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The potatoes of Otro: the reconstitution of an element of the Walser food heritage in NW Italy

Michele F. Fontefrancesco^{1,2*}  and Margherita Mello³

Abstract

The article analyzes the trajectory of the reconstitution of the gastronomic heritage among the Italian Walser community. It focuses on the case study of potato production in the Otro Valley, in Alagna Valsesia (VC), and explores how the process of heritagization linked to these products allowed the community to reconstitute a trait of their biocultural diversity lost during the twentieth century. In so doing, it offers details about the gastronomy of potatoes among the Walser and shows that food heritagization is not always coupled with the commodification of local heritage products, but rather can foster processes of reappropriation of a traditional gastronomy.

Keywords: Potato, Walser, Italy, Alps, Heritagization

Introduction

This article moves from a straightforward question: “What are the potatoes of Otro?” This simple interrogative drove a project of ethnographic research in Alagna Valsesia, a municipality in the Alpine Monte Rosa massif in NW Italy, in 2021. It aimed at exploring the sociocultural origins and the characteristics of this modern piece of local food heritage. In so doing, this question guided the analysis of the process by which the local community defines the elements of its food heritage, drawing from its gastronomic memory to reconstitute lost traits of its biocultural diversity. Hence, the article investigates the intersection between rural marginalization, tourism, food heritagization, and gastronomic revival.

Food heritagization is the process through which a local community identifies elements of its (actual or alleged) food heritage and turns them into a resource for development [1]. The process takes the members of a community to identify specific products in response

to the contingencies of the moment and recognize them as a symbol of the identity of the community and its surroundings [2–4]. The current literature shows that researchers have widely investigated the political dimension of this process, indicating the different roles producers, institutions, and the market have in terms of selection of products, standards, and paradigms of quality (e.g., [5–7]). For example, Mardatillah et al. [8] recently outlined this process by defining the heritage profile of Riau Malay cuisine in Indonesia, and Silva Gómez et al. [9] studied the characteristic feature of the culinary tradition of the Tables of the Dead in Ecuador.

Any form of heritagization stems from a form of collective *ars oblivionalis* [10], an art of forgetting that remembers only specific threads of the network of relationships that underpin the making of that food product, while others are disremembered. This process is often encapsulated within the concept of terroir. Terroir was originally used in the wine sector to link a certain location with a distinctive grape and a specific style of winemaking [11]. However, its use has been extended “to other forms of rural production, as certain foods are often endemic to particular places, sometimes because of geographical or

*Correspondence: m.fontefrancesco@unisg.it

¹ University of Gastronomic Sciences, Bra (CN), Italy
Full list of author information is available at the end of the article



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climatic conditions, but also because of the existence of a creative food economy that supports and promotes the local harvest” [12]. Terroir suggests the authenticity and indigenusness of a gastronomic product, naturalizing it in the landscape and hiding the historical process that is behind it [13]. In so doing, it ensures the reality and immutability of a product over time, in terms of its tangible (linked to the biodiversity of the place) and intangible aspects (linked to the gastronomic culture of the place) [14]. Hence, a product is given an atemporal connotation that suits the taste of the modern consumer, and above all, of the modern food tourist, for authenticity [15, 16].

Food tourists are a hallmark of present times. On a global scale, the beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked by growing attention to the themes of food and its origins, quality, sustainability, and safety [17], while food consumption practices have moved from mass production toward geographically typical foods [18]. This change fueled a growing industry of gastronomic tourism [19–23]. Food has turned into the main attraction for global tourists [24], who look for gastronomic uniqueness, “authenticity,” and “genuineness” [25–28]. Building on a long cultural history that indicated the countryside as a place linked with the past and traditions [29], rural areas have turned into a place of great fascination for food tourists, who choose these places as a destination and look forward to “unique” foods and a more “authentic” gastronomic experience [23, 30]. In response to this, rural communities, in particular those located in more remote areas and mostly affected by the socioeconomic impact of contemporary mass urbanization [31], have embraced gastronomic tourism with strong expectations of development [32]. In this way, they are entangled in the process of food heritagization and become its key players [33]. Thus, they retrieve, invent, reinvent, and promote different aspects of the local gastronomy, motivated by the intention of preserving in this way the community and constructing a solid basis for its economic development [34]. While the limits in terms of socioeconomic and environmental sustainability of this process are widely debated [1, 35–37], this process has an important, potential role in fostering the economic, political, and social empowerment of local communities [28, 38]. In particular, it can play a crucial role in countering the erosion of the local biocultural diversity that on a global level affects marginal, rural communities and cultural minorities [14, 39]. The case study of the potatoes of Otro confirms this potentiality.

