Festive Gastronomy Against Rural Disruption: Food Festivals as a Gastronomic Strategy Against Social-Cultural Marginalization in Northern Italy

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Food festivals are among the main touristic summer events in contemporary Italy. In the past decade, the country has witnessed the proliferation of these feasts, in particular in rural areas. This article investigates this success exploring the socio-cultural needs that move rural communities to organize the events. It draws on the ethnographic research conducted in the country between 2005 and 2019, and developed through different ethnographic campaigns mostly focused on North-western Italy (2005–2006; 2009–11; 2012–19). The work aimed at investigating not only the origins or motivations that lead to the organization of these contemporary lay rites, but also the cosmos of affectivity and meanings that define the human, gastronomic and natural environment, which is the landscape of the community.

Through ethnographic exploration of the randomly chosen location (Candea, 2007) of San Rocco and its Tagliatelle Festival, the article points out the interconnection between the organization of the event and the effects of the ongoing marginalization experienced by the community. Thus, the case-study sheds light on the broader context of present-day Italy and the social transformations occurring in rural areas since the nineteenth century in terms of depopulation and weakening of local, agricultural communities. Highlighting the material divide that separates urban centres and rural areas, the article suggests that the organization of a food festival is an effective grassroots festive strategy adopted by rural communities in order to mitigate and counter the impact of rural marginalization and its consequences (i.e. depopulation, aging, isolation, and impoverishment). As such, and considering the impact of rural marginalization over the entire country, the research suggests this is a key reason for the propagation of this form of festival in Italy. Overall, the article opens the ground for exploring further aspects of the role played by food festivals, in building the local cultural, social and economic capital of the communities.

The article opens by contextualizing the phenomenon of food festivals in the contemporary Italian foodscape. Considering the relevance of the phenomenon, it examines the reason for the proliferation. To address this question, it explores the ethnographic case of San Rocco and discusses the motivation behind its Tagliatelle Festival. In so doing, the article draws an ethnographic comparison suggesting that food festivals be interpreted as a grassroots strategy for socio-economic rural integration.

Food festivals in the Italian foodscape

It is not a recent story: internationally, Italy is associated with the imagery of artistic heritage (Dickie 1996), but also with foods and foodways (Naccarato, Nowak, Eckert, 2017; Parasecoli, 2014; Scarpellini, 2016). A substantial body of literature (e.g. Capatti and Montanari, 2003; Cipolla, Di Francesco, 2013; Counihan, 2004; Grasseni, 2013; Montanari, 1994; 2013; Naccarato, Nowak, Eckert 2017; Parasecoli, 2004, 2014; Scarpellini, 2016) explores the reality of the Italian foodscape. Local, environmental, and cultural embeddedness is the main distinguishing trait of the culinary Italian tradition. This diversity makes the Italian foodscape a juxtaposition of specific, local peculiarities (Capatti, Montanari, 2003) with strong differences between the coast and inland, and between Northern and Southern regions. This landscape of culinary differences is bound together by common threads, concerning, for example, the very way in which foods and dishes are categorized and distinguished, the meal is divided into different courses, and people share the meal around the table (e.g.Capatti, Montanari, 2003; Cipolla, Di Francesco, 2013; Sassatelli, 2019; Scarpellini, 2016). All these elements distinguish a common lexicon that underpins and binds together the different Italian gastronomies. Within this intricate tangle of ingredients, tastes, and foodways, there is a further element that unites the communities of the entire peninsula and reaffirms and strengthens their distinct (food) localisms: the celebration of food festivals.

The organization of food festivals is a modern phenomenon that emerged following the so-called Economic Boom of the 1960s and 1970s (Fontefrancesco, 2018a). It has bloomed in recent years with the proliferation of new events. They can come under different names (e.g. *Sagra, Festa, Festival*, etc.) but they all share a commonality: they are public feasts organized by rural communities in order to promote specific culinary products (ingredients, such as local vegetables or meat, or dishes, such as boiled meat or fried fish) in a clear attempt to attract culinary tourists (Long, 2004). Moreover, all these events, to which I will refer generically as 'food festivals' despite their Italian names, centre on a specific culinary product which is served in temporary restaurants arranged by the organizers. Around the core attraction of the restaurant, every festival may include further sacred and secular elements, such as masses, concerts, dances, exhibitions, markets, and so on.

