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**From branding to solidarity: the COVID-19 impact on marketing Strachitunt cheese from Val Taleggio, Italy**  
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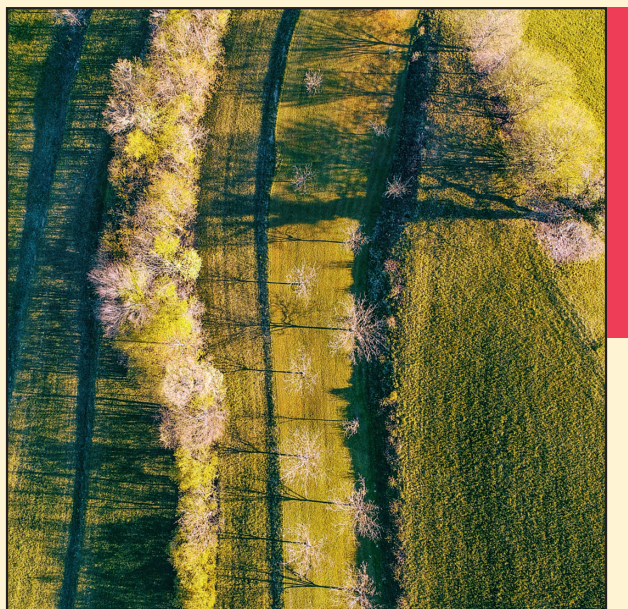
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# FROM BRANDING TO SOLIDARITY: THE COVID-19 IMPACT ON MARKETING STRACHÍTUNT CHEESE FROM VAL TALEGGIO, ITALY

Cristina Grasseni



CRISTINA GRASSENI

Curdling milk for *Strachitunt* production.

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**Cristina Grasseni**<sup>1</sup>

## **From branding to solidarity: The COVID-19 impact on marketing *Strachitunt* cheese from Val Taleggio, Italy**

**ABSTRACT:** Branding, labelling and certification are the principal instruments for marketing heritage cheese in the Italian Alps. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has put considerable strain on these tools. In Val Taleggio, where the Protected Designation of Origin cheese *Strachitunt* is made, the cooperative of producers suffered a breakdown in access to markets during the lockdown of March–May 2020. Their strategy was to appeal directly to consumers, connecting digitally with solidarity economy networks such as *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (Solidarity Purchase Groups). Building on long-term ethnography, the article shows how this appeal brought to the surface a shared discourse and understanding of proximity and solidarity, which is not usually employed in the language of certification and labelling.

**KEY WORDS:** cheese, geographical indications, solidarity economy networks, heritage, Northern Italy

## **Od blagovne znamke do solidarnosti: vpliv COVID-19 na trženje sira *Strachitunt* iz Val Taleggia v Italiji**

**POVZETEK:** Znamčenje, označevanje in certificiranje so glavni instrumenti za trženje tradicionalno proizvedenega sira v italijanskih Alpah. Pandemija COVID-19 je na ta orodja močno vplivala. V Val Taleggu, kjer izdelujejo sir *Strachitunt* z zaščiteno označbo porekla, je zadruga proizvajalcev med zaprtjem od marca do maja 2020 utrpela prekinitev dostopa do trgov. Njihova strategija je bila neposredno nagovoriti potrošnike in se digitalno povezati z omrežji solidarnostnega gospodarstva kot je *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (Solidarnostne nakupovalne skupine). Članek na temelju dolgoročne etnografije pokaže, kako je ta poziv spodbudil razpravo o razumevanju bližine in solidarnosti, ki v jeziku certificiranja in označevanja nista običajna.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** sir, geografske označbe, mreže solidarnostnega gospodarstva, dediščina, severna Italija

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# 1 Introduction: Branding for food (re)localization

The article rethinks the links between brands, labels, certification on the one hand, and territorial development and heritage-making in agricultural production on the other. It has been sufficiently demonstrated in international and interdisciplinary literature, that geographical indications do not reflect pre-existing differences, but instead establish and reify them (Coombe, Ives and Huizinga 2014; May et al 2017; Ledinek Lozej 2021). However, for the cheese-making industry of the alpine region, cheese continues to be »the chosen pivot of broader epistemologies that are acted on the ground, mediating personal, local and scalar levels of agency« (Grasseni 2017, 4). In other words, cheese is »one of the essential agricultural products, not only in the daily diet but, above all, also a highly valued (artisanal or industrial) market product« (Ledinek Lozej 2021, 143).

