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Crafting Futures through Cheese-Making in Val Taleggio (Northern Italy)

Abstract: The politics of scale is the main issue within and around debates on whether geographical indications are the best strategy to support local economies. Two PDO cheeses are made in Val Taleggio. While Taleggio PDO has outscaled the valley and its interests, Strachìtunt PDO was reinvented to be at scale for the valley's producers. I explain the two-step transition in the producers' communicative strategy, from a language of heritage cheese and its "prestige" to a multispecies language that stresses the importance of a "working landscape" as a value in itself, focusing in particular on the producers' post-COVID-19 manifesto as "keepers of molds." Guardianship emerges from it as a new form of authenticity that does not run in the strictures of terroir-discourse. The article thus spells out which role authenticity plays in the politics of scale and how it contributes to the small-scale producers' dilemma of how to craft a future for themselves and their communities. I contextualize this vis-a-vis secondary sources that also stress the conceptual and political creativity of cheese-makers' strategies to revitalize regional (dairy) economies. Food producers are experimenting with new ways of mobilizing heritage to claim guardianship of their trade, craft, and territory. A transnational producer discourse emerges through a redesign of food heritage, front-staging the ecological meaning of craft.

THE EUROPEAN SYSTEM FOR Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) hinges on the uniqueness and "singularity" of products (Karpik 2018). However, critical food studies increasingly focus on dialogue with and support of local or small-scale food producers (Dubuisson-Queller 2014; Pratt 2007), regardless of the uniqueness of their products. This article investigates this lingering contrast, building on ongoing conversations and ethnography with heirloom cheese producers in Val Taleggio. Elsewhere, I termed "heritage arena" the extremely competitive market within which producers of traditional foods must keep reinventing their discourse and positioning (Grasseni 2017). Here, I analyze two distinctive turns in the marketing strategy of Val Taleggio cheese-makers, the first carried out under the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, the second immediately following that, in 2021, marked by a self-produced "manifesto." I will argue that these innovations establish an open-ended discourse for invoking and evoking a relational ecosystem that synergizes the imaginaries, experiences, and stakes of entrepreneurs, residents, and potential consumers toward the maintenance of a local "ecology of practice," namely, a biodiverse agricultural environment and landscape that maintains its historical and ecological ties to the practice of dairy husbandry (Nyerges 1997).

Skeptics of what has been called "the French terroir strategy" (Laudan 2004: 140, see also the Introduction to this special section) question its authenticity, and underline that it is conducive to niche, exclusive market circles such as those of Slow Food. My argument is that the ongoing reinvention and rearticulation of place-based foods—in the language and marketing of local cheese production in Val Taleggio—goes beyond a simplistic evocation of authenticity and squarely addresses local needs of future-making. By this, I mean that launching an online appeal to solidarity buyers during the COVID-19 lockdown, and articulating a multispecies "manifesto" after the COVID-19 emergency, are for Val Taleggio cheese-makers ways of envisaging—and at the same time bringing about—ways and conditions for continuing their cheese production. I will argue that this strategy is at once semiotic—namely, articulated through language and symbols—and pragmatic—namely, aimed at selling cheese, thus ensuing the conservation of the valley's dairy landscape.

Cheese-making in the mountains faces multiple challenges: climate change is impacting the delicate upland ecosystem harder than elsewhere in Europe, with alternate floods and droughts. A two-year pandemic, the breakdown of global logistics, and now war in Europe have fueled energy and production costs, making it increasingly difficult to maintain competitive prices on the market, even for products that can count on a premium thanks to their perceived distinction. *Tipicità* is the concept that expresses this distinction. It is loosely related to but more specific than traditional or heirloom. Sometimes translated as typicity or "typicality" (Ceccarelli et al. 2013), the term denotes the historical,

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ecological, and human factors co-producing and being co-produced by craft foods. The same notion also extends to tangible and intangible forms of heritage, such as rural architecture or traditional festivities.

In 2020, emergency sales campaigns and grassroots solidarity responses prompted a rethinking of the discourse of tipicità of mountain cheese, refocusing the producers' communication from its uniqueness to its conservation. I will tell the story of how Val Taleggio's main socioeconomic actors—the dairy cooperative, the Strachítunt cheese PDO consortium, and the valley's main refiner—paved the way for this transition, partly unwittingly, by convening a symposium with diverse sociocultural stakeholders in February 2020, establishing novel networks that proved key to survival during the lockdown of March–May 2020. First of all, in the following section I explain how strategizing for the right kind of labeling has been important to the history of the valley's dairy economy. Then, I address the discourse of authenticity of artisanal cheese and its perceived lack of diversity. Finally, I analyze the two ethnographic examples of how Val Taleggio cheesemakers have experimented with changing this discourse, first with a salvage campaign under COVID-19 duress, and then with a manifesto claiming guardianship over the valley's "ecology of production," to use Heather Paxson's analysis of Vermont's cheese producers (2013: 32).

Ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation included my involvement in the planning and participation in the February 2020 conference. During the first lockdown (March–May 2020) I was not permitted to re-enter Italy but used personal contacts via WhatsApp and email, and read the local digital papers. I combined this remote analysis with interviews, visits, and informal conversations with the main cheese refiner of the valley, the valley's cooperative, the valley's PDO consortium, a cheese-making family farm, and representatives of solidarity economy networks, in the summer of 2021 and spring of 2022.

Taleggio and Strachítunt: Two Scales for the Same Valley

In this section, I introduce some contextual knowledge about the dairy industry of Val Taleggio, which I have covered in more detail elsewhere (Grasseni 2017). Two types of cheeses originate from Val Taleggio—and both have achieved a Protected Denomination of Origin. However, one (Taleggio) has scaled up well beyond the boundaries and productive capacity of the valley. The other (Strachítunt) was "reinvented" specifically for the purposes of better serving the scale and ecology of practice of Val Taleggio.

