

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Agriculture Marketing Through Cheese: Distribution Strategies from Local Producers in the Ibores, Extremadura, Spain

Author: Francesc Fusté-Forné

Citation:

Fusté-Forné, F. (2022). Agriculture marketing through cheese: Distribution strategies from local producers in the Ibores, Extremadura, Spain. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 17(4), 86–94.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



**BRANDON
UNIVERSITY**
Founded 1899



Agriculture Marketing Through Cheese: Distribution Strategies from Local Producers in the Ibores, Extremadura, Spain

Francesc Fusté-Forné
University of Girona
Girona, Spain
francesc.fusteforme@udg.edu

Abstract

This paper analyses the relationships between agriculture and marketing through the case of cheese. Cheese is a manifestation of *locale*, and cheese marketing is a way to protect and promote cheese heritages and landscapes. Drawing from the distribution strategies of local cheese producers in the region of the Ibores, in the province of Cáceres (Extremadura, Spain), this research analyses the selling of the *countryside* from the supply side. Results show the relevance of direct sales and gourmet stores and reveal a need for collaborative work between the stakeholders.

Keywords: Culinary heritage, food marketing, rural tourism

Commercialisation de l'agriculture par le fromage : Stratégies de distribution des producteurs locaux dans les Ibores, Estrémadure, Espagne

Résumé

Cet article analyse les relations entre agriculture et commercialisation à travers le cas du fromage. Le fromage est une manifestation du terroir et la commercialisation du fromage est un moyen de protéger et de promouvoir les patrimoines et les paysages fromagers. S'inspirant des stratégies de distribution des producteurs de fromage locaux de la région des Ibores, dans la province de Cáceres (Estrémadure, Espagne), cette recherche analyse la vente de la campagne du côté de l'offre. Les résultats montrent la pertinence de la vente directe et des épiceries fines, et révèlent un besoin de travail collaboratif entre les acteurs.

Mots clés : Patrimoine culinaire, marketing alimentaire, tourisme rural

1.0 Introduction, Objective, and Method

While cheese-based landscapes have shaped societies and territories over the course of history (e.g., Kindstedt, 2012), it has been only during the last decades that academics and practitioners have paid growing attention to the configuration of cheese as an object of place representation (Fusté-Forné, 2020a), which contributes to the construction of destination identity (Ren, 2011). In particular,

Berno and Fusté-Forné (2021) identify cheese as a specific cultural construct. Also, Kessler (2010) states that cheese is an *artefact* of the land and a *living* piece of geography. This paper is focused on the marketing strategies of agricultural products based on *Queso Ibores* (Ibores cheese). Ibores cheese is produced in the region of the Ibores, in the province of Cáceres, Extremadura, in south-western Spain, and it is sold under a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO).

Previous research has highlighted the significance of quality labels for rural development (Tregear et al., 2007). The European Union's geographical indications protect and promote “the names of products that originate from specific regions and have specific qualities or enjoy a reputation linked to the production territory” (European Commission, 2022). In this sense, a PDO does not only identify products in a specific geographical area but also recognises the know-how of local producers (Reinders et al., 2019). For example, this is the case of cheese produced in the Portuguese region of Alentejo (Dias, 2022) or the Spanish region of Galicia (Fusté-Forné, 2016). A product with a quality label represents a product that values landscapers—the producers, and the landscape—the region (Marcoz et al., 2016).

The objective of this paper is to analyse the role of agricultural products from a marketing perspective. In particular, the study focuses on the distribution strategies of local cheese producers. The method is based on a qualitative design. The Protected Designation of Origin *Queso Ibores* has five cheese producers. All of them were contacted, and three of them accepted to participate in the study. The researcher carried out field work in October 2021, which consisted of interviews with the technical director of the Protected Designation of Origin and three cheese producers. In addition, direct visits to selling places were conducted to supplement the empirical work with a visual autoethnography approach (Scarles, 2010) to provide a more robust understanding of the results through pictures (Fusté-Forné, 2020b).

