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Traditional festive food and fragile aspirations of development in Italy: the case of agnolotti pasta

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Abstract

This research draws from memories, and the deep sense of belonging, tradition, and presence that is linked with a dish of Italian regional tradition; agnolotti pasta, one example of what can be considered an Italian ethnic food. It does so in order to challenge an assumption that is widely spread in the public debate and as well as in scholarship, which automatically links the popularization of traditional, ethnic cuisine with a fulgid prospective of local development in particular for the rural communities. This article challenges this imagery by drawing attention on what popularization means and how it is achieved in food festivals, restaurants, and shops. In doing so, it contributes to decouple popularization and development by exploring the ethnographic case of Piedmont, Italy.

Keywords: Italy, Globalization, Local development, Food heritage, Food tourism

Introduction

The stove crackled in the small living room, just a few steps away from the entrance. Placed in the middle of the room, there was a walnut table, surrounded by six chairs. The table was already set with a heavy linen blanket, dishes and glasses bought a few years before thanks to a reward card in one of the supermarkets in the nearby city, odd metal cutlery stocked up over the years and always used, a bottle of water and a bottle of dolcetto wine: all this revealed the familiar atmosphere of a Sunday lunch. Different generations around a table. The nurse now over eighty and his son, the nephew-of-milk with her husband and child son.

It was a few months since they had met. In the previous weeks there were only a few phone calls to know how it was going. Finally, in the early days of Spring the decision to go on a trip into the countryside and go to visit relatives. To celebrate the occasion the nurse had made agnolotti, as only she can: thin pasta, wheat flour, water, only an egg just to blend better; stuffed with rabbit meat, some leaves of cabbage and a piece of carrot. Small, a sort of dumpling. They were served with

butter and sage, but his cousin-of-milk preferred them just browned and soaked in a cup of wine.

In the eyes of the child the agnolotti served were a sort of celebration, more than a roast or braised meat, even more of a special cake. Those of the nurse, so small if compared to those that was possible to find in the city, which were big and square with a totally different stuffing.

This research draws from memories, and the deep sense of belonging, tradition, and presence that is linked with a dish of Italian regional tradition; one example of what can be considered an Italian ethnic food is agnolotti pasta. It does so in order to challenge an assumption that is widely spread in the public debate and as well as in scholarship, which automatically links the popularization of traditional, ethnic cuisine with a fulgid prospective of local development in particular for the rural communities. This article challenges this imagery by drawing attention on what popularization means and how it is achieved in food festivals, restaurants, and shops. In doing so, it contributes to decouple popularization and development by exploring the ethnographic case of Piedmont, Italy.

The article deals with the link between traditional gastronomy and local development, presenting the culinary

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reality of this stuffed pasta: on the one hand, it is a fitting example of cultural and social product set, *embedded*, in the territory; on the other hand, it is actually the result of global productive networks. Considering this dystonic framework, this article analyzes the concept of local development suggesting the distinction between the economic data and the econometric and cultural sectors in order to offer a more precise strategic vision linked to the promotion of local production.

Development and gastronomy

Development is a fundamental topic in the Western thought and discussion, and it is a cornerstone inside the anthropological debate. Starting from the early nineteenth-century studies on cultural diversity, the keyword development [1] is linked to the evolutionist idea of culture and to the description of the trajectories of transition and change of socio-cultural forms and structures [2]. Even if the first decades of the twentieth century marked the decline of the cultural evolutionism, the imaginary proper to this current was still alive in the public debate. In particular, as underlined by Fabian [3], there was an indisputable view: it opposed and imposed a white, middle-class, Christian Western model to other forms of economic and socio-cultural organization. Through this model, an ideal opposition arose: the North of the world confined different cultures to an ideal past. This imagination, as Escobar suggests [4], enlivened a new debate on the development that began at the end of the Second World War. In this case, the term development became a synonym of modernization [5] and of a broader process of economic and cultural Westernization addressed to the former colonial territories. Over the last 30 years, anthropology has thus kept an eye on the reality originating from aid policies and international cooperation [6]; this interest has been developed so that the South of the world has become the main area of investigation [7].

