



Street food in Palermo: Traditions and market perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Street food protects and promotes the history and tradition of a place. The origin of street foods largely relies on the cultural and natural landscapes that surround the environments where they are prepared and sold. Street food illustrates a culinary heritage that is embedded in the ways of life of people, both residents and visitors. Drawing on a qualitative study, the researchers conducted ten interviews with street food vendors in the city of Palermo (Sicily, Italy) in order to understand this growing phenomenon in urban environments of the Mediterranean, where the street food also brings the customers to ancient times. Results show the strategy of the entrepreneurs as street food vendors and sheds light into the practices and perceptions they have in relation to the street food past, present and future in the context of street food values.

1. Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 1989) defines street foods as “ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors and hawkers especially in streets”. Street foods are a source of community building and a driver of social interaction that add value to urban spaces (Pill, 2014). Street foods protect local food heritages and landscapes, and promote urban living (Larcher and Camerer, 2015). This research understands street food as an example of urban foodscape (Corvo, 2014) where vendors act as the guardians of the place meanings attached to the street food experiences (Fusté-Forné, 2021). While recent research urges for a more in-depth investigation of the street food phenomenon based on the street food availability in different settings (Abrahale et al., 2019), only few previous research has studied the development of street food in the city of Palermo and did it regarding the connection between street food consumption and health (Buscemi et al., 2011). This paper adds a novel approach to the understanding of street food, identity and tourism in Sicily as part of the street food conversations happening in Italy (Alfiero et al., 2017; Dana, 2017; Parasecoli, 2021).

Street food is understood from two different approaches: “the first refers to a memory of the past when poor people could eat only cheap food on the streets; the second relates to contemporary life organization, differentiated between the time devoted to work, to care and to entertainment” (Calloni, 2013, p.341). Street food in Palermo reflects both. In this sense, Oosterveer (2006) observes that food is a way of nurturing

human relationships from a cultural and social perspective. For example, street foods are able to convey some cultural and natural values of the Mediterranean diet (Buscemi et al., 2011). Also, street foods emerge as “alternatives to homemade food and are more affordable when compared with the food supplied at the restaurants” (Sezgin and Şanlıer, 2016, p.4072). Street foods are a path to pay tribute to local ingredients and dishes and they contribute to the future sustainability of local communities (Jeaheng and Han, 2020). While visitors sample street food as part of their destination experience, locals also like ready-to-eat meals amidst current ways of life (Mohamad et al., 2021).

Street food landscapes also help to defining a particular region (Nicula et al., 2018) and “many tourism destinations are exerting effort to identify initial needs and understand the reasons why street foods are capturing the interest of tourists” (Jeaheng and Han, 2020, p.641). Authors such as Chavarria and Phakdee-auksorn (2017) state that behavioral intentions of international tourists towards street foods depends on food and service quality. Food and service quality are highlighted in other studies (Mohamad et al., 2021) and the communication of ‘food quality’ increases the hedonic values of street food (Seo and Lee, 2021). Also, ‘taste value’ is a relevant attribute towards the consumption of street food (Yeap et al., 2019) together with authenticity (Jeaheng and Han, 2020). Street food is a source of place identity (Yeap et al., 2019) which does not only strengthen the relation between hosts and guests, but also between the tourism sector and the territory (Alfiero et al., 2017).

Street food is now internationally renowned offering a great variety

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of dishes appreciated by tourists, especially by young people (Islam et al., 2017). Street food is not only traditional food, but also fast food related to globalization. This paper studies traditional street food. In fact, its consumption is not a passing fashion but has ancient origins rooted in time. It is now a cultural factor and a way of life that derives from history and popular traditions. Also, it refers to the indissoluble union between peoples and the dominations that have followed one another over time. As Cirelli et al. (2005) stated, street food is a vertical food that is consumed on the feet while continuing to be a traditional food at the same time. An article from *La Repubblica* (2019) declares that the street food sector is worth 19 million in Italy, of which over 3 million in Campania and Emilia Romagna, and over 2 million in Lazio, Sicily and Lombardy. According to a survey by Coldiretti (2013), there are 2.5 billion street food consumers in the world, 35 million Italians of which 73% habitually consume street food and 45% prefer local specialties, 24% international ones (including hamburgers and hot dogs) while 4% choose ethnic products (Privitera and Nesci, 2015). As the Palermo today magazine says in 2016 for the Palermo Street Food Fest, from Thursday 15 to Sunday 18 December, there were about 350 thousand visitors to the gastronomic event and about 1000 kilos of food were produced for each stand during the four days.