There is a globally observed movement »from local food to localized food«: Holt and Amilien (2007) outlined the co-constitutive relationship between local food products and systems and processes of localization, explaining how the latter exists in reaction to the race to the bottom and the standardization of the global food system, aiming instead towards a »value-based, territorially embedded agrifood system« (Bowen and De Master 2011, 75). As Guthman (2007, 456) explains »it is the retention of value that eases tendencies of intensification and exploitation and thus mitigates neoliberalism's race to the bottom«. However, for precisely that reason, labeled, certified, or simply locally sourced heritage foods are not as accessible – in terms of price – to the average consumer, and some critics, including Guthman (2007) go as far as considering voluntary food labels as forms of neoliberal governance or as a museification of food cultures – what Barham (2003, 132) has termed »turning rural areas into living museums for privileged urban visitors«.

Building on such critique to the »French *terroir* strategy«, anthropologists Heath and Meneley Heath (2007, 593) underline how food and drink are »localized instances of large-scale spatial and temporal processes and as cultural-material markers of power/knowledge« and conclude that »claims to distinction based on tradition or terroir are also imbricated in global industrial production and distribution«. Considering in particular the controversy around *foie-gras*, they notice how »the invocation of place by foie gras farmers and vendors also links landed aristocracy and their vintage wine, aged port, or artisanal cheeses to what the French refer to as the *terroir*« (Heath and Meneley 2007, 596). Cultural anthropologists focus in particular on the perspectives of the social actors involved in the economic chain. As Cavanaugh and Shankar (2014, 51) have investigated, »linguistic and material work« on the part of producers is needed to »create authentic goods against those who question and contest their efforts«.

This article investigates how the effort of branding can be fluid and dynamic, adaptable to important parameters such as logistics and accessibility of the food market for the consumers. These were suddenly transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it will be argued how the discourse and appeal of local mountain cheese has significantly shifted from one of singularity (Siniscalchi 2009) to one of proximity (Grasseni 2014) during the COVID-19 crisis. It will be shown how a moral discourse of belonging transpires from the communication strategies undertaken by the Val Taleggio heritage cheese makers under the emergency circumstances of the pandemic in March–May 2020. The goal of this cultural analysis is to evaluate the impact of this discourse on heritage-making practices and processes, including the potential for including more actors in local economic networks.

## 2 Research area and methodology: The *Strachitunt* PDO case study

The article's case study comes from the heritage cheese industry of the mountains in the Italian province of Bergamo, specifically Val Taleggio, which is home to two Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) cheeses: *Taleggio* and *Strachitunt*. *Strachitunt* PDO is exclusively made in the area comprising the municipalities of Vedeseta (20 km<sup>2</sup>), Taleggio (46.6 km<sup>2</sup>), Blello (2.2 km<sup>2</sup>) and Gerosa (10 km<sup>2</sup>) for a total production area according to the municipalities' official data of less than 80 sq. km. Since February 2014, the municipality of Gerosa has been merged with the larger municipality of Brembilla, thus creating the municipality of Val Brembilla. This administrative merger has not changed the original protocol and area of production (<https://www.strachitunt.it>).

The production area of *Taleggio* PDO overlaps partly with that of *Strachitunt* cheese, as both originate from Val Taleggio. In fact the production technique of Taleggio, which earned its name from the valley, achieved the distinction of a DOC (it. Denominazione di Origine Controllata, eng. Controlled Denomination of Origin) in 1954, and was then equated to the European PDO denomination in 1994 (Ministero delle Risorse Agricole, Alimentari e Forestali 1994). However, its vast area of protected denomination covers most of the Northern Italian plains - specifically in Lombardy (Bergamo, Brescia, Como, Cremona, Lecco, Lodi, Milano, Monza & Brianza, Pavia), Piedmont (Novara, Verano-Cusio-Ossola) and in the region Veneto (Treviso) (<https://www.taleggio.it/>).