Historically, Taleggio cheese—known in Bergamasque dialect as strachí—was the unassuming byproduct of transhumant dairy farming; namely, it was made with the milk of herds seasonally moving from uplands to lowlands over transhumant trails. Its production is documented as a widespread economic activity in the first survey of Italian agriculture (Jacini 1882), and in a previous inventory of Lombard agriculture conducted under the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Mitterpacher 1784). It was among the first Italian cheeses to be nationally recognized with the geographic indication *Denominazione di Origine Controllata* (DOC) in 1954. This certification, akin to the French *Appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC), was subsumed under the EU Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) in the 1990s.

Unfortunately, neither the DOC nor the PDO denomination of Taleggio cheese benefitted the valley's cheese-makers or refiners because its simple protocol lent itself to industrial scaling up, and the very broad area of production spanned most of Northern Italy's plains. This favored the lowlands' large-scale dairies, kept production abundant, and prices too cheap to benefit small-scale mountain family enterprises, whose production capacities are tiny and who face additional costs, especially in terms of logistics as well as the artisanal processing of the cheese, still done mostly by hand. PDO Taleggio's yearly production averages about 8,500 tons, of which more than 4,000 come from the province of Bergamo.[1] While certainly "authentic" in terms of abidance by a certified production protocol, Taleggio thus failed to deliver added value for the valley's producers. They feel their more "authentic" production lost out to large-scale industrial production.

By contrast, Strachítunt is the name (in Bergamasque dialect) of another heritage cheese from Val Taleggio. In 2002, the valley's cheese-makers established a consortium of producers with the aim of applying for a Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) for Strachítunt. Taking stock of the lack of distinctiveness of Taleggio, they designated a tiny area of production for Strachítunt, limited to three municipalities in Val Taleggio and the neighboring Val Brembilla, for a total production area according to the municipalities' official data of less than eighty square kilometers. Currently, PDO Strachítunt production averages roughly thirty tons per year. When they say that Taleggio is less "typical" than Strachítunt, the valleys producers rightly claim that Taleggio PDO is less traceable back to the specificities of local environments and conditions of production. Compared to their lowland competitors, Strachítunt cheese-making actually *is* "non-industrialized, local, particular, handmade" – a mark of craft

production (DeNicola and Wilkinson-Weber 2016: 1). In particular, the chosen protocol to make Strachítunt prescribes to use milk produced only in the valley. This establishes a closer tie between the dairy industry and the maintenance of grazing pastures (which would otherwise be abandoned). Also, according to protocol, milk for Strachítunt is unpasteurized (raw). This also forces producers to keep a close check on the milk quality, which depends among other factors on the health and welfare of the cows.

Scale is the issue here. The dairy industry in the mountains of the province of Bergamo is a small-scale sector, where dairies are family enterprises grazing own or rented pastures with small herds. The most successful farm in Val Taleggio owns about one hundred and fifty cows, the others averaging around twenty. They usually employ family members, complemented by seasonal workers during haymaking or during the summer grazing season in the upper pastures away from the village (alpeggio). The valley's cheese refiners are also family enterprises who own their premises. Thus, on the whole, the valley's cheese-makers (either dairy farmers or cheese refiners) are not poor. Especially in upland communities, peasants across the Alpine region have owned their land, as clearly recorded in historical documentation since at least the sixteenth century. Their incomes thrived on specialized skilled crafts such as logging, iron-mongering, and seasonal migration, which included transhumant husbandry of cattle and flocks, and cheese-making (Viazzo 1989; Mathieu 2001). To this day, they own their means of production (whether cows, farm homesteads, milking parlors, refining cellars, refrigerated trucks, etc.), mostly having inherited them from their families.

One cooperative makes cheese, including but not only Strachítunt, from milk conferred by seven farms in the valley. The cooperative, however, enrolls another sixteen nonconferring farms, the two municipalities of Val Taleggio where the cooperative is physically established, and the local government body of Valle Brembana (Comunità Montana Valle Brembana). Similar cooperatives have been established in neighboring valleys, with participation from the local government and smallholders. The cooperative owns its own infrastructure and cheese-making facilities, while the cooperative members usually own their land, cattle, and/or cheese-making and cheese-maturing facilities.

Both the cheese refiners and the milk producers still active in the valley have exercised this industry in a competitive environment over generations, have diversified their activities, and have established professional networks nationally and internationally. For example, PDO Strachítunt is but one of the fifty-four cheeses featured in the catalogue of Val Taleggio's largest refiner, along with "fresh," "organic," "goat," and Demeter-certified "biodynamic" cheeses. They employ about fifteen workers—half locals and half foreign immigrants. They are adamant that no heritage foods would exist in Italy without migrant labor, due to the difficulty in finding manual workers in rural contexts, especially in the mountains, affected by depopulation due to outmigration.[2]

Measuring power in this production economy requires comparing scales among these relatively small holders and medium-sized enterprises to the landowners and industrial conglomerates of much larger PDO consortia in the lowlands. Even the most successful cheese monger in the valley—with a family enterprise turning over about twelve million Euros per year and exporting about 70 percent of its catalogue, thus by far in a dominant position in the valley and in the Strachìtunt consortium—confesses that when they sit at the table of the Taleggio consortium, they are the smallest operation present, their voices remaining unheard.