The complete list of food festivals that take place during a summer weekend in an Italian province can occupy a long column in the section of the local newspaper dedicated to upcoming events. Just considering the Province of Alessandria, one of the key areas of my research in the North-western part of Italy (e.g. Fontefrancesco 2014;

2018a; 2019), an ideal list would provide for events such as festivals of Agnolotti stuffed pasta, Beer, Celery, Deep-fried meat, Donkey Salami, Gnocchi potato pasta, Onion, Pizza, Potato, Wine, Zucchini, etc. The list of festivals could go on, enumerating events focused on other vegetables and culinary preparations, meats and fishes, some of them deeply rooted in local tradition, others taken from places afar. Across the country (Santini, Cavicchi, Belletti, 2013), the images and colours of the advertising are a visual rhythm which marks the urbanised space in the summer; the names of the festivals and their foods outline a festive foodscape in which traditional dishes are put side by side novel foods and new culinary inventions: a gastronomic landscape in which the complex tangle of food and foodways that characterized Italian history (Scarpellini, 2016) collapse into a creative and tasty visual list of gastronomic opportunities.

The list of gastronomic opportunities attests to the relevance of food festivals for the country, raising questions concerning the meaning of these celebrations and the motivations that move hundreds of communities, every year, to organize the events, prepare foods and locations, and celebrate the feasts. Food festivals, in particular those hinging on local, traditional products, appear to be ritual tools used by local communities for creating their collective memory and heritage (Di Francesco, 2013). In so doing, the celebrated foods become ethno-commodities (Comaroff, Comaroff, 2009) encapsulated within a precise attempt to generate touristic attractivity. Thus, the festivals should be considered not just as a rite that lives solely within the bounded space of the celebrating community but framed within the special context of tourism that connects the community with the external world. In fact, as Skinner and Theodossopoulos (2011) show, tourism is a transformative dynamic that modifies a community and its territory on the basis of a non-linear negotiation between the expectation of the host community and the visitors. The forms of a food festival, hence, are the result of an unspoken negotiation between the community and the festival's public. This nature of food festivals highlights the effort of a community to create a supplementary link with the external world, and in particular with the urban centres, in order to gain a socio-cultural, although transitory, prominence. Following Ferguson (2002), this attempt to overcome a perceived disconnection can be revelatory of the cultural tension that underpins the festivals, thus offering a response to the yet unanswered question about why there are so many food festivals in Italy today.

San Rocco and its Festival

The festival

The mid-2010s. It is a special Saturday afternoon in August in San Rocco. People crowd the main square of the town, a rectangle the size of a football pitch. The square is generally used as a car park for most of the week and on Wednesday mornings the weekly market is held there. However, this weekend the local Pro Loco, a civic membership association of volunteers aimed at enhancing the quality of living in town and promoting the touristic attractivity of the community, is organizing the annual *Sagra delle Tagliatelle* (Tagliatella pasta festival), 'fresh pasta ribbons. Originally made simply with flour and water, now mostly made with the addition of eggs' (Gho, 2010, p.535).

Twenty people, most of them around their fifties, are working there, setting up the location and preparing the tables. Tables and chairs are located under a commercial marquee located at the centre of the square. There is space for about two hundred people. Four big halogen lights located at the corners of the structure illuminate the ground, while some strings of LED lights like the ones used for Christmas decorations hang over each table. While most of the people are setting up the place, five of them are working in the kitchen, a field kitchen borrowed from the local branch of the Civil Protection Force. They are roasting some meat, frying some vegetables, and preparing the tagliatelle sauce they are going to serve tonight. The organizers expect at least two hundred people, some from the village, but the majority from nearby towns. 'Everybody knows our tagliatelle and how good it is', explains Pino, the president of Pro Loco, a farmer in his sixties. 'They come here every year to enjoy the meal and the beautiful landscape of our place'.