One of the most interesting characteristics why tourists choose Palermo to enjoy its street food because as Maslow (1943) stated, food is a fundamental physiological need of the human being, that is, it is indispensable, and if this need is not satisfied the human body cannot function optimally. For the tourism industry, food is a pillar because the cost of food covers a third of travel expenses (Telfer and Wall, 1996). According to Quan and Wang (2004), the tourist, rather than eating to satiate, wants to live memorable experiences by eating local cuisine. Smells, aromas, unique flavors and typical places give life to a perfect picture in which street food becomes a cornerstone of gastronomic culture to the point of being considered a relevant part of cultural heritage. In fact, walking through the streets of Palermo it is easy to find stalls or food trucks where Palermo specialties are sold ready for quick consumption, both savory and sweet. The best places to experience a mix of smells, aromas and flavors are two very important markets, namely that of Ballarò and that of the Capo located in the historic center, and also Vucciria. The fry shops and the various stands are the places where you discover the identity of Palermo and its people who enchant with their sympathy and mastery in gastronomy which signifies that you cannot stay fast in one of the largest gastronomic capitals in the world.

Also, the prices of a service can influence the degree of satisfaction among customers, because every time they evaluate the given value of a purchased service, they tend to consider its price (Anderson et al., 1994). This concept fits perfectly with street food as it is usually extremely cheap. The strengths of street food dishes are that they are very cheap, can be immediately consumed and you can directly see how they are cooked. Palermo street food boasts a great variety of preparations. Some typical dishes are described, namely 'arancina', 'pane e panelle', 'crocchè', 'pani ca meusa', 'sfincione' and 'stigghiole'. Arancina, included in the list of Traditional Italian Agri-Food Products (PAT) of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF), is a small timbale of breaded rice seasoned with ragù or ham and mozzarella breaded with egg and fried. It has a conical shape, about 10 cm, or round. According to the Accademia della Crusca, the 'arancina' is the one prepared in western Sicily and in Palermo, while the final 'o' is conical (like Etna). In fact, there are over a hundred versions with pistachio and salmon, among others, and even the dessert with chocolate cream. 'Pane e panelle' is a PAT product typical of the streets of Western Sicily, and they are found in the streets of Palermo and Trapani and are famous all over the world. The panelle come from the Arab tradition and are pancakes made with chickpea flour. With parsley and abundantly salted and peppered, they are placed on a characteristic bread called 'mafalda'.

Another representative dish of the Palermo' street food traditions are the crocchè which are potato croquettes with a narrow and elongated

shape, flavored with parsley and often combined with panelle. The 'Pani ca meusa' (with spleen) is prepared by stuffing the *vastedda* (typical Sicilian soft loaf) with spleen and lung cut into small pieces, boiled and then fried in lard. To prepare this Palermitan delicacy, the spleen is placed in water and salted to clean it of blood and rinsed under running water. It is then cooked in boiling salted water for about an hour and a half. Once the process is finished, the spleen cools and is ready to be finely sliced. The *meusaru* also uses a typical equipment: a tilted pan, inside which the lard is fried while the slices of spleen and lung await at the top, which must be fried only at the time of sale. With a two-pronged fork, the fried slices are extracted from the oil, drained briefly and inserted into the *vastella*, which is also hot, and then stored under a cloth. The sandwich should be served hot, in parchment paper.