Development policies, however, did not evolve only in this international perspective, but had also a crucial organization inside the single Western nations, then having as focus the unequal conditions and possibilities between center and periphery and between urban areas and rural communities. In this debate, it is possible to notice that the prosecution of the long cultural path, as described by Williams [8], regards on one hand the idealization of countryside such as a reality in the middle between the bucolic space and a place characterized by socio-cultural underdevelopment, and on the other hand the idea of the city as a place of unhealthy congestion and productive avant-garde. As a consequence, the present rhetoric of development expands the idea of a progressive economic and infrastructural marginalization which is typical of the rural areas and presents as the only way out for the small villages in the inland areas

the possibility to offer all those services and experiences needed and desired by the urban citizens [9, 10] who cannot find them in the urban reality characterized by the effects of the oblivion in the modernity [11].

In particular, where landscapes and traditions have been considered several times as resources, that is to say a tool to be enhanced for social and economic growth, in the last decade, traditional gastronomy has been considered as a suitable element to promote tourism and create business. In fact, in relation to phenomena such as the leveling of taste and its lack of territorial specificity, in particular in the metropolitan areas, starting from the 1970s, a renewed interest in food that has characterized the new millennium [12] has become manifest in the search for alterity as well as in the gastronomic domain. Through the traditional and regional cooking, this wish for otherness has recovered a fundamental and globally interesting theme [13]. From Korea [14] to France [15], and from Canada [16] to Italy [17], the food of tradition has become an essential good, suitable for giving new meaning to the urban commuting that characterized the end of the twentieth century.

The horizon of the present is therefore marked by the attention toward food tradition, local food, characterized by a strong narration capable of involving both the emotional part and the interest in knowing about the history of a community and a region. To rural communities, food-and-wine connoisseurship increasingly appears not only as “a light at the end of the tunnel” [18] of an experienced progressive marginalization, but also as a last train to take, recovering and/or inventing the local gastronomic tradition, in the hope to find a social centrality—that now is lost—within the world [19]. In this sense, the food of the tradition is becoming the object of a new modern Western dreaming, marking a parallel but similar dynamic to that which Ferguson [5] described at the end of the twentieth century. As in the case of mining industry in Zambia, also, the Western gastronomic present dream hides misunderstandings and fragilities. On the one side, it crystallizes and prolongs indefinitely the dynamics of present consumption; most of all, it tends to idealize the local, making labile and unrecognizable the boundaries beyond which a business activity can become a source of wealth and value for the community. At the base of this, there is the confidence that tradition is the safety for *embeddedness*, meant as socio-cultural rooting in a given human context, and *embeddedness* as a guarantee of local redistribution of economic resources, strong plurality of actors, and the strength of social ties own, precisely, of the *embeddedness* [20, 21].

In the light of the present trends, therefore, it seems useful to study again the dynamics related to traditional gastronomic consumption and when the food, as suggested by

Barthes [22], is also a semantic object capable of expressing ideas, opinions, and beliefs that define both the individual and social ethical orientation. It is also worthwhile to highlight when it is actually a tool to strengthen local economy and when it is, instead, ethnic goods, a fundamental tool to strengthen and confirm identity. To that end, however, it is necessary to connect two distinct elements: on the one hand, the analysis of the historical and cultural rooting of a food product, and on the other hand, a closer analysis of the productive structure and of the value chain that characterizes these products. By doing so, it is possible to bring out the limits of the present scientific “vulgate,” then opening economic and anthropological questions, providing a new contribution to the debate on local development.

Methods

In this perspective, the article deals with the ethnographic case of the agnolotti and the data collected during a 15-year ethnographic research in Piedmont analyzing the dynamics of the local development of rural territory, noting in particular the use of the cultural heritage such as a socio-economic asset of the communities.