The village

San Rocco lies on the bank of an Apennine river, one of the tributaries of the Tanaro River. The village dwells at the bottom of the valley and is crossed by a provincial road, surrounded by mountains that divide two regions in the North-western part of Italy: Piedmont and Liguria. Few fields are still cultivated in the valley, while the steep flanks of the mountains, once cultivated with grapes, corn, garden vegetables and potatoes, or used for pasture, have been reclaimed by the forest. In the past fifty years, the village has lost nearly three-quarters of its population, reaching the present population of about two hundred people. As in other villages nearby (Fontefrancesco 2019), young people have migrated to the main cities of the North, moving away from the village and leaving empty houses behind. Vito Teti (2011) described the impact of emigration from Southern Italy that left swathes of land and villages unpopulated. A similar phenomenon also occurred in this part of the country (Porcellana et al. 2016; Viazzo, Zanini 2014) due to the harsh living conditions experienced by the population similar to those recorded by Nuto Revelli (1977). Pino remembers his youth in the 1970s:

> Here in the village we were, I don't know, fifty kids. Today it is a marvellous year when we have a new-born. We are few and the number is even smaller if I consider those people that are working

in the village. I would say, maybe there are ten people working here, the others commute every day. However, we have the best tagliatelle in the valley and have the festival to make people come here and know our land. And the festival is also great for getting the community together. It makes us strong. That's the reason I love it.

The festival and its impact

That night, over two hundred and fifty people come. Over 100 kg of tagliatelle, which a group of women of the village prepared during the past two weeks, are sold. Together with the tagliatelle, people have salami, roasted pork, potatoes, salad, and cakes, plus some hundred litres of wine and beer. Visitors come mostly from a maximum of 30 km away. However, there are also a couple of Dutch families: 'They have a small house a few kilometres from the village and every year they attend the festival', Pino explains.

The Tagliatelle Festival is a local event, but can animate the valley and its few communities, filling them with expectations: expectations concerning meetings with friends, having fun, enjoying good food and good wine, but also expectations concerning the future of the community and its role within the broader geography of towns and people. 'Here in San Rocco we start working early in the spring for the festival', explains Arturo, one of the volunteers of the Pro Loco.

> We start discussing the future menu, where to buy the products and the ingredients, the publicity and the music performers to invite. The work goes on and around June the women of the village gather during the week to make the tagliatelle. It took a couple of months to make them: the ones we cook and the ones we sell during the festival. Then we have to decorate the square, prepare the kitchen, cook, serve at night, and clean everything after the feast...we [volunteers of the Pro Loco] are few but we manage all the organization.

The organizers estimate that all the families of the village are involved in the organization of the event: 'most of the women work in the kitchen, men do the hard work moving furniture and preparing the place, young people... those few who still live here... are involved in serving, cooking, and managing the music and the dancing', Pino comments. 'For many of the local farmers, to participate in the organization is their way of having holidays'. The wide participation shows the relevance the festival has for the entire community and the centrality for the community calendar (Grimaldi, 1993). It is, in fact, the fulcrum of the social gathering of the village population during a large part of the year (from late winter to autumn), and the centre of people's attention. The cultural pregnancy of the event can be read, not just in the number of hours of voluntary work spent by the members of the community,

but by the festival's capacity of stirring emotion among the people of San Rocco and contributing to building hope for the community's future. 'If the festival ends, it will be the final *coup de grâce* for the village', pointed out Arturo.

A collective strategy

The Tagliatelle Festival in San Rocco is a collective ritual at the centre of a community's method of hope. Miyazaki (2004) suggests looking at hope not so much as a feeling, but as a specific cultural process, the method of hope, that corresponds to an individual and collective method of radical cognitive reorientation. Hope is a proactive and generative attitude toward tomorrow (Lempert 2018). On a collective level, through hope, a community prefigures its future and plans the actions needed to reach its goals. On an individual level, it is functional to define a life path and maintain self-esteem and, as suggested by Miyazaki and Riles (2005), it is fundamental for supporting the individuals' capacity to orient their knowledge and autobiography (Okely, 1992) towards the achievement of the specific objectives that underpin the imagination of the future.