In short, street food today represents not only the soul of Palermo culture, but also the union of art and tradition of ancient recipes. The 'sfincione' is also part of Sicilian gastronomy and has been included in the list of Traditional Agri-food Products (PAT). It consists of a base of pizza dough topped with tomato sauce, onions, anchovies, oregano and, to top it off, pieces of *caciocavallo*. To make it even more special, the dough is left to rise in order to give it softness and height, the main characteristics of this dish. Others claim that the term derived from the Greek *spongos*, which means sponge. The *sfincione* pasta is very soft just like a sponge and full of bubbles inside. According to some sources (Palermo Guide, 2021, its name means sponge and seems to be the result of a contamination between Latin, Greek and Arabic. A however, it could derive from the Sicilian dialect term *sfincia* or soft. Even in this case, however, it is always its extreme softness that is referred to. It is supposed that the *sfincione* was invented by some nuns of the monastery of San Vito in Palermo and that it arose from the need to present a dish different from the usual bread that was eaten every day for the holidays. It was therefore decided to combine the bread with a series of condiments typical of peasant cuisine. Today, in fact, walking through the Palermo neighborhoods it will not be difficult to come across the typical itinerant carts (also known as *lapini*) that sell *sfincione* at any time of day. There is also a white variant, typical of the town of Bagheria (PA), and which takes the name of 'sfincione bianco' as it provides, together with the tomato sauce, the addition of *tuma* (or fresh ricotta) and breadcrumbs. This product was elected by the Bagherese community as a representative dish.

Finally, the 'stigghiola' is also included in the list of traditional Italian agri-food products (PAT) of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF) and is a typical dish of Sicilian and Palermo cuisine, which has the guts as its basic ingredient, that is the intestine of lamb or veal. The 'stigghiola' is one of those typical Sicilian dishes resulting from poor and recovered cuisine, which has now become a symbol of regional gastronomy. There are two types of lamb and veal. Those of veal (which are those commonly found in street stalls) are inserted into a skewer by folding them in an 's' shape until the skewer is completed. Those of lamb are wrapped on the stems of spring onions and parsley, bind to perfection and roasted on burning braziers. After cooking, they are cut into small pieces and served with a sprinkling of salt and lemon squeezed on top. The 'stigghiola' abounds on Sicilian tables in the period of Holy Week, when the slaughter of goats and lambs is in progress for the classic Easter preparations. The tradition of 'stigghiola' is very ancient and derives from a Greek dish called *Kokoretsi*, which is a sort of large *stigghiola* of lamb cooked on the grill, typical of the Easter period. In fact, the 'stigghiola' was already cooked in the Greek cities of the Sicilian island. It is a dish of the poor tradition: it was consumed above all by those who could not afford to buy fine meat and fish. The term 'stigghiola' derives from 'extilia', which in Latin means 'intestine', and in particular from the diminutive 'extiliola'. To complete the picture of the culinary specialties one cannot fail to mention the Palermo rotisserie. Undisputed for their fame is the so-called 'pieces' that can be consumed at any time of the day and are available in all cafes or bars in Palermo. It seems that Frederick of Swabia II, patron of gastronomic culture, has given life to this tradition by integrating many

elements of Arab cuisine, from which the island has inherited the art of frying, has given life to this tradition (Basile, 2015).

2. 'Street' conveys 'food'

2.1. The vendors in street food systems

Street food elaborations emerge as a path to protect and promote the flavors of local culinary landscapes, and street food practices contribute to the communication of the history and tradition of a place (Fusté-Forné, 2017), and the maintenance of the cultural and social fabric of a place. 'Place' is the "amalgam of destination qualities, including landscape and architecture, history and heritage and social structures and relationships" (Smith, 2015, p.221). Street food is an attribute of 'place'. According to previous research, "street food gives people a sense of community – among sellers and buyers in the open air among crowds – that is hard to replicate anywhere else. In cities everywhere, street food is at the core of peoples' common existence and identity" (Kraig and Sen, 2013, p.31). A notion of uniqueness is encapsulated in street food practices, where street food vendors are those who convey the experience values (Pill 2014).

Through hawkers, street food must convey the local food culture (Blake et al., 2010) and provide support to local farmers and growers (Corvo 2014). According to Fusté-Forné (2021), "there is a wide acknowledgement among those who study street food that gaining an understanding of food vendors' point of view is critical to understand the situation of street food in contemporary world, and how the street food producer experience is negotiated within urban environments" (pp.1-2). Street food vendors' perspectives are crucial to understand the significance of street food practices and the positioning of street food in urban environments in contemporary tourism. As previous studies did in other geographical contexts, this paper adds texture to these conversations by analysing the city of Palermo as a street food destination. In particular, the paper is focused on the storytelling drawn by street food vendors as crucial agents for the protection and promotion of street food values.