This article focuses on and expands the knowledge already acquired during the project “Bello da mangiare. Di contenuto, di contenitore,” carried out in 2015 by the University of Gastronomic Sciences and promoted by the Consortium for National Recovery and Recycling of Cellulose Packaging (www.comiecounisg.mydocadvisor.it). The research has deepened a gastronomic case study about a peculiar variant of the Piedmont agnolotti that was called *al plin*; this particular agnolotti is typical of the area in the south-east of Piedmont, and it has recently come to the fore nationally because its variant has been made for the large-scale distribution by a big national producer [23, 24]. In this work, the research extends over the whole regional territory and in particular to the Basso Monferrato, the wide hilly area situated between the valleys of the rivers Tanaro and Po and dominating the provinces of Alessandria and Asti, as shown in Fig. 1. This territory has recently become very famous and well-known at international level thanks to being included by the UNESCO in its World Heritage List for the characteristics of its wine-growing [25]. This area was chosen because of the increasing food and wine tourism that characterizes it and makes it a destination not only for the inhabitants of the nearby cities of Turin, Genoa, and Milan, but especially for a wide European and North American audience who goes there to taste its wine and its food.

The research has been carried out considering an ethnographic point of view, focusing on the reality of the restaurants and food and wine handicraft enterprises of Monferrato, and investigating the role of these economic local actors in the development of food and wine sector

as well as their motivations through autobiographical interviews conducted with the methodology of the life stories [26]; in addition, the research has focused on the individual trades and their analysis through an economic administrative targeted survey to deepen the economic aspects of the individual companies. The study has also included the interview to patrons and customers in order to explain the reasons of their buying and the processes of acquiring the gastronomic expertise and its use in everyday life at home.

Results Italian gastronomy, during the last century, has raised a fundamental role on the international scene [27]. In the national and international imaginary, pasta has a pivotal and identity role of this popular gastronomy [28]. Actually, even if localism is an element which characterizes the Italian cuisine, in the whole national territory, it is common to use products deriving from the drawing, rolling, and drying of the dough made from water and flour, mostly of cereals and in particular durum wheat (*Triticum durum*) and wheat (*Triticum aestivum*).

In the Northern regions, where the more common local custom is to use bread wheat and eggs, it is customary to stuff pasta, in particular ravioli. The tradition of ravioli is documented starting from the Middle Age [28]; it has developed through a diversified class of products united by a unique characteristic: a sheet of closed and filled pastry. Tortelli, pansotti, tortellini, mezzelune, and raviole are territorial examples of the changing gastronomy affecting raviolo: names, forms, dimensions, stuffing, and different ingredients shaped on the basis of taste, customs, and raw materials locally available.

Agnolotti is the peculiar raviolo of Piedmont and has its place in the regional food—known for its mixed boiled, *bagna cauda* and *bicerin* [29]; it is considered as one of the principal holiday dishes, traditionally used for the Sunday lunch or to celebrate Winter feasts, above all Carnival. Over the last 50 years, with the increase of the economic and foodstuff possibilities of families, agnolotti have entered into common use and have been sold more or less as handmade products, both in specialist shops and supermarkets.

The name agnolotti is documented since the eighteenth century, though the regional gastronomic folklore puts its origin in the late Middle Ages, from the name of the chef Giacomo d’Acaja, Agnolo [29]. Its shape is mostly square, with a variable side length between 1 and 3 cm; it is made overlapping and closing—by specially suitable molds—two sheets of pastry in order to hold the filling. The pastry is made with water, flour, and eggs, in variable quantities according to the custom, the taste, and the creativity of each family. The pastry is rolled up to be thin and around 1 mm thick. The composition of the filling varies, but it is more common the use of meat.