2.0 The Ibores Cheese

Ibores cheese has been produced since the fifteenth century. According to the Dirección General de Turismo (2020), “there is evidence of its presence on Thursdays of each week in Trujillo since July 14, 1465, the date when King Henry IV of Castile granted this city the privilege of holding a market” (p. 50). The Ibores cheese is made of goat milk produced in the region of the Ibores, located in the province of Cáceres. In particular, Ibores cheese is a fatty cheese, made of raw milk from goats from the Serrana, Verata and Retinta breeds. It is a cylindrical-shaped cheese, and its rind can be natural or smeared with oil or paprika, and its flavor is buttery (Diputación de Cáceres, 2021).

The production area is in the Cáceres regions of Los Ibores, Las Villuercas, La Jara, and Trujillo, in a landscape that combines valleys, forests and cultivated land (see Figure 1), in the Villuercas Ibores Jara Geopark (UNESCO, 2022). The area divides the basins of the Tajo and the Guadiana River. According to the Diputación de Cáceres (2021), “holm oak meadows and abrupt mountain ranges are home to a transhumant cattle herd capable of withstanding harsh grazing conditions” (p. 4). These landscapes represent the environment where the animals are grazing and feeding, and they are the source of the quality of dairy production, and cheeses, which are a fundamental basis of the regional economy (Junta de Extremadura, 2021).

Figure 1. The agricultural landscapes of the Ibores region.



Source: Author.

Ibores cheese was recognized as a Protected Designation of Origin in 2005 by the European Union (Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, 2022). This was achieved after collaborative work between milk producers, cheese makers, and the public administration, aiming to safeguard a traditional product (Junta de Extremadura, 2021). Thus, from a product (cheese) that represents the brand of a region (the Ibores), the quality label emerged as a path to protect and promote cheese as part of the rural landscapes of Cáceres (Diputación de Cáceres, 2008).

3.0 Results

Data collection allowed us to understand the marketing of agricultural products through the case of local cheese producers and their distribution strategies. The representative of the PDO *Queso Ibores* revealed that cheese producers have two lines of production and, thus, commercialization. They have cheeses certified with the quality label (see Figure 2) and cheeses without the certification. The production region is small, and it encompasses the four counties Los Ibores, Las Villuercas, La Jara, and Trujillo. Five cheese producers and twenty-five farmers represent the stakeholders of the *Queso Ibores* value chain. Added to the quality control, the PDO plans and develops the promotion of Ibores cheese through fairs and tasting events. For example, the Trujillo cheese fair (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2019) is the most relevant example that contributes creating brand awareness and promoting the territory. In relation to the sales distribution, the technical director of the PDO explains that 45% of the cheese is sold in the region of Extremadura, Spain (where they highlight the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Madrid), and 10% of the cheese is exported.

Figure 2. Ibore cheese sold under the PDO *Queso de Ibore*.



Source: Author.

Results show that the PDO is a platform to protect and promote a product based on its historical values. This also represents a way to preserve the knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. However, the representative of the PDO also warned that the generational changeover in the production processes of agricultural activities is a challenge that needs more attention from public and private stakeholders. In particular, he mentioned that one hundred farmers were active two decades ago, while now only twenty-five remain open. In this sense, the public administration aims to build a stronger collaboration between farmers, cheesemakers, and sellers in order to improve rural lifestyles, and facilitate economic and social well-being. This includes strategies for the creation, management, and marketing of agricultural products as a source of rural development.

It is important to note that all the interviewees reported that sales in Extremadura highly depend on visitors from Madrid. The producers explain that there is a growing interest in cultural and food tourism, which is crucial to increase the relevance of cheese as a product that participates in the configuration of destinations in the countryside. This is the case with Extremadura. Cheese distribution is established in specialty food and gourmet boutiques which are gatekeepers of local products—which pay tribute to local people, places, and practices as a source of visitor attraction. Also, direct sales (see Figure 3) are a relevant distribution channel where customers have a direct contact with the producers as the soul of cheese and the *landscape*.