A *Strachitunt* consortium of dairy-farmers and cheese-refiners aiming to establish a PDO in Val Taleggio began collaborating in October 2002, initially under the auspices of Slow Food (Grasseni 2017, 122–28; *Strachitunt ... 2022*). The goal was to claim a Protected Denomination of Origin that would have only Val Taleggio as area of production for *Strachitunt*, because the producers felt that a broader production area would only favour the interests of lowland industrial producers and not the livelihoods of small and medium enterprises in the mountains (Grasseni 2017). A simple comparison between areas of production of Taleggio and *Strachitunt* show how minuscule Taleggio cheese's homonymous valley is, vis-à-vis the vast area where Taleggio PDO can be produced (Figure 1).

It took the *Strachitunt* consortium more than eleven years to obtain the PDO, mostly due to legal appeals from other producers in the neighbouring lowlands, who claimed that they too historically mastered the *Strachitunt* craft, because its recipe had been circulating among transhumant cheesemakers for generations (Grasseni 2017). Despite these hurdles, *Strachitunt* was eventually registered as a PDO cheese in March 2014 with EU regulation (CE) n. 244/2014. It was further modified in March 2021 (Regione Lombardia 2021). The production protocols (disciplinari di produzione) of Italian PDO cheeses can be consulted on the web site of the The Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (it. *Ministero delle politiche agricole alimentari e forestali*).

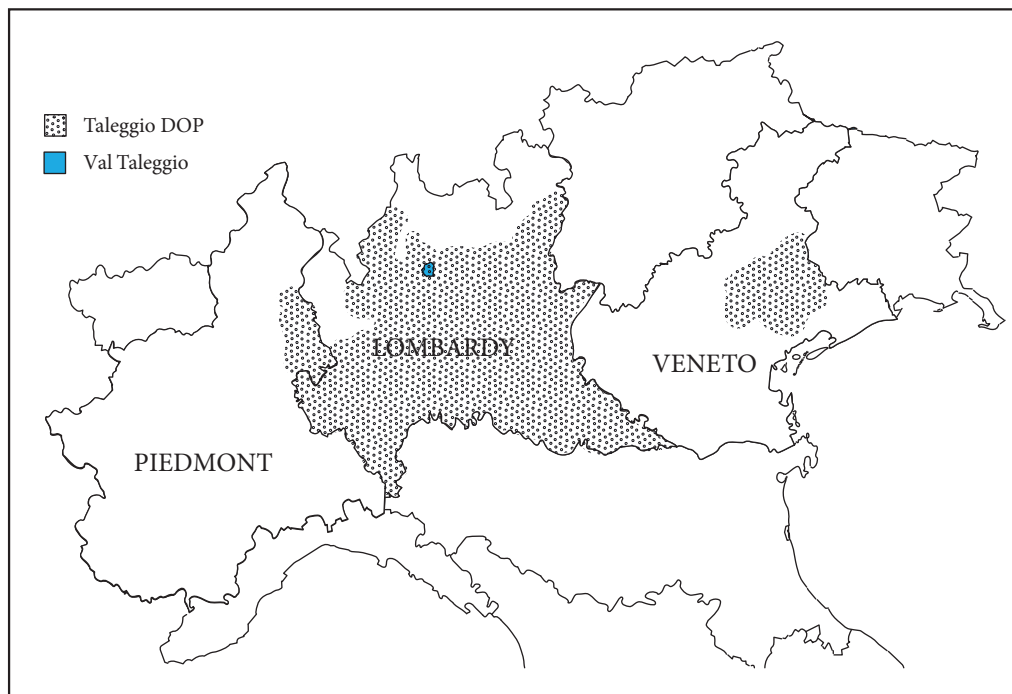


Figure 1: Comparison of the production area of *Taleggio* PDO and of Val Taleggio (De Musso n.d., <https://www.geoportale.regione.lombardia.it>).

To make *Strachitunt*, the producers' cooperative *Sant'Antonio di Vedeseta* gathers and transforms milk exclusively from active dairy farms in Val Taleggio and Gerosa. Beyond being a member of the production consortium for *Strachitunt*, the producers' cooperative of Val Taleggio gathers and transforms the milk of the last five remaining dairy farms in Val Taleggio, plus three new farms in Gerosa, and enrolls the cheese-maturing firms of Val Taleggio as associates too. The cooperative specializes in producing a raw-milk PDO Taleggio, matured by the valley's cheese refiner CasArrigoni for at least two months, conforming to the PDO protocol of production for Taleggio cheese. The fresher variant of the same cheese, called *Stracchino di Vedeseta*, is also produced with raw milk in the same cooperative and matured for a minimum of 35 days (thus not a PDO production).

