaters into an “imagined community,” or as Nicolas Adell, Chiara Bortolotto, and Regina Bendix indicate, the subject and cultural owner of heritage cheese as a patrimony (Adell et al. 2015). In fact, Adell and coauthors underline the transition, in the language and practice of the heritage complex, from an expectation of communities “bearing” cultural heritage to one of “participating” in it (Adell et al. 2015: 8).

Precisely because of its intrinsically strategic character, however, the reinvention of cheese as heritage is an ongoing and dynamic process: it is constantly repitched and reperformed in relation to the actors' reciprocal repositioning. Pierre Bourdieu, talking about “the space of literary or artistic position-takings,” explains “that the structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.” Di Giovine adapts this analysis of “positions and position-takings” (Bourdieu 1993: 30) to “the heritage-scape's field of production” (Di Giovine 2009: 14). Referring to UNESCO World Heritage sites, Di Giovine looks at the “protracted negotiations that exist in UNESCO's designating process, management procedures, and tourism” (p. 8). In our case, this “field of heritage production” juggles the social production of recognition (such as food prestige) with the very serious business of making a living for the socioeconomic actors involved, such as cheesemakers, merchants, journalists, middle-men and brokers.

Arjun Appadurai has taught that the politics of authenticity and the politics of connoisseurship are but some of the forms that “politics,” understood as “the link between regimes of value and specific flows of commodities,” can take (1986: 57). His use of the word “arena” pertains specifically to how “large-scale exchanges” interact with “more humble flows of things”: “in the politics of reputation, gains in the larger arena have implications for the smaller ones” (Appadurai 1986: 20). Similarly, the production of heritage value for Strachitunt cheese in Val Taleggio was a pivotal albeit extended process that brought politics to the fore aligning social actors in relevant ways to obtain a PDO for their valley. This extended moment is only one step in a longer history, during which Val Taleggio lost “cultural ownership” of the Taleggio cheese that bears the valley's own name, subsequently fought for a cheese of its own by another name, rediscovered strachi—a humble transhumant cheese—and won for its Strachitunt a PDO (a protected regime of geographical indication for a sedentarized strachi).

The discourse and practices that turned Strachitunt into a piece of heritage include key interpretations and performances of cheese as patrimony (*patrimonio*) and as a bearer of *tipicità*, and only worked as a result of active and continuous intervention and positioning, including commercial tactics, symbolic politics and the pervasive performance of a culture of gastronomic discernment (gustatory, sensorial, historical, genealogical, geographic, agronomic, and culinary) on which I wish to dwell on next.

Sweet and Sour: Normalizing Taste

The sensorium linked to the taste of cheese provides the backdrop to the performance of locality and the rhetoric for its consumption. In tourist venues, professional fairs, and open-air festivals, the cheesemakers of Val Taleggio perform the cultural meaning of cheese, showcasing relevant activities such as hand milking, or milk curdling, or cheese tasting. Performance is fundamental to the reinvention of cheese both in closed-door negotiations and in strategies for public communication, as the performance of authenticity is elicited and extracted from cheesemakers, refiners, and dairy farmers. I investigated this ethnographically over time, through my own apprenticeship as a cheese-taster alongside the valley's cheesemakers in 2007, as well as attending the performance of street theater and interactive video installations that were organized by the Ecomuseum Val Taleggio in 2008–9 and 2013. The Ecomuseum participated also in the Turin's Slow Food Salon as part of its effort to boost tourism and the cheesemaking industry in the valley. The most recent instance of this choral and longitudinal effort to place Val Taleggio on the map of the world cheese heritage was a three-day festival in the mountains of Bergamo reflecting on Strachitunt's success and future challenges in February 2020. This performance of locality around Strachitunt as a marker of identity for Val Taleggio was a three-day event that included a very well-attended conference, workshops, and visits to the production sites in the valley (dairy farms, creamery, and cheese refines).¹ At Turin's Slow Food Salon or in educational workshops, at festivals, and at conferences, this performance is ambivalent and prescriptive for all involved performing food heritage to urbanite consumers, tourists, and connoisseurs.