Over decades, marketing representations of the Val Taleggio cheeses have hinged on traditional authenticity, such as using words and phrases bound with notions of artisanal, small-scale cheese-making within a bounded territory. The choice of using dialect to name their flagship heritage cheese, Strachítunt, was part of this strategy. Grounding the presentation of this reinvented recipe in the valley's historiography, it was presented first as a variant of stracchino cheese (the Bergamasque *strachí*) made during transhumance as a precursor to PDO Taleggio cheese and a forefather of Gorgonzola. While a Protected Designation of Origin stresses the area of origin, warranting the boundary-keeping within which production protocols should be enforced, in the case of Strachítunt this is a "post-transhumant" anachronism (Grasseni 2017: 13). The reinvention of Strachítunt actually sedentarizes the cheese-maker—no longer a traveling herder who made cheese as a chore, hastily and presumably not too well, using milk from tired cows as the etymology of strachí has it, but an expert craftsperson working with high-quality, closely monitored milk for e-coli count. It is the (non)treatment of milk that allows redrawing boundaries: raw milk worked at milking temperature (a munta calda) cannot travel far because it cannot be refrigerated, cannot be pasteurized, and cannot be reheated according to protocol. This bound ecology also redefines its craft. Strachítunt can be made only with milk from Brown breed cows grazing in Val Taleggio, and thanks to the consortium's alliance—or as some have it, unsound overlap—with a successful cheese-maturing family firm in the valley, it is also seasoned in its underground cellars. These are contemporary versions of mountain caves earlier used for maturing cheese, namely, climate-controlled

concrete vaults. Paradoxically, this hyperlocal protocol of production calibrates Strachítunt to a "global hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld 2004): disdaining scaling up, keeping production niche, and commending a premium price for this distinction.

The Language of Heritage Cheese

Heritage cheese is associated with added value, for example because of its exquisite craft or limited production, or remoteness of the production area (and their extra costs). According to critics, this uniqueness engenders exclusion because it posits social and geographical boundaries (Guthman 2007). For example, PDO functions as a marker of distinction (of the cheese, but also of the buyer), and boundary-marking abounds in production protocols. As Guthman notes, labels that designate existing producers to protect their access to business are hardly redistributive in terms of access to land and craft (2007: 462). This is particularly true of big consortia that command a sizable percentage of regional and even national GDP, such as Parmigiano Reggiano, and Taleggio, and also non-PDO consortia such as Grana Padano. However, in conditions of depopulation and progressive pastures abandonment, the same cannot be predicated of smaller mountain consortia such as Strachítunt. In Val Taleggio, on the longer term, one did not observe the phenomenon that Guthman denounces, namely, "the monopoly of ground rents that develop when a terroir comes to be associated with exceptional characteristics" (2007: 462). Access to land has remained open to new, young, neo-rural dairy farmers not only in Val Taleggio but across the Alpine region (Corrado 2010). For example, three new members have joined the Val Taleggio cooperative, increasing the otherwise dwindling number of milk-conferring farms. Even at this tiny scale, PDO does seem to have worked as an incentive to start up a dairy business in the valley, as had been the auspices of the consortium founders.

If anything, this incentive came too late. Filing for a PDO was a laborious endeavor, initiated in 2002 and completed only in 2014. By March 2014, when Strachítunt was officially entered in the European Register of protected designations of origin (PDO) with Commission Regulation Number 244/2014, the valley had already imploded demographically due to outmigration. No competitor from outside Val Taleggio would be allowed to make "their" cheese, as had happened with Taleggio PDO. But a bureaucratically impervious process of almost twelve years had exhausted the valley's producers in cantankerous skirmishes with copycat neighbors and even amongst themselves, leaving very few standing. "Kings of a ghost valley," the saviors of Strachítunt had survived the "war of the cheeses" to come out as almost the *sole* cheese-makers tout-court left in the valley (Grasseni 2017: 97). In the bounded realm of the "heritage arena," artisanal producers are forced to compete for prestige, hoping to better control the conditions of their already challenging market.

The heritage arena employs specific concepts, including that of tipicità, a notion I propose to keep distinct from that of terroir. It is not terroir that features in the language used by Val Taleggio's cheese-makers to market their cheese. With tipicità, the artisan cheese producers of Val Taleggio refer to their clear connection with the local agricultural landscape, as explained in the previous section. *Tipicità* recurs with other key designators, such as *patrimonio* (heritage), *territorio* (territory) (Counihan 2019: 25–26; Grasseni 2017: 42), and *eccellenza casearia* (dairy excellence).

A notion of guardianship is intrinsic to this discourse. For example, the word *tutela* (tutelage, guardianship) is in the name of every PDO consortia, as in *Consorzio per la Tutela dello Strachítunt Valtaleggio*, the consortium for the protection of Strachítunt. This is the legal depository of the Strachítunt trademark, which is responsible for abiding by the protocol established with the PDO certification. Strictly speaking, this means guardianship of a production protocol and area of production. But it also implies a relationship of responsibility to act in the interests of the "guarded" product, similarly to how one would act on behalf of and in the interests of a minor under tutelage, or a ward, to whom one acts as parent or guardian.

In the following sections I will show how this active guardianship has meant inventing a new register, communication channels, and a new vocabulary to articulate the privileged relationship among producers, refiners, and their ecology of practice, which is claimed in the language of heritage cheese.

New Language for Old Cheese

Since March 2020, artisanal producers have faced travel restrictions, increased safety regulations, and difficulty accessing customers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of market and logistic impediments, the valley's dairy cooperative mobilized a discourse relying less on dairy excellence and more on solidarity to promote Val Taleggio's cheese. This would have probably been half as successful, though, had it not been for the consortium's proactive exploration of the limits and potentials of PDO guardianship in a conference in February 2020—by sheer coincidence, on the weekend COVID-19 broke out in Northern Italy.[3]

FIGURE 1: *Strachítunt conference, February 22, 2020. Brembilla, Bergamo.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY CRISTINA GRASSENI © 2022

With the title *Strachítunt. Da valore per la famiglia a risorsa per il territorio* (Strachítunt. From family value to resource for the territory), a three-day conference was promoted by the Strachítunt consortium on February 21–23. The agenda was to debate whether PDO certification is sufficient to promote local economies. "Un prodotto è il suo territorio" (a product is its territory), reminded us the president of the consortium, opening the conference. Territorio in this case is translatable in short as territory but has a much broader significance than a geographical space or an administrative boundary, as it includes a community in its interpretation (Counihan 2019: 25–26). It is not an Italian translation of the French terroir. In fact, in my experience terroir never even featured in professional cheese-makers' conversations. While defining the boundaries of a production protocol, territorio also implies its sociocultural, economic, infrastructural, demographic, and environmental surroundings.