This case study builds on a long-term ethnography of heritage cheese-making in the Bergamo province (Grasseni 2009; 2017). Empirical data over the short period of time covered for this study includes participant observation in the organization and follow up of a two-day conference in collaboration with the *Strachitunt* consortium in February 2020, to which the author participated as convenor and round-table moderator. Remote (digital) ethnography in social networks (Facebook groups, WhatsApp groups, email lists) was conducted during the 2020 lockdown (March–May 2020). Formal (audio and video recorded) and informal interviews were conducted in person in Val Taleggio and Bergamo in February 2020, then the summer of 2020, 2021 and spring of 2022 (with twenty people, among which the president of the producers cooperative Sant'Antonio di Vedeseta, managers and employees of the two main cheese refiners in Val Taleggio, the cheesemaker of the valley's dairy cooperative, representatives of the Solidarity Purchase Groups network who organized collective bulk-buying from the cooperative during the COVID-19 emergency, including the organizer of the initiative Market and Citizenship, local historians, cattle breeders, representatives of environmental associations and short food chains, faith and justice groups, the president of the *Strachitunt* consortium, the organizer and ideator of the *Strachitunt* conference, scholars of solidarity economies and of environmental sciences). These conversations were complemented by participant observation during public events such as film-screenings, cheese-tasting events, and guided tours of the cheese-making and cheese-refining facilities. Empirical data is complemented by analysis of documentary sources such as regional and EU regulations published online and in legal bulletins, product specifications such as production protocols (it. *disciplinari di produzione*) which are reported online by the relevant production consortia, by the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF), by the European Commission EU Geographical Indications Register eAmbrosia, or in the Region Lombardy bulletin (it. *Bollettino Ufficiale*). Secondary sources such as press releases, (digital) newspaper articles and professional magazines also integrated empirical and primary sources. When statements are not sourced, the relevant information has been obtained in personal conversations and ethnographic observation (author's field notes).

### 3 Results of ethnographic observation

This section offers results of ethnographic observation during two phases: firstly, the *Strachitunt* conference in February 2020 reflected critically on the added value of protected designations for the preservation of territorial economies in mountain valleys such as Val Taleggio. This critical reflection is contextualized within a broader picture of networks and alliances among private entrepreneurs and public institutions, which the local press recorded and commented on. Secondly, digital ethnography and follow-up interviews are employed to record the marketing discourse that the Val Taleggio producers employed to by-pass the March–May 2020 COVID-19 lockdown.

#### 3.1 Conference and networks

The conference »*Strachitunt: From family value to resource for the territory*« (it. *Strachitunt: Da valore per la famiglia a risorsa per il territorio*), held over three days on 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2020, staged a significant debate about whether the system of labelling and certification that characterizes production consortia is sufficient to promote territorial economies – particularly in Val Taleggio.

The presentations and conference were located in Val Brembilla, while it was accompanied by several laboratories and guided visits in Val Taleggio, including to the dairy cooperative and to the main cheese refiners of the valley. The conference was also an occasion to showcase the dairy cooperative to the broader public



(the curdling session was also recorded and broadcast on local television while it was being presented and explained to the conference visitors). Additionally, the cooperative shop opened for the conference and the valley's cattle breeders opened their cowsheds to the registered audience (Figures 2–5).

Among the invitees, representatives of the association Market and Citizenship explained the importance of »informal networks of production and consumption«, »practices of active citizenship and social economy, community supported agriculture, short food chains and local food policy«. These are often disconnected topics from the discourse and practice of marketing heritage cheese. They are often overlooked in the glossy brochures and Made in Italy stands which celebrate instead local identities and excellence of culinary production. This intervention instead proposed a privileged relationship between small scale producers and solidarity economy networks, particularly Italy's solidarity purchase groups (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, GAS). However, during the conference, one could not notice too much synergy between the representatives of the entrepreneurial world of PDO consortia and producers' association on the one hand, and the representatives of critical consumers with their requests to activate direct and short food chains with solidarity economy networks. One of the reasons given in a round table was that, even for a medium-sized consortium, to pay one person to staff a stand at a farmers' market for an entire day, is not an attractive investment because of the likely lack of returns (especially if one considers the transport costs, the expected intensive communication and personal engagement, and the loss of value of the merchandise displayed vis-à-vis the small quantities than usually get sold in these venues).