At local and regional levels, cheese is also distributed in restaurants and the hospitality sector—for example, the ‘Paradores’, which are a type of accommodation, managed by the national Government, that protects and promotes the local culture and nature, and thus creates menus which are based on the availability of local products and the incorporation of traditional dishes—for example, a cheese table which conveys the sense of a place through local-based cheeses. However, according to the participants, the volume of sales in restaurants is smaller than in small agri-food stores. They explain that this happens because while a store sells a 400-gram cheese to a single customer, a

restaurant uses a single 400 gram cheese in different dishes, and a piece of cheese lasts longer for them. However, the producers also acknowledged that the use of cheese in restaurants is growing, not only for cheese tables but also for desserts and sauces.

Figure 3. A direct selling point of Ibores cheese.



Source: Author.

Finally, the cheesemakers mentioned that the cheese sold with the quality label is much more successful because the certification provides prestige to the agricultural product, and also consumer trust. However, they stated that cheese should be better promoted as a destination landmark. Also, they recognize that some towns in the Ibores are far away from tourist spots in the region. One of the producers says that “visit here [the cheese facility] means to visit a hidden place in a hidden town in a hidden region” (personal communication, October 4, 2021). While this is a problem in terms of distribution, it also emerges as a way to discover a hidden gem—the cultural and natural landscapes of the Ibores, whose destination value proposition also relies on cheese.

Figure 4. A road sign in the town of Deleitosa (Cáceres, Extremadura).



Source: Author.

4.0 Conclusion

This research analyses the marketing strategies of cheese as an example of a local agricultural product. Cheese has a deep connection with the landscape where it is made, and it reflects the historical and traditional knowledge applied to the production and consumption dynamics. Direct sales and gourmet stores are the most successful distribution strategies because they represent the first-hand experience between sellers and customers. First, direct sales promote a close encounter between the cheesemaker and the visitor, which results in a memorable food experience (Sidali et al., 2015). Second, gourmet stores enhance the knowledge transfer ‘from farm to fork’ based on experts who manage and market the products of a particular agricultural region. In this sense, a local product engages people with proximity food (Fusté-Forné et al., 2020) and short supply chains as part of the circular economy (Jurgilevich et al., 2016; Kiss et al., 2019).

Cheese production contributes to the reduction of the degradation of rural landscapes and lifestyles (García-Hernández et al., 2022). This is anticipated to be crucial from the perspective of quality products, which show a strong link to place, also in terms of marketing—the place itself appears in the name of the product. Also, the collaboration between stakeholders contributes to the survival of identity products. For example, the pairing of local beverages and foods is a driver of cooperation between producers (for example, cheese and wine), which increases the visibility of the territory amidst the challenges that small farmers and growers face. This also refers to product innovation—for example, cheeses that are flavoured with local products such as pepper or thyme. In addition, the role of restaurants as marketing ambassadors (Min & Lee, 2014) of the *locale* should be further explored, as well as the motivations of visitors to learn about local landscapes through local agriculture. Digital marketing strategies are still scarce and also represent an opportunity for future research.

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Department of Business, University of Girona.

References

- Berno, T., & Fusté-Forné, F. (2020). Imaginaries of cheese: revisiting narratives of local produce in the contemporary world. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 23(5), 608–626. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11745398.2019.1603113>
- Dias, J. (2022). The use of cheese from Alentejo in Portuguese gastronomy: A travel through history. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 29, 100579. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2022.100579>
- Diputación de Cáceres [Provincial Council of Cáceres]. (2008). *Alimentos de Cáceres* [Food from Cáceres]. Cáceres, Spain: Author.
- Diputación de Cáceres [Provincial Council of Cáceres]. (2021). *La tradición del buen gusto* [The tradition of good taste]. Cáceres, Spain: Author.
- Dirección General de Turismo [General Directorate of Tourism]. (2020). *Ruta del Queso de Extremadura* [Extremadura Cheese Route]. Junta de Extremadura.
- European Commission. (2022). *Agriculture and rural development*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/agriculture-and-rural-development_en

