

Intangible heritage and agri-food economies in a festive perspective. The 'sagre' and food festivals in inner areas of Sicily (draft).

Abstract

Over the last decade, cultural festivals have garnered increasing interest from local governments as part of a strategy to restructure and revitalize the economy of the inner and rural areas in southern Europe. These areas have been significantly affected by depopulation and disintegration of traditional agricultural and food economies. Agro-food fairs, known as "sagre" are significant cultural events in the small villages of the rural areas in the Mezzogiorno (southern Italy regions). These events play a crucial role in highlighting the cultural heritage of the territory by promoting the local products. The "sagre" encompass more than just the exhibition and sampling of these products; they also include artistic, recreational, cultural, and rural tourism activities, providing a chance for both local community interactions and visitor attractiveness.

Despite the potential of "sagre" and agro-food fairs in the valorisation of local intangible heritage, through the dissemination of techniques and products historically rooted in the territory, it is relevant to critically analyse these events within the discussion on the quest for authenticity and evaluate their effectiveness in strategies for the development of rural areas undergoing depopulation processes. From this perspective, this paper aims to analyse the significant "sagre" of the internal Sicani area in southern Sicily, based on the testimonies of local actors involved in the associative and productive sphere. Specifically the cases of "Sagra della Pesca di Bivona", "Sagra del Formaggio di Santo Stefano Quisquina", "Festa dell'Agustu di Alessandria della Rocca", "Sagra della Guastedda di San Biagio Platani" and "Festa dell'Olio di Lucca Sicula" will be reviewed.

1. Introduction

Italian internal areas face various developmental challenges, including limited access to essential services, economic decline, and depopulation. In response, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), a national policy aligned with European cohesion guidelines, proposes several strategic dimensions for implementing development actions in these regions. One key strategic dimension is tourism, alongside culture and nature.

Both the SNAI and various national, regional, and local public entities emphasize a form of tourism focused on culture, aiming to create minimal environmental impact while simultaneously stimulating the economy and enhancing local cultural heritage. To generate positive outcomes in cultural tourism, it is crucial to enhance the cultural assets of these internal areas, specifically by improving the offering of cultural and creative events. The Sicilian Region recognizes enogastronomic events as initiatives to be promoted, as they have the potential to attract new tourist flows and effectively leverage local cultural capital.

This contribution presents key concepts in the study of rural agro-food festivals in Europe, with a particular focus on Italy and Sicily. Among these concepts is the notion of "typicality" and the typical local product. The paper offers definitions of the types of agro-food events aimed at economic and tourism promotion, as well as the definition of "sagra" in Italy as a particular type of event. The social and economic impacts of these events, as observed in various studies and research, are then discussed, particularly in relation to the tourist experience associated with food products during festive activities in rural settings.

In the second section, several agro-food events in the Sicani area of Sicily are analyzed: the Tomato Festival, the Harvest Festival, the Agustu, the Terra Mia Fair, and the Proloco Expo. Through qualitative interviews, these events are described in terms of their organizational

structure, functional relationships and collaborations, the role of intangible cultural heritage through moments of transmission, dissemination, and enhancement of local products and knowledge. Finally, the challenges and future prospects of these events are reviewed.

2. Concepts

Tourism and Food

Food conveys information about its place of origin. Food-oriented tourism places value on the authenticity of these products and the traditions of rural life. This type of tourism can generate economic impacts but also enhance local awareness of these values. Indeed, interest in this type of tourism has been increasing in recent decades, and events based on these aspects are on the rise.

Typicality and Typical Local Products

The concept of local products allows the connection of typicality to a local context, linking production and sales to a nearby location. These products often boast strengths such as uniqueness, authenticity, and quality, which are increasingly demanded by consumers. Institutional recognition of these products serves both as a tool for protecting and promoting "territoriality." Local sales ensure that the product does not lose its qualities. This type of sale is often facilitated by events as *sagre*.

Places with specific productive characteristics may become the subject of patrimonialization processes as part of promotional initiatives. However, these identity reaffirmation processes also carry risks, such as dynamics of simplification and standardization, and the imposition of dominant imaginaries to meet market demands.

Definitions of Agro-Food Events

Agro-food festivals are categorized within the broader framework of modern festivals, which experienced a boom in Western countries starting in the mid-20th century, driven by economic motivations and facilitated by the development of the tourism industry and technology.

A food festival places emphasis on the food and gastronomic peculiarities of a place, often involving a certain level of community engagement, which is particularly significant in smaller or rural food festivals. Concepts such as culinary or gastronomic festivals have a stronger focus on the preparation and enjoyment of specific dishes.

Bitušíková (2023) classifies different food festivals into:

- Those linked to traditional celebrations with ritual elements (e.g., Carnival, religious events, etc.).
- Those with an economic profile associated with productions from a specific geographical area.

In Italy, some food festivals are referred to as *sagre*. Most of these follow the latter profile, being commercial events. *Sagre* are centered around a product, offered sporadically, and include other cultural and recreational activities.

Sagre serve as mechanisms for the community itself to organize productive life, establish agreements, and define common values, economies, and temporalities. They foster the building of social capital through the affirmation of a sense of place, providing opportunities for gathering and creating bonds between participants and local residents.

A concern that has emerged in some sagre is the low quality of products and limited authenticity. While it is important that each sagra adheres to these minimum standards, the concept of authenticity is often questioned because it is based on the expectation of a "true nature of things," which obscures the historical processes of creating and inventing some traditions.