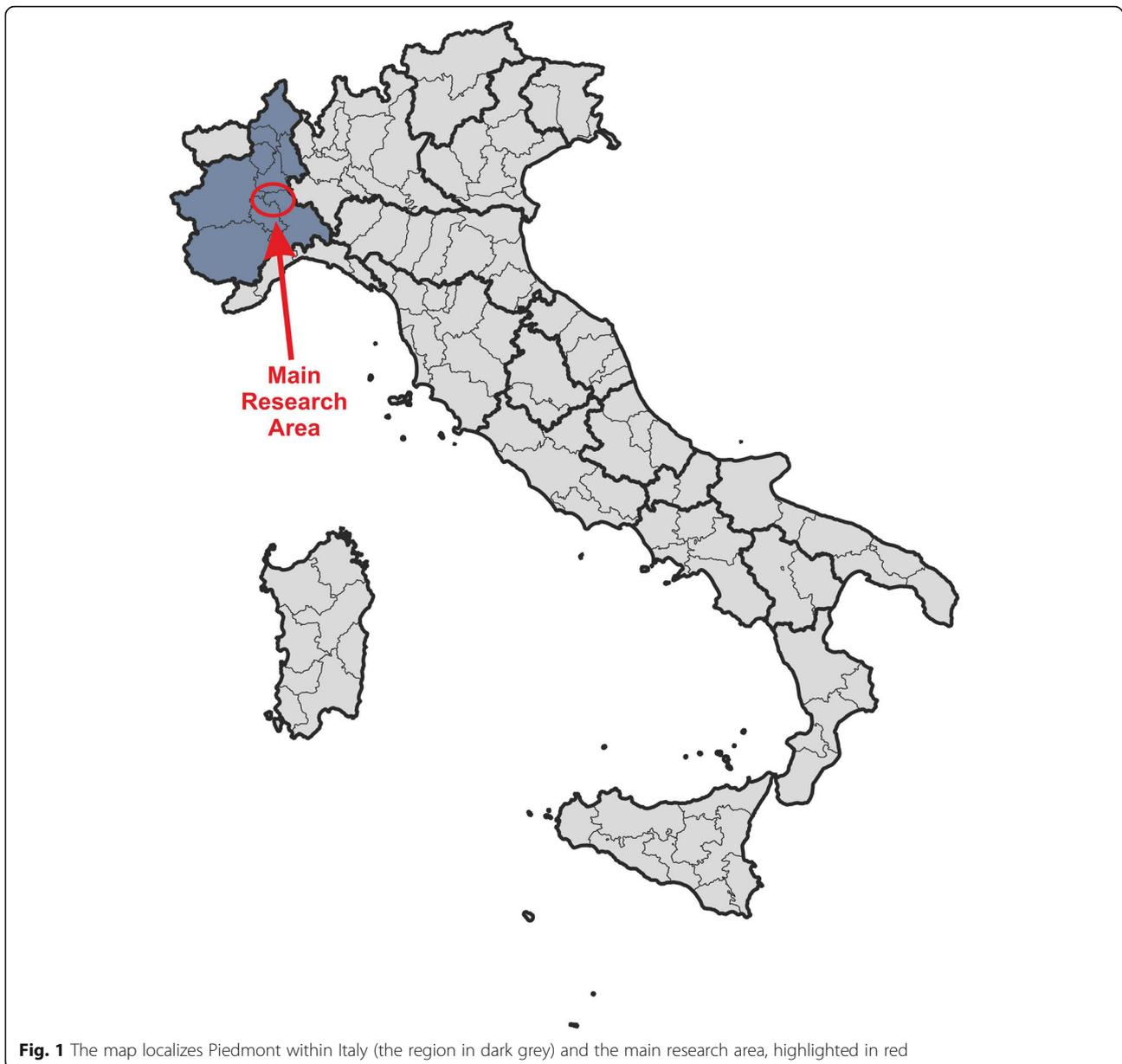


Fig. 1 The map localizes Piedmont within Italy (the region in dark grey) and the main research area, highlighted in red

Today, the fillings are made mincing cooked, boiled, grilled, or braised beef meat. Other kinds of meat—mainly red, such as pork meat or game meat, and white meat, such as meat type poultry or rabbit meat—and cooked or raw vegetables, such as cabbages, carrots, and grains of cereals, are associated in variable quantity to the beef meat. Once these ingredients were vegetables or meat leftovers, they were kept and cumulated during the week, and so revised—by mincing and mixing them—as a filling to be used in the agnolotti made for Sunday meal.