Because it encompasses so much, the scope and meaning of territorio can be dynamically nuanced through language, symbols, and imagery. To place it center piece in the conference title not only marketed the event but also indicated the ambition and scale of the networks it aimed to establish and sustain. It was, in short, a political statement as well as a public act of future-making. By political, I mean a reflection and deliberation pertaining to the goals and needs of a polity, a community. Such deliberations and reflections are naturally future-oriented. However, in the permanently precarious conditions of artisanal cheese-making, operating in a hypercompetitive market, with small margins for costs and premiums, and in a rapidly degenerating mountain environment due to climate change and demographic implosion, future-making means making a future, any future, imaginable. This became particularly clear in the immediate aftermath of this conference.

That very weekend, it became apparent that the COVID-19 virus was in Bergamo and in the nearby valleys. Shortly after, Bergamo began headlining world news (Goddard 2020). A strict nationwide lockdown was enforced on March 8 until May 18, impeding the logistics of distribution and consumption for many small-scale producers, such as those of Val Taleggio. Local online news began to profile appeals of the very same experts who had participated in the February conference, inviting consumers and policymakers not to forget smallholders and artisanal producers in favor of supermarket chains—especially now that stepping out of one's home was forbidden except for unavoidable grocery shopping. Translated into English, these press titles alarmingly read: "The mountain needs mankind [*sic*], the territory needs its products" and "Val Taleggio and Strachítunt in times of corona: we risk throwing away hundreds of [cheese] wheels" (Bassi 2020a, 2020b). Finally the valley's cooperative published a call for online orders on Facebook (Figure 2).

With simple and direct language, the message invited all those who "fancy some cheese" to receive it at home, ordering through a WhatsApp number, email address, or landline. The

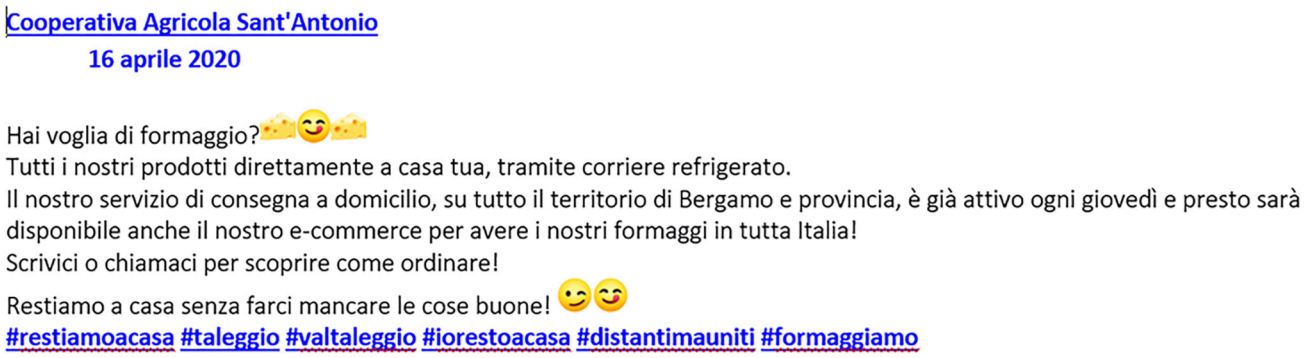


FIGURE 2: *Screenshot from the Facebook campaign of Val Taleggio's dairy cooperative, April 16, 2020.*
WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/COOPSANTONIO/POSTS/1999979140222735

delivery was still limited to once a week in Bergamo and the surrounding province, with the promise of launching an e-commerce platform. The vocabulary and register used, notably, did not evoke the prestige of their products, and the PDO certification of the local cheeses, either Taleggio or Strachítunt, was not even mentioned. It was also not mentioned *which* cheese was on sale of the many types available in Val Taleggio. Nevertheless, this notice triggered such interest that incoming orders soon overwhelmed the cooperative staff.

Elsewhere, I elaborate on the contents of the Strachítunt conference and on the sales campaign that ensued during lockdown (Grasseni 2022: 144). Here, I reflect on further dynamics that might be helpful to complicate notions of authenticity. I believe this emergency turn in communication left a mark on the language and marketing philosophy of (at least some of) the local producers. The vocabulary marketing of Val Taleggio cheese evolved over the following year or two, transitioning from evoking traditional prestige to invoking *another kind of authenticity*, as in simple, healthy, genuine, produced by small-scale farmers in one's territory—farmers in need of help. By invoking an unmediated relationship between producer and buyer, the cooperative used a canon of authenticity that implicitly democratizes the market of heritage foods, creating a space for horizontal and direct communication, explicitly avoiding "middle men" and the language of prestige. Notably, this small-scale operation made use exclusively of Facebook and WhatsApp ("not even Instagram!"—a subsequent comment from one of the campaign's organizers) and of the local online news magazine *BergamoNews*, eschewing printed newspapers such as *L'Eco di Bergamo* or the local edition of *Corriere della Sera*, which had played an important role in supporting the long-fought PDO candidature of Strachítunt. The communication effect was immediate: by renouncing the high status of heritage cheese and solely appealing to universal feelings such as desire, appetite, and solidarity, this deliberately simple message exploited a visceral sense of the authentic, one that pointed directly at what is good about food and especially evoking the sense that one can "stay at home" during such alarming and unpredictable historical conjuncture "without missing out on good things."