The taste of heritage is indeed bittersweet. In the case of Strachitunt, both the actual cheese and the long-drawn sagas of their makers are double-layered, and sweet and sour at once. This reinvention is only one, possibly *the* most successful and hard-fought, of many other attempts to achieve the ever-elusive goal of using local cheese to leverage systemic issues of paramount importance: market branding, rural development, and ultimately economic and social survival. Heralded as the dairy "excellence" of Val Taleggio by a number of paladins (initially Slow Food, then the valley's own Ecomuseum) who celebrated its gustatory and moral suasion, Strachitunt delivered its PDO in 2014, eleven years perhaps too late, leaving the unsurpassed protagonists of its reinvention as veritable kings of a ghost valley (Grasseni 2017).

Crafting and marketing Strachitunt's traditional taste in an innovative and unique canon played a paramount role in the way traditional producers were corralled to reposition themselves within Bourdieusian "fields of forces." Within the field of force of heritage foods, pivoting on the identity of singular products, the taste of Strachitunt

played a subtle and ambivalent role, because cheese flavor must be recognizably *of one product*. In other dairy industries, this justifies the pressure toward the standardization even of niche productions, and the use of various technologies to "stabilize" cheese, for example with the use of industrial ferments in milk coagulation and during the maturing phase. But in the same breath, the taste of heritage must also be unique and distinctive in order to have "added value." Unique taste can bring surprises, as in the case of raw milk blue cheeses like Strachitunt: its flavor in fact can sometimes be too sharp to be appreciated by the untrained palate. Most importantly, it is impossible to foresee if any slice will taste like another because the cheese has not been inoculated with bacterial cultures. Its molds grow naturally, which means they might not grow at all. So Strachitunt can have the mild, lactose sweetness of Taleggio *and* the piquant sharpness of a gorgonzola mold, *or either of them*.

It is at the heart of this paradox between distinction and standardization that the so-called middlemen such as the National Associations for Cheese Tasting (ONAF) and Slow Food play a significant social, cultural, and political role, namely training the taste and educating consumers to articulate the "added value" of heritage cheese. Through my own apprenticeship as a cheese-taster alongside the valley's cheesemakers, I could appreciate how laborious it was for some of them to equip themselves with an apt vocabulary to market the cheese they could *make*, but not describe and extol. Those who could, had a cutting-edge advantage. Attending the local Ecomuseum and participating and observing commercial fairs such as the World Cheese Awards (2019) or Turin's Slow Food Salon (2010), and a number of educational presentations of Strachitunt offered to perspective buyers in the period in between, I could appreciate the ambivalent and prescriptive nature of the roles of those involved: tourists, valley residents, and cheesemakers alike are involved in the community conundrum of performing and co-performing a calibration of local cheese to largely projected expectations: those of the European legislator, those of the urbanite consumers, and those of the hoped-for tourist and connoisseurs.

In my previous work on the transformation of animal husbandry in the Alps, *Developing Skill, Developing Vision* (2009), I maintained that, among the dairy smallholders of the Lombard mountains, skill and "practices of locality" are mutually co-constitutive. I described how their skilled practice of animal husbandry is not ahistorical but rather intimately connected with a regime of agricultural counselling, hence with both local and translocal politics of food, prescribing and enacting certain ways of looking at cattle—"skilled visions" (Grasseni 2007a). Following the cows, and their milk, I turned to investigate the transformation of cheesemaking—particularly its spaces and timescapes of production and consumption. During several years of observation, I witnessed how upland cheesemaking was driven from high-pasture domestic mountain huts to Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP)-run creameries. The introduction of HACCP production protocols was but one of the many ways in which artisan cheese was being repositioned within the global forces of a "field of production" (Bourdieu 1993). This entailed a powerful incept of "audit cultures" (Strathern 2000), which had momentous effects on high-pasture cheesemaking. I began to observe its effects at the end of the 1990s, and I referred to the consequent adjustments of local cheesemaking as a process of *calibration* (Grasseni 2007b: 61–90).

Reinventing cheese meant calibrating its “ecology of production,” an apt phrase which I adopt from Heather Paxson (2012), to the increasing pressures to standardize procedures, environments, and operations. But it further entailed a symbolic calibration, namely its transformation from a perceived “traditional” yet everyday foodstuff to a distinctive item of food heritage (Grasseni 2011). It meant that production systems must be *calibrated* to normative and commercial expectations that have purchase both on international economic circuits and on very local arrangements. This does not mean that the alpine cheeses I am talking about have suddenly begun to sell on international markets—though some of them do and have done for some time. Rather, it means that they have to be entirely refashioned *as if* such potentiality was at hand. The arena they choose as audience, although in practice very local, is symbolically, rhetorically, and normatively global.