Destination, Experience, and Districtuality

Among the objectives of food festivals are stimulating the economy, entrepreneurship, and increasing sales of local productions as well as existing businesses. But an equally important aspect is the creation of links between consumers/visitors and producers/exhibitors, which is central to the construction of the destination's image.

In this construction process, the atmosphere and experience evoked during the festival—whether intellectual, social, or sensory—play a key role. Satisfaction can create bonds with both the products and the place of origin, encouraging visitors to return or attracting new attendees.

One of the ways to enhance the productive economy related to food in inner areas is through proposals centered on districtuality, the creation of food districts, cultural itineraries focused on local foods, and event calendars of various types of events within a bio-district. An interesting case in the analyzed territory is the Rural Quality District of Sicani (DRQ). This district aims to promote the creation of a territorial brand in which agricultural and food products are central. Sagre and other events, although not yet included as a form of short supply chain sales, could be integrated in the future.

3. Case Studies: Sagre and Agro-Food Events in the Sicani Area

In recent years, several agro-food events have taken place across the 12 municipalities of the Sicani inner area, with at least one event occurring in each municipality annually. Between 2023 and 2024, at least 15 such events were held. Information gathered from online sources and interviews with local administrators and association members allowed for the provisional categorization of these events into four main types.

- "Harvest and Sharing Festivals," which originate from traditional harvest celebrations where a soup made from local produce was shared with the community. Today, these festivals have been revived as opportunities to promote local products and attract visitors.
- "Sagre," events that focus on a specific local food product, often prepared and consumed on-site, and some of which have a long-standing tradition.
- "Gastronomic Events," which do not focus on a single product but offer a variety of tastings that represent the territory on a broader scale.

- "Agricultural Fair," a supra-municipal and national event where agricultural equipment is displayed, and local products are tasted, with the Terra Mia Fair being a recent example in the area.

The paper presents several detailed case studies of agro-food events in the Sicani area, illustrating how these events are organized and the impacts they have on local communities:

- **Sagra del Pomodoro Siccagno in Montallegro:** This festival highlights a particular variety of tomato that requires minimal water, emphasizing sustainable agricultural practices. The event includes live demonstrations of traditional tomato processing techniques, allowing visitors to experience the authentic preparation of local foods. The festival not only promotes the unique agricultural identity of Montallegro but also strengthens community ties by involving residents in its organization.
- **Fiera Terra Mia in Ribera:** A reimagined agricultural fair that originated in the 1980s, this event focuses on promoting sustainable agriculture. It features a range of activities, including educational workshops for children, exhibitions of local products, and cultural performances. Despite its recent revival, the fair faces challenges related to limited regional reach and the need for stronger infrastructure to attract visitors from outside the immediate area.
- **Festa dell'Agustu in Alessandria della Rocca:** This event revives a traditional harvest festival that historically marked the end of the agricultural season. The festival is a community-driven initiative that involves local residents in the preparation and celebration of traditional foods. The event's emphasis on communal participation and the preservation of cultural practices makes it a valuable tool for reinforcing local identity and fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Harvest Festival of Ancient Grains, Cereals, and Legumes in Cianciana:** is organized by the municipality, with support from the Sicilian Region and the Proloco, and aims to revive traditional harvest celebrations that flourished from the 1960s to the 1990s. Due to population decline, the event had diminished but was revitalized in 2018. Previously, farmers in various neighborhoods hosted competitive feasts, cooking part of their harvest. Today, the festival is centralized, showcasing local agro-food products and crafts, and includes educational activities on sustainable traditional farming practices. The event's timing is also adjusted to accommodate the return of emigrant residents.
- **Expo delle Proloco in Cattolica Eraclea:** A new initiative aimed at bringing together various local cultural associations (Proloco) from across the Agrigento province. Each Proloco showcases its region's unique products and traditions, providing a platform for cultural exchange and promoting the broader region as a tourist destination. The expo is still in its early stages, with limited tourist impact, but it holds potential for future growth.

4. Critical Analysis: Challenges and Opportunities

The paper offers a critical analysis of the challenges faced by agro-food events in the Sicani area, as well as their potential to contribute to local development. One of the key challenges is

the region's infrastructural limitations, which restrict the ability of these events to attract tourists from outside the local area. Poor transportation links and limited promotional resources further exacerbate this issue, making it difficult for these events to achieve their full potential in terms of economic impact.

Another challenge is the need for stronger collaboration between local stakeholders. While there is a willingness to cooperate, logistical and financial constraints often hinder the development of effective partnerships. The paper highlights the importance of building robust networks of collaboration that can enhance the capacity of these events to generate economic and social benefits for the community.

Despite these challenges, the paper argues that agro-food events hold significant potential for promoting sustainable rural development. By linking cultural heritage with economic activities, these events can help to revitalize rural areas, preserve traditional knowledge, and foster a sense of community identity. However, achieving these outcomes requires careful management to balance the needs of the market with the preservation of cultural authenticity.

5. Conclusion: The Future of Agro-Food Events in Rural Development

In conclusion, the paper underscores the vital role that *sagre* and agro-food events play in the socio-economic development of rural areas like the Sicani region. These events provide a unique opportunity to promote local products, preserve cultural heritage, and attract tourists, thereby contributing to the revitalization of economically marginalized areas.

However, the success of these initiatives depends on addressing key challenges, such as improving infrastructure, enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, and ensuring the sustainability of these events in the face of economic and environmental pressures. The paper calls for a balanced approach that respects cultural authenticity while also embracing innovation and market demands. By doing so, agro-food events can continue to serve as powerful tools for rural development, fostering both economic growth and cultural preservation in regions that need it most.