Importantly, this seemingly impromptu turn—however serendipitously timed by urgent circumstances—had been carefully prepared. The Strachítunt consortium had wisely set itself up both for global networking and for local favoring, pursuing every alley open to persuasion. For example, the February conference I participated in posed the question whether PDOs were authenticity straitjackets, tying producers too much to protocols and niche consumption. To answer that, the conference gathered a heterogeneous palette of potential producer/consumer collaborations. There were representatives of environmentalist associations, solidarity economy networks, and internationally renowned craft cheese activists such as Carlos Yescas (Rodgers 2016), who spoke online from Boston on behalf of the Oldways Cheese Coalition about "Protecting traditional raw milk cheeses." All the while, the organizers also invited the usual suspects, namely, spokespersons of industrial milk and cheese associations that market a sizable portion of regional and national GDP and export (see the Introduction to this special section).

Among the invitees, representatives of Bergamo's Solidarity Purchase Groups presented their mission to facilitate direct producer/consumer collaborations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the producers' entrepreneurial world and the representatives of alternative food networks rather talked across purposes. The former politely reminded the latter of "economy's hard facts," for example, the importance of export for GDP and the likely low returns of alternative food networks. However, these factual market conditions were breaking

down the very moment consumers and producers courteously presented and articulated their reasons. Between February 21 and March 8, Lombardy and Italy precipitated toward their first lockdown. We have seen how the producers' cooperative reacted with a communication strategy through nontraditional media, broadening and diversifying its distribution channels and audience. Ignoring the dissonance with the other socioeconomic actors at the February conference, the solidarity economy network promptly responded, first actively spreading the cheese-makers' message, and then buying *any* cheese produced by the cooperative of Val Taleggio through about five hundred self-arranged collective orders—notably, not at sale prices but at the customary premium price, as is their etiquette.

Consumers' support avoided competition among small-scale producers, at a moment when they could not afford to shoulder lower prices, as opposed to large-scale industries in the same dairy sector, which have ampler pricing margins thanks to the quantities they sell. As explained, both Taleggio and Strachítunt are PDOs, but with incommensurable production and commercialization capacities. While the former can navigate the rising costs and falling margins due to low prices by increasing production, a small-scale sector is even more dependent on the capacity to warrant high prices for one's products on the market.

Weaving diverse and even conflicting webs on the eve of lockdown, the Val Taleggio cooperative and PDO consortium thus equipped themselves to be heard later, if not under the banner of tipicità, then under that of solidarity. Also thanks to the local online press and social networks, Val Taleggio prominently featured in the media. Consistently, the valley's producers redeployed media-enhanced forms of direct sale under lockdown. All channels were activated: commercial, personal, cultural, and political, within and beyond solidarity economy networks. What I argue in the following section is that after this urgent and serendipitous rethinking of message and audience, over the following couple of years, a more articulate semantics of care and guardianship has emerged and become prevalent over one of prestige and border-protection. The language of guardianship of a labeled product has morphed into one of guardianship of the valley's whole cheese-

FIGURE 3: *CasArrigoni Newsletter, June 22, 2021.*
COURTESY OF CASARRIGONI

making ecology (wherein cheese-makers are "keepers of raw milk," taking care of "molds").

Authenticity or Guardianship?

Talking to cheese entrepreneurs, one quickly learns that their understanding of the authenticity of place-based foods is far from uncomplicated—which does not mean they doubt the excellence and distinction of what they make and market to make a living. These are notions with real economic value and hold political implications (in the sense of allowing concrete scenarios for envisaging a future—see above) for their communities, and for their social and natural environment. However, mobilizing these notions does not mean being incapable of appreciating (and further mobilizing) their constructed-ness and historicity, their contradictions and idiosyncrasies.

True, voluntary food labels, and especially certified PDOs, grant "exclusionary protection" to some products and producers, and not to others (Guthman 2007: 457). However, against Guthman, if we look at local food systems from a different point of view than the moral high ground of critical consumers requiring "commodities that embed ecological, social and/or place-based values" (Guthman 2007: 456), we find that artisanal producers may well be willing and able to deliver ecological and social values of their own. Nevertheless, they are (usually) bound to, and sometimes thoroughly embracing, the (capitalist) mission of producing commodities that can be traded in the global market through their sheer positioning in it. As Richard Wilk states, "one paradox of the marketplace is that the very acts that decommodify—identifying a food as a part of an inalienable heritage—give them higher value as commodities" (2006: 20). Or, as an interlocutor simply reminded me, "we make cheese to sell." With this in mind, I look at *which* ecological and social vision some of the valley producers chose to project, and how, first by changing their communication strategy during COVID-19, and then with a new turn in their discourse about the practice of dairy husbandry and cheese-making in Val Taleggio.