One of the take-away message provided by the representative of Assolatte (it. *Associazione Italiana Lattiero-Casearia*), the industrial association of dairies (milk and cheese producers) was that consortia for geographic indications continue to play a key role for the Italian economy. Among the figures mentioned are the one indicated on the home page of the associations' official website (<https://www.assolatte.it>): with 16,2 billion euro turnover and over 100,000 jobs, the dairy sector is of paramount importance in Italy and abroad, exporting 40% of production for a value of almost 3 billion euro. A number of public institutions and professional associations dynamically participate in networks and alliances around the trade of cow-breeding and cheese-making, for example local administrations such as municipal councils and mayors,



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Figure 2: A cameraman records the curdling of the milk for *Strachitunt* production, *Strachitunt* wheels are in the foreground.



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Figure 3: Cooperative shop displaying the *Strachitunt* conference program on the door.



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Figure 4: Cooperative shop selling several cheese made at the cooperatives including Strachitunt.



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Figure 5: Brown cows at the stable of a dairy conferring milk to the valley's cooperative.

breeders' associations such as APA (it. *Associazione Promozione Allevamento*, eng. Association for the Promotion of Breeding), farmers' unions such as Coldiretti and their agricultural extension services, chambers of commerce and tourist boards. The most important events or funded projects profile prominently in the local press as well as in websites, flyers, and videos. For example the yearly festival *Forme* hosts public exhibitions and professional workshops, and hosted the World Cheese Award in October 2019.

In the province of Bergamo alone, one finds nine out of Italy's fifty PDO cheese consortia, including that for *Strachitunt*, and four Slow Food presidia. They are listed in Italian and English under the institutional website of Bergamo as UNESCO Creative City (<https://www.bergamocittacreativa.it/>). This recent recognition of Bergamo as Creative City for gastronomy, on a par with Alba and Parma, was sought and obtained in 2019 within the international framework of UNESCO (<https://en.unesco.org>). UNESCO's Creative Cities is a networking program aimed to support designated cities to develop existing economies based on their traditional strengths, gastronomy in this case. In Italy there are another nine »creative cities« namely Bologna and Pesaro for music, Fabriano, Carrara, and Biella for crafts, Rome for cinema, Turin for design, Milan for literature. In the case of Bergamo, its »Cheese Valleys« were profiled as a keystone for UNESCO recognition, building on the existing alliance among local production consortia of seven cheeses made in the Bergamasque mountains called »Princes of the Orobie [mountains]« (<https://www.bergamocittacreativa.it/>). The relevant Memorandum of Agreement (it. *Protocollo d'intesa*) counts 34 partners among municipal and province administrations, boards of conservation parks, Local Action Groups of EU development projects, the Alpine Corps Association and offices for tourist promotion.

### 3.2 Online marketing strategies during the COVID-19 lockdown

Between the end of February and the beginning of March 2020, Lombardy and specifically Bergamo became a global hotspot of the COVID-19 pandemic. A very strict national lockdown was enforced as per March 8<sup>th</sup> 2020. Travelling and leaving one's home were forbidden. Practically every movement on foot or by transportation, public or private, was forbidden except for health emergencies, the carrying out of jobs of national interest, and shopping for necessities in the closest outlet or convenience store. This impeded or discouraged the logistics of distribution and consumption for many small scale producers such as those of Val Taleggio.

On April 16<sup>th</sup> 2020, the dairy cooperative launched a Facebook appeal for online orders. It read (translated in English): »Do you fancy some cheese? All of our products directly at your home, via refrigerated courier. Our home delivery service in all of Bergamo and province is already active on Thursdays, and soon we will launch our e-commerce website to deliver our cheese anywhere in Italy! Write or call to find out how to place your orders! Let's stay at home without missing out on good things!« (Cooperativa Agricola Sant'Antonio, Facebook post April 16<sup>th</sup> 2020). The message was accompanied by emoticons as it would be in a WhatsApp conversation among friends, and linked up to Twitter campaigns about »staying at home«, »taleggio«, »Val Taleggio«, »staying united while apart« and »let's cheese«. There was such an overwhelming (online) response that two days after, the same Facebook page asked customers to only make orders by phone because there was too much correspondence to look after. After a week, the dairy coop benefited indeed from an e-shop portal, orchestrated through the efforts of the main valley's cheese refining entrepreneur.