The festival in San Rocco cherishes the community's hope. In so doing, it reinforces the community's social cohesion (Parla, 2019; Schiffauer, 2019), and helps the local people to face the uncertainty of the present and the effects of the transformation the community went through in the past several decades. In fact, as Pino pointed out about the significance of the festival for San Rocco*:* 'To understand it [our festival], you need, first of all, to taste our tagliatelle. But then, you need to do another thing. You must understand this place and the real meaning of its change. *Chang*e indeed has been affecting San Rocco and its territory: a continuous decrease in the population, the rising number of abandoned houses, and the fast expansion of the forest where once there were tilled fields'. The words of Pino may mirror the 'apocalyptic turn' (Lynch, 2012), that afflicts broad segments of Western society. However, they are more than an expression of a growing anxiety about what is to come. They are a formulation of the sense of place (Basso, 1996), the sensorial and biographical understanding of the local landscape, shared by most of the people in the village who witnessed the modification of San Rocco over the past three or more decades.

A community of small farmers until the Second World War, the village, as well as the valley, lost a large part of its population in the 1950s and '60s, due to hundreds of people moving away from the village and the valley (overall San Rocco and its neighbouring villages lost around 60% or their population in the period), leaving behind a life as peasants as well as their houses. Fast, the higher grazing land was covered by trees, such as acacias, ash, and hornbeams, as well as other plants that are part of the contemporary Apennine flora (Molinari, Cevasco, 2009). The empty houses and the new forest are haunting reminders (Stewart, 1996) of the past and visible signs of

the fragility of the present for people born before the 1970s, which includes the majority of the inhabitants of San Rocco (average age of the population is around 50 years).

The abandonment perceived by the community expressed a growing disconnection (Ferguson, 2002) between the locals and the outside world. When asked about what the key problem for the community is at the present time, rather than issues concerning local impoverishment or exploitation, people in San Rocco point to their marginalization within the wider context of the country. For San Rocco marginality is not a form of passive exclusion from the global economy and society, as suggested by Narosky (2016) in reviewing the main transformation of peasant communities debated in anthropology. It is the effect of its inclusion that is becoming increasingly detrimental to the preservation of the community and its environment. Faced with the possibility of leaving the village, people abandoned the valley, thus triggering a marginalisation of the remaining community. Depopulation, aging and impoverishment are the result of the actions undertaken by members of the community in their active negotiation of their participation within the wider context of the country; a negotiation that passes by having to abandon the town and leaving behind an uncanny and disturbing landscape of absences (Fontefrancesco, 2015) that visualises the crisis the community is experiencing.

It is in the context of this crisis that the Festival should be understood, because, as Pino remembers, '[The Tagliatelle Festival] started about twenty years ago when we felt we had to do something to keep our community alive'. The Festival was and still is meant to be a symbolic and social response to this status, being a collective gathering able to strengthen the social bonds among members of the community through participation in the event, as well as an event able to reinforce the fame, therefore the cultural importance, of the community within the wider world.

Against rural marginalization

The experience of San Rocco can be taken as an example to understand the general demographic trend which rural communities experienced across the country during the twentieth century. Despite the constant rise in productivity of Italian agriculture (Farolfi, Fornasari, 2011), this sector plays a minimum role in the present job market: while in 1871 over 70% of the active population was working in agriculture, and around 40% continued to do so in 1951 (Bravo, 2001), in 2019 only 5% is still working in agriculture (ISTAT,2019).