Aim, sources, and methods

Methodology

The potatoes of Otro refer to the tubers produced in the valley of the Otro stream, in the municipality of Alagna

Valsesia (45°51′14″N 7°56′14″E, Fig. 1). The article is the result of case study research [40] focused on the promotion of this product based on the bounded community approach [41]. It was conducted through ethnographic fieldwork between March and August 2021 in Alagna Valsesia. The village is situated on the Monte Rosa massif at 1191 m. It is one of the most important settlements of the Walser minority in Italy [42, 43], and it has been a prominent touristic place for mountaineering and winter sports since the end of the nineteenth century [43, 44].

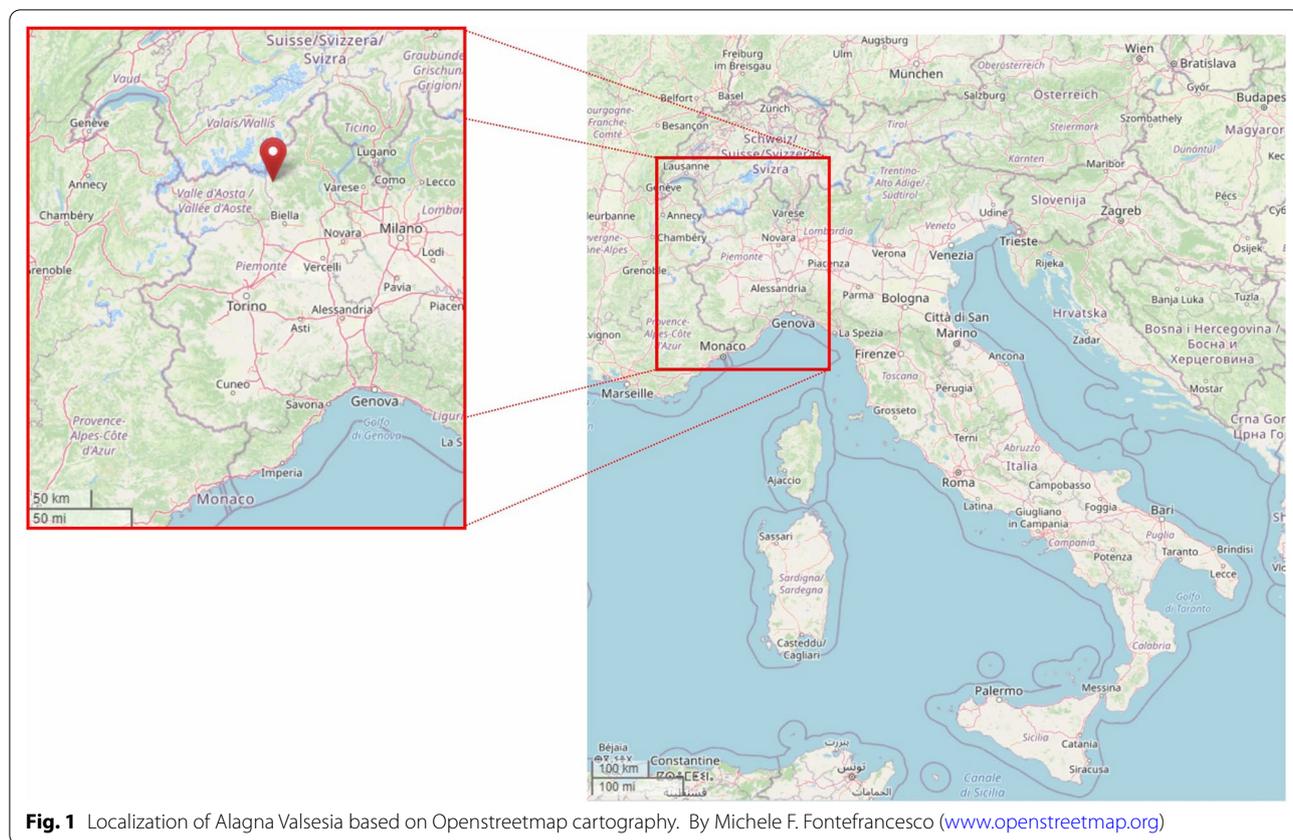
The research was based on the methodology of food scouting. This methodology is conceived as “the ethnography-based documentation of folk/traditional perceptions, uses, and management of the threatened or neglected plant, animal, and microbial food ingredients used within a given cultural setting/community as well as the folk customs attached to them that developed within a certain area as the result of a long socio-ecological coevolution” [45].

The qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with local stakeholders. Specifically, all the Otro potato producers [3] were interviewed based on a 10-question questionnaire that investigated the gastronomy and farming of the local tubers. Further interviews were conducted with local restaurant owners [15] using a five-question questionnaire that investigated the gastronomy and use of the local potatoes in their restaurants and the attitude of the tourists. Moreover, local public officers [3] employed in the tourist office were interviewed using a five-question questionnaire that investigated the role of potatoes in the local touristic offer and the attitude of the tourists. A sample of old members of the Otro community [4] were interviewed using a 10-question questionnaire that investigated the evolution of potato production and use in the community. Similarly, a sample of tourists [10] were interviewed in order to understand their attitude toward the local gastronomy.

The interviews were elaborated qualitatively in order to shed light on the topic of interest. The research involved the observation of the site as well as literary research aimed at detailing the economic trajectories concerning potato production in the area.

The case study: the Walsers

The Walsers are a population of Walser German dialect speakers who live in the Alps, predominantly between Switzerland and Liechtenstein. In Italy, they are one of the historical-cultural minorities [46], having arrived in the country in the thirteenth century [47]. They live on the Monte Rosa massif in three main valleys: the Lys Valley, the Formazza Valley, and the Sesia Valley, where Alagna Valsesia is located.



The Walsers inhabit a region characterized by an alpine climate. Chestnut and beech tree forests dominate up to 1000 m above sea level, while higher elevations are covered by fir, pine, and birch forests, as well as grasslands with rhododendron and blueberry bushes at over 2500 m. The geomorphological characteristics of the territory allow many animal species to find suitable habitats, among them hares, rock ptarmigans, marmots, chamois, and mouflons.

The communities have based their traditional subsistence economy on multifunctional agriculture predominantly based on cattle breeding and the combined cultivation of cereals (mainly barley, rye, and maize), vegetables (such as cabbages, carrots, onions, onions, and turnips), and fruits (apples, pears) [42]. Potatoes and their cultivation were introduced in the late eighteenth century, at which time they became integrated into the Walser diet as the main staple food [48–50].

The Walser communities have dwelled in the upper part of the valleys, while the lower part has been inhabited by Italophone populations since medieval times. Thus, the Walser household economy has involved trading with the lower valley settlements, supplying

food surplus (meat, livestock, and cheese), in exchange for products such as salt, tools, textiles, and wine [42].

The case study: the Otro valley

Alagna Valsesia is one of the largest Walser communities, and the municipality covers the upper part of the Sesia Valley, including the headwaters of the river, and other lateral valleys. Among these is the Otro Valley (*Oltertol* in the Walser language).

The Otro Valley rises at about 1700 m above sea level, in the western portion of Alagna Valsesia. There are seven hamlets that are typically inhabited between March and December, in the period when cattle use the local pastures [51]. These hamlets can be reached only by foot, in a one-hour walk from Alagna Valsesia. The valley has been populated since the Middle Ages, although only six families live there at the present. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the valley was integrated into the local touristic system after the opening of the first hotel, the creation of a cableway, and the creation of ski facilities. However, after the closure of the cableway in the early 1970s, all the touristic facilities were abandoned, marginalizing the role of the

valley within the touristic development of the municipality. The institution of the Bread Festival in the 1990s partially changed this trend.

The festival was developed starting from a local tradition. In the third week of October, when the first snow had already fallen in the valley, all the people of the valley met in Scarpia [52], the largest of the hamlets of the valley, to use the community oven to bake the batch of bread they were going to use during the winter. From this custom, in the 1990s the local community developed a food festival that involved different attractions, among which were the lighting of the community oven and the baking of rye bread, together with other events such as a market for local cheese and salami, as well as concerts and other entertainment. The festival rapidly grew in size sufficient for inclusion in national guides, such as that of the Italian Touring Club [51]. While local bread and cheese were promoted in the festival, potatoes were not promoted, but the revival of potatoes began in the first decades of this century, thanks to the organization of a dedicated event.