2.2. Tourism awards value to street food

Street food represents a tourism attraction for the area where it is performed because it creates an experience where tourists can gather the sense of a place. Street food is a current consumption trend with an increasing demand (Corvo, 2014). At the same time, food-based tourism awards value to food-based culinary heritages and landscapes. In this sense, "street food is one of the centerpieces of culinary tourism for people in pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences" (Kraig and Sen, 2013, p.17). While the literature has paid a growing attention to food-based tourism practices in recent decades (Ellis et al., 2018), and it is evident that street food has a growing relevant role in urban food tourism (Henderson, 2017), the study of the relationships between street food and tourism remains unexplored (Henderson, 2019).

Street food experiences also boost a direct encounter between locals and visitors, which is a source of service quality, as discussed above. Previous research has revealed how a particular local identity is transferred to visitors via street food tourism experiences. This is the case of Polish foods such as *pierogi* (Fusté-Forné, 2019). However, in the current globalized world, street food events are also placed within the intersection of *local* and *global*. For example, while street foods communicate the values of local identities, they also convey the significance of global influences, as it happens with representations of Eastern food cultures in Western countries (Fusté-Forné, 2020). In this sense, street foods respond to processes of hybridization in urban environments (Bae, 2008) due to their cosmopolitan nature. Food is an identity marker which is often negotiating its place between local and global issues (Mak et al., 2012), between local visitors and international tourists.

3. Material and methods

In light of the foregoing, this document aims to explore the phenomenon of street food in today's urban environments. The present research is based on a qualitative case study approach (Lyons, 2005). This method appears particularly appropriate for the purposes of the research. Yin (2009) has suggested that a case study is the preferred method when the focus of a research is contemporary and when addressing research questions that are preceded by 'how' and 'why'. To achieve the goal of this research, the study was conducted in the city of Palermo as explained below. The city of Palermo, in fact, boasts an ancient tradition of street food that was the result of the succession of the various dominations that have left their mark on the city. Street food is the noblest part of the Palermo gastronomy, the oldest part. It was born in Thermopoly in the Greek cities of Sicily where hot things were sold: 'quarume', 'stighiola', fried fish, mollusk balls, and boiled vegetables. In these places you could eat on the spot or you could take it in order to eat at home, so we can say that we already had 'fast food' and 'take away'.

Street food is also known throughout Sicily, both in urban environments and in agricultural towns. In agricultural centers, street food plays a different role than in urban environments as it very often also constitutes the lunch of many farmers who work all day in the countryside. Other Sicilian cities (i.e. Messina, Syracuse, Catania, Agrigento) also have a vast offer of street food sites. However, for the purposes of the research, our study focused on the city of Palermo, the capital of the Sicily Region and destination of many Italian and foreign tourists (Sgroi, 2021). Over time, street food in Palermo has had a positive impact on the city's economy. The street food outlets were always born near the 'taverns' as after eating you had to drink. In the historic center of Palermo, in the past near the 'panellari', the quarumaro' 'or other street food outlets, the 'taverns' were born in order to offer local wines (i.e. catarratto, insolia). A combination of eating and drinking which confirms the biodiversity of the Sicilian territory from which street food and wine (agricultural crops and livestock farms) derive.

From an economic point of view, the street food vendors and the 'tavernari' had the same customers. Therefore, from a strictly commercial point of view, they were two business activities that shared the same customers and therefore street food and wine, at least in the past, could be considered as food products with a joint offer. Street food has had a positive impact on the economic life of the city of Palermo both as a 'fast food' and as a 'take away'. Street food was largely sold as a food that even consumers with a low income level could afford as the price was and is within the reach of all consumers. The sale of street food, which as seen boasts ancient traditions, has reached our days and the sale of the same, albeit on a smaller scale than in the past. It represents for the consumer a moment in which he immerses himself in the gastronomic history of 'ancient' Sicily. Today in the city of Palermo street food is offered in outlets located in the historic part of the city. In particular, it should be noted that there are points of sale that offer all the Palermo street food products such as the 'Focacceria San Francesco'; specialized points for the sale of 'pane e panelle' and bread and 'meusa' (Central Station, Piazza Indipendenza, Porta Felice, La Cala); points of sale for the 'stighioli' in the suburbs and finally 'sfincione' by street vendors in the ancient markets Ballarò, Il Capo and Vucciria. The productive offer of street food is represented by a variety of points of sale that represent a unique peculiarity of its kind as it goes from specialized points of sale (only one type) to points of sale that offer all the products of street food. The research is focused on gastronomic outlets, which offer a wide range of products, from bread and panelle, stighioli, pane e meusa, croquettes, sfincione, and arancine. Specifically, we examined ten gastronomic street food outlets in the historic center of Palermo and some in the suburbs (for the stighioli).