Agnolotti are served with melted butter and sage, with a flavored sauce made with roast or braised beef; in the first case, the sauce is the result of the beef or pork pot roast cooking, and in the second case, it is made by

braised beef, or a particular meat sauce made with almost no tomatoes. In addition, the custom to serve agnolotti boiled without sauce, i.e., soaked in red wine (dolcetto, barbera, nebbiolo), is also attested.

Agnolotti are regularly served in regional restaurants and belong to the foodscape, the gastronomic landscape of daily menu of the region. Despite this global distribution, the tradition of agnolotti has also strong local recipes and variants particularly appreciated, such as the agnolotti “al plin” that means “pinch,” and this dish is typical of the territory between Alto Monferrato and Langhe.

In the common distribution within the region despite the huge number of variants which represent rhetorically local identities, the mix of industrial and

domestic production methods shows how the agnolotti is characterized by a social sphere of uses, and rhetorical and complex dynamics that exceed the limited borders of a single community and involve a large area wherein the agnolotti attests its strong *embeddedness*, from a historical point of view but also from the economic viewpoint of consumption practices of this product.

In the Italian context, there is a growing trend regarding the purchase of food products in the supermarket; this phenomenon that has been to the detriment of small shops in the last 3 years [30] involves the purchase of agnolotti too. As a matter of fact, in the supermarkets, agnolotti are sold mainly at food counters (as a 60-year-old pensioner explains: “[the big national companies producing pasta and specialized in fresh products] either do not produce agnolotti or have little expertise... better those sold at the [supermarket]. They cost a few euros more but are totally different”). According to our research data, the products sold at food counters in supermarkets are made directly by the chain of supermarkets in their main laboratories or in the laboratories located in the shops, or are produced by local suppliers. This last strategy is widespread mostly in family-run or sole-trader supermarkets, which are still very common in the national territory, about 43%. These companies supply also a large part of the urban stores or the restaurants in the territory; just a small percentage of the shops produce internally the stuffed pasta, but they usually sell it at high prices.

Commonly, in the individual or family diet, the consumption of agnolotti is popular and frequent but not daily. As an informer explains: “we eat them once or twice per month. Especially in winter and spring. We eat them to celebrate... On Sunday or on special occasions.” Still nowadays, agnolotti is mostly a good that represents a gastronomic symbol of celebration. The consumption is correlated to the purchase and not to domestic production because, as the research shows, it is mostly occasional (“once or twice per year...”), during the main festivities when the whole family can meet, for example Christmas, or to celebrate special occasions (“I make them when my daughter comes and visit us, when she comes back from Brussels every four or five months...”).

In a foodscape marked by the abundance, where the food which was typical of celebration moments in the past is now always available, during the whole year [31], agnolotti are mainly appreciated from autumn to summer, purchased for consumption at the end of the week or as simple dish to be prepared. In particular, in restaurants or in food and wine festivals, they are bought because they are considered as surely good food, compared to menus that have instead dishes perceived as “exotic,” “strange,” and unusual to the eye of the consumer.

Despite this, the choice of the consumers becomes an esthetic one because their appreciation of the dish is based on adjectives such as “tasty,” “rich,” “strong,” and “good,” as shown in the field work of data collection. This judgment is also based on the examination of the pasta, of the stuffing, and of the form. In particular, consumers mainly appreciate the agnolotti with a very strong-flavored stuffing with a thin pasta. If generally consumers appreciate agnolotti “not too big,” that is about 2 or 3 cm in the edge of the dough, or less as typical of the variant “del plin,” an esthetic based on the small size, a centimeter - a centimeter and half in the edge of the dough, thin pasta, that is less than a millimeter, and rich filling. This esthetic of smallness is not, however, noticed markedly in the area of Monferrato where the predominant form of the agnolotti is big and squared. The taste is influenced by the place of origin, without questioning the origin of ingredients, but just focusing on the place of preparation and the experience or affinity with their producer.