Data analysis

The Festival of the Potatoes of Otro was launched in 2000 as a reaction to the success of the Bread Festival. As explained by one of its organizers, “The Otro potato festival was organized by the locals as a reaction to the success of this event (the Bread Festival). The Bread Festival used to be a festival for our community. The last moment of the year when all the people of the valley meet. But then it became a mess. Too many tourists. It was a success and told us our food and our place matter, but it was a mess. We needed something for us. This was at the basis of the festival.”

Since its first edition, the potato festival was scheduled on the Saturday before the Bread Festival. It involves a gathering of all the people of the valley, particularly those who grow potatoes, even if only for self-consumption, to celebrate the importance and significance of local potatoes. The festival lasts one day, from the morning to the afternoon. People gather in the church within the hamlet of Zar Chilchu, early in the morning. After the celebration, participants join for lunch at the Zar Senni refuge in Otro, with the menu based on dishes made with potatoes. In the afternoon, there is a potato competition at which potato growers display their products (Fig. 2), often carving the potatoes to look like animals or objects, and arranging them into artful compositions. Several prizes are awarded by the jury, such as the heaviest potato or the most beautiful composition.

The event is built on the common practice of cultivating potatoes, shared by inhabitants of the valley (Fig. 3) [52]. Although at the beginning of the twentieth century



Fig. 2 Potatoes prepared for the potato festival. © Photo: Margherita Mello



Fig. 3 Potato field in the Otro Valley. © Photo: Margherita Mello

different local potato varieties were widespread in the area, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, local producers were cultivating international varieties. Local varieties were lost due to the depopulation of the valley, which intensified after WWII, and above all to the abandonment of local varieties and the practice of keeping their seeds, due to the availability of cheap high-yield

varieties, as well as the diffusion of new agricultural techniques [53]. Despite the loss of these indigenous varieties, which survived in other Walser areas, such as in the Lys Valley and in Formazza, local families continued the practice of potato production, cultivated mainly for self-consumption.

The primacy of the domestic space is a relevant aspect of the entire gastronomy of the potato in Alagna and in the Otro Valley. Potatoes are widely used in families, prepared by being simply boiled or baked, and accompanied by butter or cheese. They are used as ingredients for preparations such as gnocchi or vegetable soups. They are the ingredients of two local recipes that are still prepared by families during the winter season: Uberlekke stew and Masarai potato soup.

Uberlekke (Fig. 4) stew is made with mixed salted meats, partially desalted in running water, and cooked with carrots, laurel, and potatoes. The dish was originally cooked with the leftovers of different kinds of meat, specifically pork, cow, marmot, or game, as well as meats preserved in salt to last into the winter.

Masarai (Fig. 5) potato soup is made with leeks, cream or butter, potatoes, and animal fat. Today bacon or speck is used, but once the soup was prepared with lard, rind, or any other fatty cut of meat. This dish is prepared often during the winter, because in the vegetable gardens in the upper valley, leeks alone do not suffer from snow [54].

While these recipes are still commonly prepared in the houses of Alagna, they have very limited visibility in the restaurants of the town. In only one restaurant does the menu include Masarai soup. This absence is commonly justified by the restaurateurs indicating that such dishes “are too heavy for the taste of the tourists,” although their menus encompass other dishes based on butter and cheese. As some of the people of Alagna suggested, “(their) absence may happen because we still associate them to something humble, to the everyday life of our



Fig. 5 Masarai potato soup. Photo © www.lavinium.it

families and our ancestors, and to the image of a rural community that was fighting every day against hunger and precarity. So, we do not recognize the possible value these dishes could have today for making the tourist appreciate the uniqueness of our land.” The potato festival interprets this understanding by placing the potato and its gastronomy at the center of a public, touristic event.

In so doing, the festival has been able to stir the local population’s interest in the history and the characteristics of local potato production. “The festival was a public moment that raised awareness in our community,” explains one of the organizers. “People start taking potatoes not for granted like their link with Otro.” The festival has brought to the fore the impact of the erosion of local biodiversity, with the disappearance of local plant varieties, and built a cultural sensitivity needed for their reintroduction.

In 2021, two of the local commercial potato producers decided to distribute one potato to each of the participants in order for them to plant it and return the



Fig. 4 Uberlekke stew. Photo © www.sfizioso.it



Fig. 6 Morella potato. © Photo: Paysage a Manger

following year with at least one more potato. The potato was of the Morella variety, or Dubiò or Bloa in the Walser language (Fig. 6).