- Folgado-Fernández, J. A., Di-Clemente, E., & Hernández-Mogollón, J. M. (2019). Food festivals and the development of sustainable destinations. The case of the cheese fair in Trujillo (Spain). *Sustainability*, 11(10), 2922. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11102922>
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2016). Cheese Tourism: local produce with Protected Designation of Origin in the region of Galicia, Spain. In C. M. Hall and S. Gössling (Eds.), *Food Tourism and Regional Development: Networks, Products and Trajectories* (pp. 252–262). Routledge.
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2020a). Savouring place: Cheese as a food tourism destination landmark. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 13(2), 177–194. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-07-2019-0065>
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2020b). Say Gouda, say cheese: Travel narratives of a food identity. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 22, 100252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2020.100252>
- Fusté-Forné, F., Medina, F. X., & Mundet i Cerdan, L. (2020). La proximidad de los productos alimentarios: turismo gastronómico y mercados de abastos en la Costa Daurada (Cataluña, España) [The proximity of food: gastronomy tourism and local markets in Costa Daurada (Catalonia, Spain)]. *Revista de Geografía Norte Grande*, (76), 213–231. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-34022020000200213>
- García-Hernández, C., Ruiz-Fernández, J., & Rodríguez-Gutiérrez, F. (2022). Geographical indications in cheese mountain areas: Opportunity or threat to landscape and environmental conservation? The case of Cabrales (Spain). *Applied Geography*, 146, 102753. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2022.102753>
- Junta de Extremadura. (2021). *Denominación de Origen Protegida ‘Queso Ibores’* [Protected Designation of Origin ‘Ibores Cheese’]. Extremadura, Spain: Author.
- Jurgilevich, A., Birge, T., Kentala-Lehtonen, J., Korhonen-Kurki, K., Pietikäinen, J., Saikku, L., & Schösler, H. (2016). Transition towards circular economy in the food system. *Sustainability*, 8(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su8010069>
- Kessler, B. (2010). *Goat Song: A Seasonal Life, a Short History of Herding, and the Art of Making Cheese*. New York: Scribner.
- Kindstedt, P. (2012). *Cheese and culture: a history of cheese and its place in western civilization*. Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Kiss, K., Ruskai, C., & Takács-György, K. (2019). Examination of short supply chains based on circular economy and sustainability aspects. *Resources*, 8(4), 161. <https://doi.org/10.3390/resources8040161>
- Marcoz, E. M., Melewar, T. C., & Dennis, C. (2016). The value of region of origin, producer and protected designation of origin label for visitors and locals: The case of fontina cheese in Italy. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 18(3), 236–250. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2000>
- Min, K. H., & Lee, T. J. (2014). Customer satisfaction with Korean restaurants in Australia and their role as ambassadors for tourism marketing. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 31(4), 493–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.877412>

- Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación. (2022). *Denominación de Origen Protegida Queso Ibores* [Protected Designation of Origin Ibores cheese]. https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/alimentacion/temas/calidad-diferenciada/dop-igp/queso_lacteo/DOP_queso_ibores.aspx
- Reinders, M. J., Banovic, M., & Guerrero, L. (2019). *Introduction*. In C. M. Galanakis (Ed.), *Innovations in traditional foods* (pp. 1–26). Elsevier.
- Ren, C. (2011). Non-human agency, radical ontology and tourism realities. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 38(3), 858–881. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.12.007>
- Scarles, C. (2010). Where words fail, visuals ignite: Opportunities for visual autoethnography in tourism research. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 37(4), 905–926. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2010.02.001>
- Sidali, K. L., Kastenholz, E., & Bianchi, R. (2015). Food tourism, niche markets and products in rural tourism: Combining the intimacy model and the experience economy as a rural development strategy. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 23(8-9), 1179–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2013.836210>
- Tregear, A., Arfini, F., Belletti, G., & Marescotti, A. (2007). Regional foods and rural development: The role of product qualification. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 23(1), 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2006.09.010>
- UNESCO. (2022). *Villuercas Ibores Jara Unesco Global Geopark*. <https://en.unesco.org/global-geoparks/villuercas-ibores-jara>