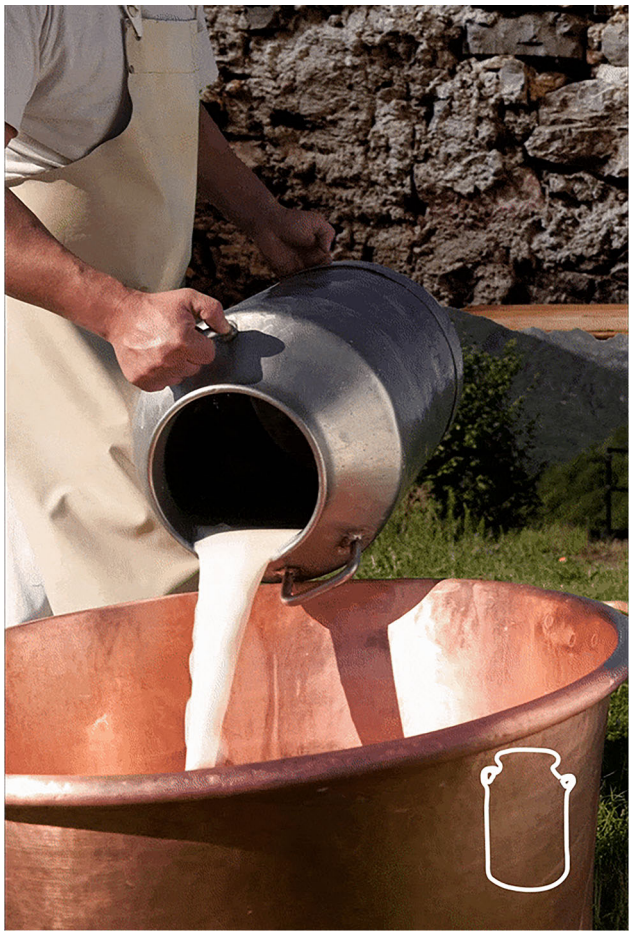


FIGURE 4: *CasArrigoni Newsletter, May 12, 2021.*
COURTESY OF CASARRIGONI

One conclusion reached at the February 2020 conference, in the eyes of the organizers, was that a new language and a debate on the role of PDO were much needed in order to envisage and communicate what the future would look like for cheese-making in Val Taleggio. As a follow-up to the February conference and a lively Facebook campaign in March and April 2020, an unmistakable signal of change reached me via email through the newsletter of Val Taleggio's most prominent cheese-refiner, CasArrigoni, in May and June 2021. It was a "manifesto," preceded and introduced, both in the newsletter and on their website, by a statement (in English) entirely devoted to "molds," explaining their importance to the taste and color of cheese and defining them as "our heritage and our trademark."

The manifesto was accompanied by the usual imagery of traditional artisanal cheese-making, in this case professional, staged photographs of a man pouring milk from traditional stainless steel canisters into a copper cauldron, recalling the collection of fresh raw milk for immediate cheese-making, and a close up of a section of Strachítunt wheel particularly rich in natural blue molds (Figures 4 and 5). It was however introduced by novel mottos: "We declare ourselves keepers of raw milk" and, again "We declare ourselves keepers of molds."

Compared with the brochures the family enterprise had distributed over the previous couple of decades, sometimes bilingually (in French) and with mottos such as "We chose to stay in the mountains to give you the cheese of your dreams,"

At casArrigoni we declare ourselves keepers of molds

We know molds and we know some of them are good and useful for our work. Molds transfer their truly characteristic taste and flavors to our products. They also give color and flavor to our cheese, giving it an identity. Ours are unique molds because they cannot be replicated. We take care of them because they are our heritage and our trademark. Our seasoning cellars are natural, made with living materials, to ensure a spontaneous growth of the molds.

FIGURE 5: *Introduction to CasArrigoni's manifesto.*
COURTESY OF CASARRIGONI

communication around the added value of their cheese had now morphed, from the trope of family, roots, heritage, and history into a new visual and linguistic design (cf. Grasseni 2003). Realizing the political, economic, and ecologic role of the cheese-entrepreneur as "keeper" of the valley's molds required a manifesto, and here it came online in June 2021: a manifesto in twelve points, each point summed up by stylized icons, for "history" and "tradition" but also "raw milk," "mold," "mountain," "human capital," "hand-made," "caves," "tools," "Brown Swiss cows," "summer pastures," and "organic."

How does a cheese entrepreneur whose business has been built on a generic rhetoric of mountain tradition, never once mentioning the nitty-gritty of the cheese-making practice (molds, tools, caves, etc.), land on a statement like this? This is the question I asked a member of a family firm, a well-traveled woman in her thirties. In our first audio-recorded interview, which was followed by several exchanges of visits and an ongoing email correspondence, we chatted about Formaggio Kitchen in Cambridge, Massachusetts. With the same matter-of-factness with which she mentioned the fromageries of Paris, but also of London, Boston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, she could recount with the precision of a dictionary entry the variety and exceptional breath and scope of international cheeses one can find in the specialist cheese monger on Huron Avenue in Cambridge (Jones 2016b: 285). At the February 2020 conference, she had caused quite a stir by declaring polemically that growing up in Val Taleggio was not at all an idyll, and that future-making meant abandoning the rhetoric of the good old days. Interviewed about the current state of affairs in her enterprise, she boasted exporting 70 percent of their cheeses, including raw milk cheese, to the United States, Australia, Japan, and Europe. "Pasteurization is a thing of the industry of the 60s and 70s. Unless it's very clean and very well monitored, raw milk . . . you know I send raw-milk Taleggio to the US? No one else is able to. You need to work every day: analyze everything. If the e-coli level is good we send, otherwise we don't. You need to be very careful in the cow shed, work with the breeder. This summer we trained all eight farmers who confer milk to the coop."[4]

Defying the paternalism enshrined in Italian law that (until 2022) legally bound one to carry only one's father's surname, she had made formal recourse to Bergamo's Prefect and obtained to add her mother's surname—the enterprise's name—to her own. She probed the contours of the possible with this and other moves, such as ideating the February 2020 conference but leaving others to moderate it, or challenging one's guests and the established stereotype of the goodness of growing up in Val Taleggio's unspoiled landscape. Partially abandoning the consortium's border-keeping as the driving motive of their symbolic work is undoing paternalism from within, respectfully challenging her father's work before inheriting it. At the same time, using simpler but broader notions of ecology and craft to speak otherwise about authenticity and guardianship is a bold move. She chose to portray the manifesto as the serendipitous result of a candid translation predicament during a visit from American buyers, in the company of the CEO and marketing expert of an Italian cheese-exporting firm: "They just would not get it, so we had to come up with drawings."