The consumption of agnolotti is typical of the domestic consumption, of restaurants, or of food and wine festivals. Furthermore, as it has been already shown, the consumption is the result of the purchase of the product rather than of its domestic preparation. The analysis of the menu, as well as of the offer of shops, highlights further aspects of the demand mechanisms. Collecting data regarding the menu of restaurants and the product list in the shops reveals there are few variants of agnolotti, while the main aspect of consumer interest is the filling. Agnolotti differ because of their filling, the types of meat used (e.g., beef, pork, rabbit), the age of the animals used, and the cooking methods. No reference is made to the other ingredients used for the preparation of stuffing; there are only a few exceptions, specifically in the case of beef, because the particular cattle breed is indicated. No information about the place of origin or the type of slaughter has been found. Another element of interest is the form (e.g., squared, “gobbo,” “al plin”) and the size. The dough was only characterized by the presence of any natural food coloring agents (e.g., cuttlefish ink, spinach); otherwise, no other information is given about these, or the used flour, or the presence and origin of the eggs. Only in the restaurants and supermarkets, information about the place and the producer of the agnolotti are given, but just emphasizing if the product has been prepared in the same shop or restaurant. In the restaurants, clear relevance has been given to the sauce, generally offered according to those of the tradition.

All considered, therefore, in the Piedmont *foodscape*, agnolotti appear as a good in a market which is characterised by craftsmanship and industrial production. In this sense, the reality of the agnolotti does not stray from

the food modernity [12], but still has a strong reinforcement in the framework of the practices and the affections, showing an additional aspect of the *embeddedness* of this product. In particular, the agnolotti preserves a universe of ordinary affects [32] focused on the intimacy of the familiar feelings, the precise memories of events that have marked the personal life, and the individual taste. In this sense, the *embeddedness* of product grows thanks to the individual life, and so finding, as suggested by Sutton [33], in memories and in familiar atmosphere a sense of prosecution and sharing that strengthen the idea of rooting and desirability of the dish.

On this cultural and human basis, production and trade related to this dish are developing. In many times, analyzing the reality of Piedmont gastronomy, the ethnographic analysis has focused on cases developed in surrounding limited areas where the whole economic cycle of production and sale was completed in the small space of a village or of a valley. This peculiar productive structure has renewed the mantra of the local food because of the positive economic outcomes, but it cannot be used to describe the particular situation of the agnolotti: a complex network of places and practices that escapes even to the eyes of the consumer. The research, in fact, suggests that for the consumers, the agnolotti seems to be completely local. The perception of typicality and traditional food of agnolotti seems to close the gastronomic specialties in a black box. Latour [34] explains that a black box is:

the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.

The sense of dissemination associated to the product, therefore, stops the attention toward the real origin of the product facing a conviction that could be summed up in the words of an interviewed person: “Meanwhile [agnolotti] are made here ... if not in [this village] they are made 10 km far from here, but are always be considered as typical of our territory.” The wide network that characterizes these products is made dull by this sense of being rooted, but the example of an agnolotti, served with melted butter flavored with sage, produced and presented in a restaurant of Alessandria makes this network resurface. Table 1 highlights the origins of every single ingredient used for the production of the filled pasta.

Table 1 Localization of the origins of the individual ingredients of an agnolotti presented in a restaurant of Alessandria

	Ingredients	Origin
Sheet of pastry	Bread wheat flour	Ukraine
	Eggs	Province of Forlì-Cesena
	Water	Province of Alessandria
	Salt	Province of Foggia
Filling	Beef	Province of Cuneo
	Pepper	Indonesia
	Salt	Province of Foggia
	Savoy cabbage (<i>Brassica oleracea</i> , variety of Savoy)	Province of Alessandria
Sauce	Sage (<i>Salvia officinalis</i>)	Province of Alessandria
	Butter	Province of Cremona

The example highlights the shifting between the perception and the economic reality that marks the biography of this specialty. Behind an agnolotti, in fact, a global network emerges and unites the landscapes and the different communities. Contrary to what happened in the case analyzed, the network becomes even wider when the restaurant or the shop buys the product from others, such as companies and distributors placed in the regional territory.