Moreover, the expectation that tradition has unexploited commercial potential, that it is a resource deserving of “valorization,” calls for added value to be made evident and relevant not only to consumers, but to “communities” at large. Anthropology offers an ethnographic long take of the sometimes-conflicting voices and agendas that contributed to determine which strategies of reinvention and icons of locality became in turn viable: supportive local administrations, well-established entrepreneurs, food activists, international buyers, local historians, and social workers with political ambitions. The overall result is a skillful and precarious reinvention of the everyday, often dependent on selling ambivalent notions, including the very concept of community. Within a “food heritage” framework, some ambitious local administrators and entrepreneurs, far from solving local conflicts, have succeeded in using the language of dairy “excellence” as a springboard, hopefully for the valley and certainly for their own political careers and economic viability. However, reading the Strachitunt PDO story as a mere social construction of a geographical indication would be diminutive of the “ecologies of sentiment” (Paxson 2012) that underwrote this epic.

Conclusion

Claiming control of a cheese as patrimony falls nothing short of advocating sovereignty over it. In the cultural mobilization of food as heritage, the aspects of guardianship and reinvention are conjoined. Economic rivalries, moral maneuvering, and political alliances populate the intertwined histories of neighboring mountain communities whose entrepreneurs and administrators choose divergent paths to “valorize” their cheeses. Small and fiercely territorial PDO geographic indications coexist with other forms of self-safeguarding of other niche productions in the same area: some opt for the distinction of hard-core authenticity, with marketing support of associations such as Slow Food. Others make use of more malleable quality certifications such as the commercial trademarks bestowed by local chambers of commerce. Others linger between quantity and quality, caught in the chasm. Each agenda is pursued by local politicians, entrepreneurs, and activists who skillfully trade in the most viable currency of the moment (whether European PDOs, Slow Food Presidia, or production protocols of the chambers of commerce).

Entire localities are thus called into play in the moral labor of identifying with, and properly exploiting, one’s heritage (*patrimonio*). In Italian this process goes under the name of *patrimonializzazione* (roughly translatable as “heritagization”). Patrimonializing alpine cheese entails that a number of social actors (not only dairy farmers, cheesemakers, and refiners but also public administrators, consumer associations, and tourist entrepreneurs, for instance) cooperate to identify, describe, study, safeguard, extol, reproduce, and market specific items of tangible and intangible heritage. *Patrimonio* is often described as a commonwealth—a patrimony in fact, which is handed down (patrilineally, presumably) from generation to generation.

It thus pertains to autochthonous residents or at least to a community that identifies itself as largely unchanged over time. To the risky rhetoric of autochthony (Geschiere 2011; Kalb 2004), patrimonialization adds a “metaphysics of sedentarism” (Malkki 1992) that, even in a realm that is not usually considered political, introduces some serious frictions and dilemmas. Which cheeses are authentically “mountain cheese”? Is it important to produce “traditionally” with raw milk? These are not naïve questions and the ingenious answers that each producer gives is in itself an act of economic and political strategy. Rethinking the economy through calibrating protocols of production for raw milk cheese in the Italian mountains today is not just a question of marketing but of political imagination. The politics of food designations is neither an invention of tradition nor a tradition of invention (Paxson 2014), but a reinvention of food within a specific field of production that includes heritage and place-based names as major force fields. These articulate and shape both the marketability and political capacity of food to mobilize resources and passions, to foster conflict and suggest alliances. Their outcome, in the marginal rural areas of the northern Italian Alps, may determine the very serious business of economic viability and even demographic survival for a whole mountain community. For the few hundred people involved, the cause of obtaining a Europe-wide protected denomination for Strachitunt was believed to make the difference between becoming a dying valley or following in the footprints of other niche producers, such as the “Bitto rebels” (Corti 2012), namely heritage cheesemakers who had fought bitterly, and commercially won, against larger consortia. This was a veritable war, a war of the cheeses, and each economic actor involved fought for their livelihoods with the resentment that only history’s losers can have.

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Note

- 1 See <https://www.strachitunt.it/strachitunt-da-risorsa-per-la-famiglia-a-valore-per-il-territorio-convegno/>.

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