The text of the manifesto is retrievable from their website, in English, but translated from notions that have been formulated and narrated first in Italian, and then addressed to an international (professional) audience. Place and materials are contextualized in a multisensory working environment. The manifesto refers explicitly to cows, molds, and pastures as partners in the enterprise of cheese-making. The future and not only the past is in focus here, as new allies and perspectives are being evoked for continuing to live and produce in

FIGURE 6: *CasArrigoni manifesto*.
COURTESY OF CASARRIGONI

the mountains. Cheese-making is thus portrayed not as an act of stubborn resistance, of loyalty to tradition despite contemporary hurdles and exacting standards, but rather as a project, a plan, and a banner—a roadmap for crafting futures (Figure 6 and Table 1).

The uniqueness and non-replicability of molds and raw milk, which is actually open to debate in microbiological terms (Paxson and Helmreich 2014; Raffaetà 2021), crafts an "intimate relationship"—one of guardianship—between the microbiomic identity of this particular locality and the skilled practitioners who operate in it. As Roberta Raffaetà puts it: "Is it possible to imagine and advance intellectual property as associated not just with the isolation, selection, purification, invention, or manipulation of a biological entity but also with the skillful maintenance, repair, and variable reproduction of an entire ecosystem?" (2021: S330). Along with the Trentino cheese-makers with whom Raffaetà worked, my Val Taleggio interlocutor would enthusiastically pledge so. A positive answer to this question allows contemporary raw-milk dairy farmers to attach added "biovalue" (Waldby 2002) to the ecological complexity of alpine cheese-making, namely, its microbial molds. In other words, it allows Val Taleggio cheese-makers to argue that their cheese, *all* cheese, is *still* special because of their distinctive "sociobiological topoi" (Raffaetà 2021: S330).

Similar to other cheese entrepreneurs studied internationally, such as the Kehlers brothers visited in Vermont by Heather Paxson (2012) or the Bellontes of Saint-Nectaire with whom Harry West worked (2014), future-making is anchored in their shared conviction that diary technique is embedded in the local landscape and, vice versa, enables its ecological and socioeconomic continuity, as Mateo Kehler states in his preface to the *Oxford Companion to Cheese* when he asks, "Can we Americans be the saviors of French terroir?" (2016: viii). Heather Paxson expresses this equation as "reverse-engineering terroir" (2013: 201). Instead of literally applying the French model of terroir, which posits the land and human-made landscape as bestowing distinctive flavor to

TABLE 1 CASARRIGONI MANIFESTO: FULL TEXT (WWW.CASARRIGONI.IT/EN/AZIENDA/MANIFESTO).

Responsible for a history

our history belongs not only to a forefather, a transhumant breeder, but to all the Bergamini* of the Taleggio Valley who for centuries have carried out cows transhumance, or rather the practice of moving the herds from the mountain to the plain and back building up a strong relationship between the two and and creating the modern dairy context

Enthusiastic about tradition

that means we are aware, grateful and happy to be part of a unique heritage and to be able to continue to enhance it, as well as safeguard it.

Keepers of raw milk

inestimable value, because working raw milk allows us to preserve all the flavor, vitality and quality of the product. Keeping raw milk means enhancing perfection.

Supporters of molds

molds are our heritage, as they transfer their truly characteristic taste and flavors to our products. They also give color and flavor to our cheese, giving it an identity. Our molds are unique because they cannot be replicated

Settled in the mountains

the Taleggio Valley is an enchanted valley, surrounded by a chain of mountains. Between water and rock, herbs and woods, our quality workmanship depends on the particular microclimate of the valley. Our life as mountaineers, even if it is uncomfortable and difficult sometimes, defines our location and identity.

High human capital

we commit to recognizing the value of the people who work with us and investing in their training. We believe in the skills and contribution of people, both individually and as a aroup. We recognize the value of a human capital on which an artisan company like ours is founded.

Manual and artisanal processing

touching our products is essential, it helps us to know what they need at all times in order to be perfect. It is the aspect that most belongs to us: a direct and physical contact with our cheese.

Natural aging cellars

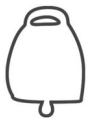
underground, quarried in the mountain. Our cellars are natural because they are built in reinforced concrete, that is a living material, which helps us to recreate the seasoning conditions of natural caves, a material that communicate with the product, giving and retaining molds and precious organisms.

Use of natural and traditional tools

we use pine wood crates that contain and store the cheese for the entire duration of the maturation, in a mutual exchange of humidity and mold. To protect the rind, we only use cotton sheets, which naturally regulate humidity, without damaging the appearance.

Brown cows

we care about safeguarding the biodiversity of the breeds, we commit to ensuring that only milk from Italian Brown cows is used for the noblest products. The milk of this breed is very good and excellent above all for the production of typical cheese, because it is rich in proteins.



Summer pastures

from May to September the cows of the Taleggio Valley move to the pastures at high altitude, keep fit, eat the best seasonal herbs and help to preserve the landscape. Watch the documentary.

Organic range

as we believe there is a strong relation between earth, animals and humans, we try to minimize the impact on the environment and respect the cycle of nature. *typical local herdsmen.

wine or cheese, according to Paxson, "These translations of terroir embody more American aspirations invested in place: environmental stewardship, agrarian enterprise, and rural community" (Paxson 2013: 190). I suggest that on *either* side of the Atlantic, a milieu of cosmopolitan champions of locality share similar aspirations, attending international fairs, competing for World Cheese Awards, or performing as judges at food fairs. Beyond their national identities, these innovative food entrepreneurs are busy with scaling the leviathan of global food down to their own landscapes and communities, and often share an ecological approach that allows them to define that ideal local dimension (e.g., through cheese made with raw milk).