Examining and explaining business strategies needed to maximize the profit of an enterprise, Porter [35] paid attention to the linking of the various steps of the production of a good, and their position in the company and in the territory. Porter’s model of the value chain offers a base which stimulates still at present a more precise analysis of the real spread and localization of the production network. Considering that it is now a well-established anthropological assumption that the human phenomena develop in multi-sited realities [36], it should be noted that for each step of the production chain, resources are distributed in specific surroundings.

In the case studies analyzed by the discipline, at least the first three steps (i.e., ingredients production, manufacture, and product selling) can affect the limited space of a community. Therefore, the positive effects described by the discipline develop, except in the case of agnolotti since these steps seem to disjoint strongly.

Discussion

The case study of agnolotti highlights the limit of a conviction that makes the traditional food *ipso facto* a factor of local growth. Precisely, this idea is based on the hypothesis of a local and bounded production. The case of

the agnolotti suggests, instead, that the typical gastronomic products, such as those of the ethnic handicrafts, can also be the result of extended, global productive network if in their outstanding feature.

This case study lead us, however, to a further remark. The current debate on the possibilities offered by traditional food to the rural world is based on a particular meaning related to the term “development.” Whereas the rhetorical idea of development is linked to the theme of the Westernization in the South of the world, in this case, the concept of development is based on a monetary and brutal vision of the economy, where the emotional aspect and cultural context, that are part also of market trade, pass unnoticed. But the trust toward the dissemination of the product, as it has been suggested by the interviewed consumers, highlights how the agnolotti has not stopped to have a strong cultural function, even if it is a product of the global world. Agnolotti continues to be an active signifier [37] capable of responding to the intangible expectations of the consumers. In this sense, the consumption of agnolotti continues to be an element that creates the idea of community and territory, therefore a factor of territorial cohesion.

According to this framework, we question the role of the traditional food and the contribution that it can give to the local communities. As a matter of fact, the debate suggests that the socio-economic challenges that these local realities have to face are on the one side the impoverishment and on the other side the social disintegration, so it can be stated that the traditional food offers some support, in particular from the point of view of identity and culture. The rediscovery and appreciation of traditional food are the consequences of a rediscovery of the territory, its centrality, permanence, and sense of historicity, rather than an economic automatic shift. It is therefore necessary to question the mantra of the present, without confusing the horizons and the expected results in order not to cherish vain expectations of modernity [5] too easily disregarded.

In conclusion, the article has explored the link between traditional gastronomy and local development through the case study of the agnolotti in Piedmont. The study of perception and practices of production and consumption that distinguish the stuffed pasta, from the most representative and identity dishes of the gastronomy of the region, highlights the limits of a more and more consolidated conviction of the current public debate considering traditional food such as an immediate economic resource for the community. As a result of this research, the meaning and the cultural role that food assumes within the community and the other consumers have been questioned, together with the places and the ways of production and of selling. The case of the agnolotti represents an example of a

culinary tradition that goes beyond the boundaries of a single community becoming a regional product, and it highlights how the product may be the result of a complex network that exceeds the local to embrace the global reality, even if it is an element of the traditional gastronomy, such as it happens for other sectors. Because of this complexity, the work highlights how economically the enhancement of the traditional gastronomy does not develop in a single or certain way for the local realities. In spite of this, the cultural and identity role do not fail: it seems to be an implicit reply to the oblivion caused by the modernity that affects both the urban centers and the rural communities.

Conclusion

This article would therefore offer a contribution to stimulate the debate about the local development and the necessary resources and conditions. In particular, we want to suggest not to melt and confuse economic and econometric issues with those of socio-cultural nature because they are different elements and competitors to the community life. Precisely, thanks to a clear distinction between these two aspects of analysis, it is possible to create more punctual and precise development strategies that are capable of optimizing the use of the territory, its people, and their material and immaterial assets.

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Consent for publication

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Competing interests

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