This is a local potato variety, popularized in early 2000 by a festival organized in Rima, another Walser village, by the local producers together with Slow Food [50]. The Morella potato is an ancient potato variety cultivated by the Walsers. The tuber has a medium size and an elongated shape. The peel is light purple with shades of blue: the name Bloaboherfià, used by the Walsers to identify this ecotype, derives from this characteristic. The Morella pulp is pure white, and the color remains unchanged during cooking. The eyes of the potato are shallow and bright purple. The plant is not particularly vigorous and is quite branched. The leaves are dark green with purple veins. The flower is rather large and pale lilac.

Although residents of the Otro Valley remember when Morella potatoes were commonly cultivated in gardens, in 2021 its production was limited to only one producer. Similarly, other local ecotypes have also been lost over recent decades.

In the 2010s, on an individual basis, some of the local producers decided to reintroduce traditional ecotypes used by the Walsers. This was made possible by commercial and preservation initiatives that occurred in other valleys, specifically in Formazza and Gressoney. In the 2000s, in Formazza a research project led by Giovanni Guarda was able to individuate three pure, autochthonous potato varieties (i.e., Formazza (Pomätter Häpfä), Red Eyes (Roti Öigjè), and Walser) that were registered in the National Register of Conservation Varieties. In the following years, these varieties were promoted by local institutions and local producers as a distinctive piece of the local environmental and gastronomic heritage. Building on this, in Gressoney Saint-Jean, two farmers in 2014 founded a new company, Paysage a Manger, with a straightforward project: to grow local, ancient varieties of potatoes to promote the uniqueness of the terroir together with the peculiar gastronomic characteristics of these potatoes. Together with the Swiss foundation ProSpecieRara, they identified 60 cultivated varieties, among which six are typical of the Walser area: fläckler (macchiata), frühe prättigauer (precoce di prettigovia), lauterbrunnen, parli, safier, and weisse lötschentaler (bianca del lötschental). Because the enterprise proved to be successful, ProSpecieRara provided the seeds needed by the producers of Alagna to reintroduce traditional varieties, specifically the Parli (a medium-small yellow potato), the Safier (a red-skin, medium-small potato), and the Weisse lötschenta (a white, spicy potato).

While the reintroduction continued over the years on an individual level, in 2021 the festival was used for the

first time as a tool for expanding the initiative, turning it into a collective, grassroots action, relaunching the process of heritagization of the local potatoes.

Discussion

What are Otro potatoes?

On the tangible side, they are the local expression of a more widespread Alpine gastronomic heritage that is linked to the cultivation and use of potatoes in Walser communities. The gastronomic heritage is expressed in specific ecotypes as well as the use of the tuber as the main food staple of families, especially in the winter season. Potatoes have a central role on Walser tables and are tied to specific recipes of soups and stews that combine the potato with the use of milk and cream, cheese, lard, and cured meat. This cuisine derives from a specific form of subsistence farming of the Alpine community [42] that was interrupted by the deep socioeconomic changes that coincided with the demographic and economic decline of the community during the second half of the twentieth century. In this context, the cultivation of local varieties was marginalized and abandoned, leaving only memories behind. In this respect, this trajectory mirrors what happened in other rural European areas, where the impact of economic modernization and urbanization led to the abandonment of traditional gastronomies in favor of national, standardized foodways (e.g., [55–57]). However, in recent decades, local ecotypes have been reintroduced in Otro thanks to collaboration with other Walser communities, from which local farmers gather seeds and samples that are then reintroduced in the valley. In this respect, from an objectual perspective, the continuity with the past has been broken, and those potatoes that are recognized as traditional in Otro are only the outcome of a recent introduction of potato varieties used by Walser communities across the Alps. They are not the precise ecological expression of the Otro valley, but the outcome of a specific genetic pool that characterized the production of the mid-twentieth century.

However, on the intangible side, the continuation of the gastronomic heritage faltered but was never extinguished. Local recipes continued to be prepared at home, although they did not have a main role in the local restaurant scene. Fassino [58] showed in the case of the Piatella Canevesana bean, a variety of white bean cultivated in Cortereggio, of which cultivation was lost in the second half of the twentieth century, that the maintenance of a gastronomic tradition linked with a specific product can be sufficient to kindle the recovery of agricultural production. Similarly, in Otro, the rediscovery of traditional potatoes stems from the gastronomic memories and practices of the community, triggering a grassroots process of heritagization of this vegetable.