The campaign continued also throughout April thanks to the local (digital) press, which reiterated how due to COVID-19 restrictions, local producers from the Bergamasque mountains risked throwing away their produce (Invernizzi 2020). The network of Solidarity Purchase Groups of the province of Bergamo RETEGAS intervened at this point, also thanks to personal contacts made at the February conference. Through informal chains of word-of-mouth and email lists, they activated the solidarity of individuals and networks within and beyond the province of Bergamo, being prepared to buy heritage cheese such as *Strachitunt* and other types of cheese produced by the cooperative of Val Taleggio, despite a conjuncture that was making it difficult for these commodities to make it to the market (and thus would warrant a lower price). The cooperative's thanks appeared on June 4 2020 on the Facebook page of RETEGAS, acknowledging having received orders from Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Rome and Naples (Rete Gas Bergamo, Facebook post on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2020).

## 4 Discussion

The ethnographic anecdotes gathered at the *Strachitunt* conference, the opinions confirmed by stakeholders with in-person conversations, and the analysis of digital discourse in the local press and Facebook reflect important changes in the marketing and communication style of the Val Taleggio producers. These emerged during the COVID-19 emergency, but have been anticipated by forward-looking networking strategies. The notion and semantic implications of heritage cheese have shifted from one stressing the importance of certification and labelling to one implying the primacy of solidarity and »proximity« (Grasseni 2014). Local farmers and entrepreneurs are portrayed as in need of help, thus the premium price asked for heritage cheese is now solidarity-driven, rather than based on their »singularity« as commodities (Siniscalchi 2009).

The vocabulary and register chosen by the producers' cooperative for their online appeal were informal and non-elitist, thus broadening and simplifying the language of its distribution and not even mentioning consortia and geographic indications. As part of this broadening of its audience, the cooperative of producers underlined that they produce *not only* PDO cheese such as *Strachitunt* and *Taleggio*, but a very broad range of dairy products which »support breeders, cheesemakers and cheese refiners« since the eighties (Bassi 2020). The word and notion of solidarity featured prominently in this campaign: »it was the collaboration and great solidarity of the people of Bergamo and Lombardy to support decisively the producers of this territory throughout that terrible period of March and April 2020«, commented the president of the valley's cooperative. »This emergency taught us once again what teamwork means, especially for a small and fragile sector like ours« (Bassi 2020).

The February 2020 *Strachitunt* conference was a springboard to reflect on how to expand and nurture alliances and networks beyond production consortia, for example involving societal stakeholders in the name of sustainability, locality, and food sovereignty – as advocated by the representative of the association Market and Citizenship at the conference. For example, by profiling its »cheese valleys« to join the UNESCO Creative Cities network, Bergamo underlines its dairy tradition – notably not only that of the mountains, but also the more industrialized and well-connected dairying lowlands. So-called intangible cultural heritage is thus politically tangible, connecting knowledge economies with value-creation according to the semantics of (culinary) appreciation.

As mentioned, Val Brembilla includes one of the production localities of *Strachitunt*, Gerosa, which has merged into the municipality of Val Brembilla. While the production protocol of *Strachitunt* has not changed, this has implications in terms of new potential alliances for Val Taleggio and its cheese-making economy to the neighbouring, more populous, better connected and economically significant Val Brembilla. In fact, while the municipalities of Val Taleggio (Taleggio and Vedeseta) count 296 and 193 residents respectively, plus the minuscule municipality of Blello (73 residents), the population of Val Brembilla counts 4249 residents (of which 360 in the former municipality of Gerosa, according to municipalities' official demographic data updated to May 2020). The conference organizers wanted to offer a well-orchestrated show of force of all the socio-economic actors involved directly or indirectly in the consortium's strategies in Val Taleggio, namely the dairy cooperative, individual dairy farming families, the cheese refiners of the valley, but also the municipalities of Val Taleggio and its neighbouring Val Brembilla, and their communities at large.

Grasseni (2017) argued that making heritage cheese is a dynamic process of meaning-making, in which heritage synergizes with other concepts (such as *tipicità*) to function as a marker of distinction. In the case of the new marketing style triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the language of proximity, combined with underlining the small scale of local operations, served the purpose not of guarding and certifying production boundaries, but to act directly in solidarity with producers. This adds to recent scholarship about »local food systems« (LFS), by underlining how the perceived *meaning* of LFS is of paramount importance in solidarity economies, and not only their perceived advantages *per se* (such as healthiness, higher value, social and financial support to farmers and local economies, community building, sustainability; Enthoven and Van den Broeck 2021).