To achieve that, these cheese entrepreneurs have to be more than economic actors: they are designers, philosophers, and leaders—crafting futures for themselves and their own. When specifically challenged on the exclusivity of her production and marketing strategy, in other words on the lack of its social inclusiveness, my interlocutor replied reflexively. She differentiated herself from those *really* marketing their cheese at elites and gave a couple of examples of what she means by this concept: "Ours is not cheese that only five Russian oligarchs can afford to eat." She commented on the boomerang strategy of the "Bitto Rebels" who uncompromisingly abandoned the homonymous PDO consortium (Rinallo and Pitardi 2019). While hailed by Slow Food, they "retreated" and "closed themselves off," according to her, to an even more exoteric circle of cheese connoisseurs than PDO buyers: "I went to see their caves with signed wheels from the so-called heroes of Bitto, all these journalists, writers and so on but . . . we make cheese to eat!" While rethinking their communication in less exclusionary terms, her firm does not embrace the popular low-end, as use of the word *nostrano* would denote. Nostrano never appears in conjunction with high-end cheese marketing because it underlines a (too) domestic scale, as in salame nostrano. Literally speaking, nostrano means "our own," but it denotes something more and something less than that: it evokes the homemade, the humble, and the unpretentious. Val Taleggio cheese is not marketed like this. Underlining its naturalness does not mean abandoning the claim to its uniqueness altogether.

My interlocutor unabashedly sees herself as a businesswoman who needs to make an attractive margin to pay her workers and providers fairly: "It's wrong that a cheese should cost too much. But it needs to be remunerative for the entire chain, as well as accessible. Then it still can be niche, namely it requires an estimator with a culture for natural cheese. Strachítunt costs double than Gorgonzola because Gorgonzola is an industrial product. Strachítunt costs more than that to make." In every way she counters the challenge, her thesis is one of guardianship, in continuity with the family business but articulated otherwise than her father's discourse about guardianship (tutela) of a single product (Strachítunt) through a PDO consortium. Declaring one's family business as a "keeper of molds" and "keeper of raw milk" amounts for her to future-making and guardianship of the productive territory of an entire community, almost *despite* the PDO consortium. Her "futurist" manifesto, as she likes to call it, is an altogether political act.

Conclusion: The Politics of Scale

Practitioners agree that selling small-scale, quality cheese at a premium is the only actual possibility for mountain dairy farming to continue to exist vis-à-vis the industrial dairy economy racing prices to the bottom. In the aggressively competitive market of the heritage arena, "touting authentic production and mythic landscapes" (quote from this section's Introduction) is the only viable strategy for heritage food entrepreneurs to market their narrative. In other words, authenticity has so far been the mainstream narrative embraced by artisanal producers in order to survive in a global market that offers the lowest possible compensation for production, at social and environmental costs. This has added narrative requirements to their ecology of practice. These requirements include the *expectation* of added value, in the form of *some kind of* distinction from industrial foods. Authenticity's origin myths and the "je ne se quoi of their particular soils, climate and land"—of which the editors of this special section are skeptical—are but one way to deliver that narrative, which they need to survive as local economic actors in a "global hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld 2004).

This article shows how, while they were never naïve in pursuing this strategy, Val Taleggio cheese-makers certainly embrace the moral understanding that there is value in the preservation of their working rural landscape vis-à-vis the placeless, nameless, and tasteless foods churned out by the intensive agriculture and mass manufacture of multinational concerns. In this they are in good company with other innovative entrepreneurs who, while navigating a cosmopolitan professional milieu, invest symbolically and financially in the preservation of pastures, farms, and jobs in their local communities (e.g., in Vermont [Paxson 2012] and in France [West 2014]). The politics of scale, for their cheeses, is thus at once globally constrained and locally vested. Their produce remains high-end but affordable for the middle classes.

We have seen how an urgent, solidarity-driven response to the first COVID-19 lockdown in March–May 2020 meant rethinking the language of authenticity for Val Taleggio's cheese, which became more attached to notions of resilience and future-making and less vested in protected denomination and dairy excellence (eccellenza casearia). A significant departure from the routine was the little weight given to labels and certifications in the Facebook campaign of the valley's cooperative. Then, the ensuing marketing communication and manifesto of CasArrigoni in 2021 definitely placed novel focus on material culture and future-making, profiling dairy farmers, cheese-makers, and cheese-maturers as "keepers of raw milk" and "keepers of molds," guarding and presiding over a heritage landscape, in the belief that continuing cheese-making practices preserves its territory—or its "working landscape" (Paxson 2012: 206). Heather Paxson, describing Vermont's "post-pastoral working landscape" (2012: 206), identifies the traits that make a landscape continue to "work" for its inhabitants once dairy farming becomes heritage. Maintaining the meadows, the pastures, the herds, and the views, maintaining its working residents in place, keeping the homestead architecture alive and lived in, with its network of sociality and mobility, are all necessary ingredients also for post-transhumant cheese-making in the Alpine region.

This incidentally also leaves the producer a freer hand to set standards over *how* to apply their manifesto in practice, still counting on a price premium while eschewing not only the exclusionary language but also the strict regulations of geographical indications. While this allows choosing even higher standards and verifications (to export raw-milk cheese to the United States, for example, or for international biodynamic certification), it keeps one's language of singularity malleable enough to be negotiable and diversified (from "unique" to "traditional" to "collection," as one finds in CasArrigoni online catalogue).

Authenticity is also redefined in the same breath as the critical question "Whom does authenticity include and whom does it exclude?" (quote from this section's Introduction) is turned around to focus on what/whom this kind of authenticity includes, de-naturalizing the terms of inclusivity by broadening the discourse of economic and ecologic value to natural actors other-than-human, such as cows, molds, pastures and caves.

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NOTES

1. Source: CLAL–Italia: Produzione Taleggio DOP.

2. Research on immigration in the Alpine region is scarce, but see Raffaetà and Duff (2013).

3. The dairy cooperative of Val Taleggio and the PDO consortium for Strachítunt cheese are two distinct entities, but some of their membership overlaps. In fact, the dairy cooperative is also a founding member of the Strachítunt PDO consortium. The Strachítunt consortium enrolls the cooperative, two cheese refiners of the valley, and three privately owned dairy farms (see www.strachitunt.it/en).

4. Audio-recorded interview, March 2022.

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