Commonly, heritagization is seen as a form of extractivism [59] that makes existing elements of local biocultural diversity into commodities aimed at tourism and the global market [1], in the process losing traditional values and meaning. The case of Otro shows a different trajectory. Specifically, this process is based on a double relationship with the outside world that is fundamental on the one hand to retrieve the actual elements of the culinary heritage and on the other hand to raise awareness within the community about the centrality and shared value of the gastronomy. In fact, similarly to the younger Chetti generation involved in the revival of Peranakan Indian cuisine in Malaysia analyzed by Mohd Fikri et al. [60], the Otro producers involved in the rediscovery of the potato gastronomy were relatively knowledgeable about their ethnic culinary heritage but overall unskilled. For them, contact with other Walser communities, in Italy and Switzerland, was essential in order to learn new farming practices and recover lost ecotypes to reintroduce in their community. At the same time, the contact with tourism, thus with the global market economy, has created awareness in the local community about the erosion of their heritage and has spurred the people of the Otro Valley to recover and reconstruct what was lost.

The rediscovery of the local potato cultivation is not a form of definition and particularization of a broad local gastronomic knowledge, as it happened in Japan with the *washoku* gastronomy [61, 62]. Rather, this dialogical process with the outside world can be seen as a process of reterritorialization of the potatoes in Otro. “Territorialization” evokes a unique and strong cultural relationship between an object and a specific place that is enshrined in the local heritage [63]. Scholars have suggested that the fast socioeconomic transformation that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, which led to the marginalization of rural communities, weakened this form of local bonds, generating cultural oblivion and standardization (e.g., [64–66], [67–70]). In the case of Otro, the twentieth century coincided with the deterritorialization of potatoes from the local communities. This process took place both at the level of biodiversity, with the loss of local varieties supplanted by new, international ones, and at the level of gastronomy, with the marginalization of local recipes. The encounter with tourism, however, allowed a reterritorialization of the potatoes. This process, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have suggested, was a profound change of perspective and understanding that allowed embedding the traditional knowledge concerning potatoes into a new context [71]. The potato festival was a fundamental device for this process [72], because it represented on the one hand a collective process of participation and entanglement with

this particular food product and, as in the case of the kimjang festival in Korea allows the participant to learn, enact, and embody this particular aspect of the local food culture, and its underpinning stories and worldview reinforcing their local identity [73]. On the other hand, the festival is the interface through which locals approached the globalized world and proved the value of local products to a broader audience as well as for the local community, stimulating the locals to recover the elements of biocultural diversity that were linked with the gastronomy of potatoes.

In this respect, the potatoes of Otro are the result of a creative process that entwined the vitality of a local gastronomic tradition with a proactive relationship with the outside world that generated tangible and intangible resources for the revival of the potato gastronomy.

Conclusions

This article explored the history and gastronomic characteristics of the potatoes of Otro. In investigating the history behind the recent popularity of this food, it analyzed the heritagization process that underpins this product. In so doing, the article highlights the process of reterritorialization of these potatoes in the valley, a process characterized by the success of a local food festival and the ongoing reintroduction of traditional potato varieties.

The article opens questions concerning the future of this process and the actual possibility for local producers and restaurateurs to continue in this reterritorialization, expanding the visibility of the product outside Alagna, as has happened for potato heritagization initiatives in other Walser communities, and reinforcing its presence in the local area, also thanks to a stronger presence of traditional potato dishes on restaurant menus. In this process, it will be crucial for local potato growers and other stakeholders to work together for the success of this project.

Moreover, this case study is useful to rethink the debate concerning heritagization and the relationship between local communities and the global market. In particular, the research suggests the value of abandoning a pessimistic understanding of the role of the global market and tourism in terms of sustaining the consistency of a local gastronomic heritage. Rather, it suggests that the global market can foster among a local population a stronger understanding and awareness of the value of their heritage, eliciting grassroots initiatives aimed at its consolidation, expansion, and promotion.

In conclusion, we return to the question: “What are the potatoes of Otro?” They are the promise of a possible positive future for the gastronomic heritage of the Walser community, an expression of the resurgence of

specificities considered lost under the weight of globalization and rural marginalization.

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Author contributions

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Author details

¹University of Gastronomic Sciences, Bra (CN), Italy. ²Durham University, Durham, UK. ³Filatura Margherita Mello, Pettinata Mello, Valdilana (BI), Italy.

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