The development of a register of communication based on solidarity in the online promotion of Val Taleggio's cheeses during COVID-19 points toward the significance of proximity, not only in geographical terms, but also in relational terms, in consumers' appreciation. This adds to existing qualitative and quantitative analysis of consumers' perception of the preferability of local food systems, which tend to focus more on their objective characteristics such as healthiness, affordability, traceability etc. (Merlino et al. 2022, 9). A recent comparative survey conducted across 13 countries (Nemes et al. 2021, 593) found that the impact

of COVID-19 on alternative and local food systems (ALFS) meant an increase in »innovations and adaptations« that enabled them »to extend their scope and engage new actors«, thus in effect »upscaling«. While the urgency of relocalizing (at least some of) the supply chain became evident in times of lockdown because of the stalling global production, »bottom-up participatory initiatives and the everyday practices of 'ordinary' citizens and social entrepreneurs« became more appreciated, argue the authors (Nemes et al. 2021, 592). This argument comes mainly from a point of view which compounds small-scale and local food producers with social and alternative entrepreneurship, which is misleading because the two do not necessarily share the same interests and needs, as it emerged during the mentioned debates during the *Strachitunt* conference. Secondly, if ALFS benefitted, supermarket chains with authorized entry and delivery schemes, and multinational online providers such as Amazon reaped the most benefits through increased digital and captive trade. However, local food producers benefited from more attention in media and press (especially thanks to their connection with concerns about health, diet and safety), so that their very existence, skill and struggles found more space in mainstream discourse.

This is significant for the Italian food sales economy where 18% of farms use direct sales as their main sales channel for 90–100% of production (Nemes et al 2021, 593). In the case of the *Strachitunt* Facebook appeal, direct sales did no longer mean staffing stands at farmers' markets, but substituting the usual logistics chain of mid-size economic players such as Val Taleggio's cheese refiners. Moreover, direct sales were traditionally used with raw products, unprocessed harvest, or extremely small operations – not the kind of consortia which, albeit small in size, strategically weave networks in dynamic alliances with economic and political partners (such as *Strachitunt*, for example in association with the network [it.] *Principi delle Orobie*, or within UNESCO's network of Creative Cities, or during expensive and well publicized events such as *Forme*).

The local dairy industry has significantly invested on certifications and geographic designations, inculcating the distinction of mountain cheese in local discourse also with the help of celebrity chefs and food journalism (Bindi and Grasseni 2014). While the prices of singularity marketing favored discerning customers and niche markets, the new turn to the local has taken a democratizing flavor. Now heritage cheese producers in the Bergamo valleys seek not so much foodies, but rather solidarity buyers and networks of benign consumers, who are ready to accept hand-crafted, locally sourced foods at a price premium, but without the stringent, exclusive protocols that were key to define branded or certified heritage cheese. These developments contribute to qualify heritage cheese in flexible ways, calibrating economic, social and moral appeals within a broader discourse of solidarity, proximity and locality.

## 5 Conclusion

Ethnographic analysis based on long-term research of the local dairy industry combined with digital ethnography and follow-up analysis of the marketing practices of Val Taleggio cheese during the 2020 lockdown allows us to conclude that the *Strachitunt* conference of February 2020 marked a significant point in critical reflections on the added value of protected designations and laid some fundamental steps in networking more broadly for the preservation of territorial economies in mountain valleys such as Val Taleggio. This happened within a context of institutional and commercial alliances that had already been established, but benefitted from the enlargement to solidarity economy networks.

Branding, labelling and certification are traditional tools for the promotion of local products. Solidarity economy networks had not previously been interested in the marketing of typical products of the local territory. However, in this case both heritage cheese producers and critical consumers had to compromise and converge on the language and practice of salvage-economy, instead of dairy excellence.

This is relevant to debates of branding, labelling and certification as it relativizes the perceived meaning of food heritage. In times of urgency, the (re)localization of food movement revealed to react to issues of proximity and solidarity (and less to previously paramount issues such as culinary excellence and protected denomination). Hence, in their marketing and communication, local dairies are now redefining their practices within a broader discourse of solidarity and proximity.

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