This decline is, above all, the result of the precarious condition and the deep technological transformation associated with agriculture in the past century. Between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the early 1920s, Italy experienced the first massive wave of emigration from the countryside, directed largely abroad. About 15 million people left the country during this period (Audenino, Tirabassi, 2008). After the Second World War, without the limits to internal mobility that were imposed by the Fascist Regime, another wave of emigration occurred from rural areas. This time, people were mostly directed to Rome and the industrial cities of the North, in particular Genoa, Milan, and Turin (Bravo 2001, pp.115–26). The process started in the 1950s, had its peak during the 1960s and 1970s, and only came to an end in the 1990s (Grimaldi, 1996). The rural exodus (Rosental, Casarini 1991) may be stopped, but at present young people still generally move away from the countryside seeking better job opportunities and services. Despite widespread public rhetoric celebrating a renewed participation of young people in agriculture, still, in 2019 (ISTAT, 2019), the sector is struggling to attract new generations and is facing a dramatic process of senilization (Cagliero, Novelli, 2012). This has led to a vicious circle that is dangerous for rural development. It combines reduced profits, aging, and impoverishment in a dynamic that is unable to trigger new investments and offers the farmers an uncertain perspective on the future.

San Rocco is just one example of a community located in this rural periphery that is facing challenges with respect to depopulation, aging, isolation, and impoverishment. In 2013, the national government formulated the first plan, the so-called Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (National Strategy for Internal Areas), to counter the difficulties experienced by rural communities, focusing on specific objectives and a few specific target areas (Vincenti, 2018). However, most of the communities have only been marginally supported by the plan or by similar, but smaller, actions undertaken by regional councils. In the face of this situation, while scholars are pointing out possible alternative or complementary strategies to revitalize marginal areas (e.g. De Rossi, 2018), local communities are developing their own grassroots responses.

In the wake of new demand for 'genuine', 'artisanal', and 'traditional' foods coming from urban centres (Corvo, 2015), tourism and gastronomy (Corvo, Fontefrancesco, 2019) appear as a 'light at the end of the tunnel' (Fontefrancesco, 2018b). Thus, in this context, it is possible to draw an ethnographic conclusion about why food festivals are multiplying. It is not just a matter of gastronomic fashion trends. The ethnographic window (del Mármol, Vaccaro, 2015, p.23) of San Rocco suggests that food festivals are a key grassroots strategy against marginalization and its consequences, which represents one fundamental reason for their proliferation.

Conclusion

Concluding, the case of San Rocco and its Tagliatelle Festival explains why a food festival is a strategy for countering the perceived decline of a contemporary Italian community. The case study of San Rocco can be viewed in

the broader picture of the country and the increasing marginalization rural areas are facing. Here, marginalization is not caused by a wider political and social context that actively excludes the rural community (Perlman, 1976), or the result of failed social integration between the rural and the urban (Narotzky, 2016), but rather a detrimental integration between the two. Like San Rocco, most rural communities are experiencing the same issues concerning depopulation, aging, isolation, and impoverishment. Making an ethnographic comparison, therefore, the article suggested that the contemporary proliferation of gastronomic festivals is not a matter of fortuitous circumstances or fashion, but rather it is directly correlated to the ongoing rural marginalization, in so far as to make the organization of such events a widespread grassroots strategy for supporting the life and social integrity of the community.

The article offered its contribution in considering a festival not just as a ritual event, part of the system of practices and believes of a bounded community, but as an economic and political act deeply embedded in the public agenda of the community and the nation. It has not explored the biographical motivations that encourage people to get involved as organizers or visitors of the event, nor has it discussed the role played by the festival in creating a local identity or supporting the local economy – rather, it has clarified the socio-cultural emergency these events deal with, leaving the task of shedding light on the other topics to subsequent contributions. The article opens a final question. In the context of rural marginalisation, should we view the proliferation of food festivals as the last masque before the Red Death comes, as in the famous short story by Poe (Poe 1938, pp.269–73)? Or is it a sign of an incipient rural renaissance? The answer may lie in the middle of these extremes, swinging from one to the other based on the success of the festivals in animating, involving and keeping together the communities in the face of their progressive waning. A festival can provide a stronger contribution if it is integrated with other, subsequent public and private initiatives meant to curb a new socio-cultural centrality for the community.

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