The ten places were chosen according to the research objectives. They are selected because they are the street food centers of the city of Palermo according to the history and popular food traditions. For the

stigghiola, as mentioned, interviews were carried out outside the city center as these stores are born in the urban periphery for the cooking activity. Fig. 1 shows the location of the points of sale.

The street food vendors were contacted by the researchers in person and all agreed to conduct one-on-one interview. In particular, the semi-structured interviews were conducted directly by the researchers. The data collection work has been agreed with the owners of the activities, in order not to disturb the normal working hours. The interviewees are aged between 35 and 70 years and all of them are men. Regarding the level of education in the age up to 50 years are graduates (6 cases); in the remaining cases (over the age of 50) they all hold a lower secondary school diploma (Table 1). Each interview lasted from 15 to 30 min.

In relation to the objective of the research, and following a descriptive question on the type of products delivered by each of the vendors, the interviews aimed to explore how street food vendors integrate the role of street food in the urban context and therefore the meanings which they attribute to the phenomenon of street food, and its gastronomic and tourism values. Based on what was discussed during the literature review, and in line with the objective of the article, the interview guide was defined with ten open-ended questions to facilitate the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewees (Table 2). First of all, street food vendors were questioned about their understanding of the street food phenomenon. Second, given the observed theoretical importance, the interview was based on the understanding of 1) the implications of what street vendors sell; 2) how long have they been in business; 3) if the economic activity is the only source of income; 4) who their customers are; 5) what products are offered; 6) if the consumer demand is concentrated during the year; 7) the characteristics of the place where they are located; 8) information about the raw material for the preparation of street food; 9) impact on consumer demand caused by Covid-19; and 10) how street food sees the future.

Results were elaborated according to the objectives of the research. The data gathered during the interviews was scrutinized through transcription and the creation of tables to facilitate the qualitative analysis. Following the first processing and analysis of the data, data drivers were identified: basic strategic orientation of the entrepreneur who owns the store; business strategy at a co-corporate level and competitive strategy.

4. Results

In this section the results of the interviews are reported regarding the practices and perceptions of street food by the phenomenon sellers as

Table 1
Data of the interviewees.

	Age			Education	
	up to 40	41–50	51 to 70	High school	University
N	3	3	4	6	4

Table 2
Interview template.

1. Do you know what street food is?
2. How long have you been in this business?
3. It is your only business (your only source of income)?
4. Who are your customers?
 - o Palermitani
 - o Italians
 - o Foreigners (tourists)
5. What do you produce?
 - o Arancine
 - o Bread and panelle
 - o Croccchè
 - o Pane ca meusa
 - o Sfinzione
 - o Stigghioline
6. Is the demand concentrated or not during the calendar year?
7. Why do you sell street food in this place?
8. Is the raw material for the preparation of street food local or not?
9. Has Covid-19 had an impact on your business?
10. What are the prospects for street food in Palermo?

part of the urban environment of the city of Palermo. Initially, it is important to note that there was a large variety of street food dishes and the Fig. 2 illustrates some of the products.

These foods, as we have seen in the introduction, have ancient origins and are the result of the testimony of the various dominations that have taken place in Sicily. Street food in the city of Palermo is both of vegetable origin (panelle, croccchè) and animal (spleen, stigghioli) and mixed like arancine. Street food is an easy-to-eat food that satisfies the nutritional properties in terms of calories and can be obtained with low spending power. Therefore it is a food that can potentially be purchased by all consumers regardless of low or high spending capacity. It ranges from a minimum of € 1.50 to a maximum of € 2.50 for sandwiches with spleen or panelle and also for the sfinzione (per piece). Even the stigghioli do not have high prices (3–4 euros). Regarding the knowledge of street food, respondents in eight out of ten cases replied that they know



Fig. 1. Map of the street food places (Palermo, Italy). Source: Google Earth (1:600).

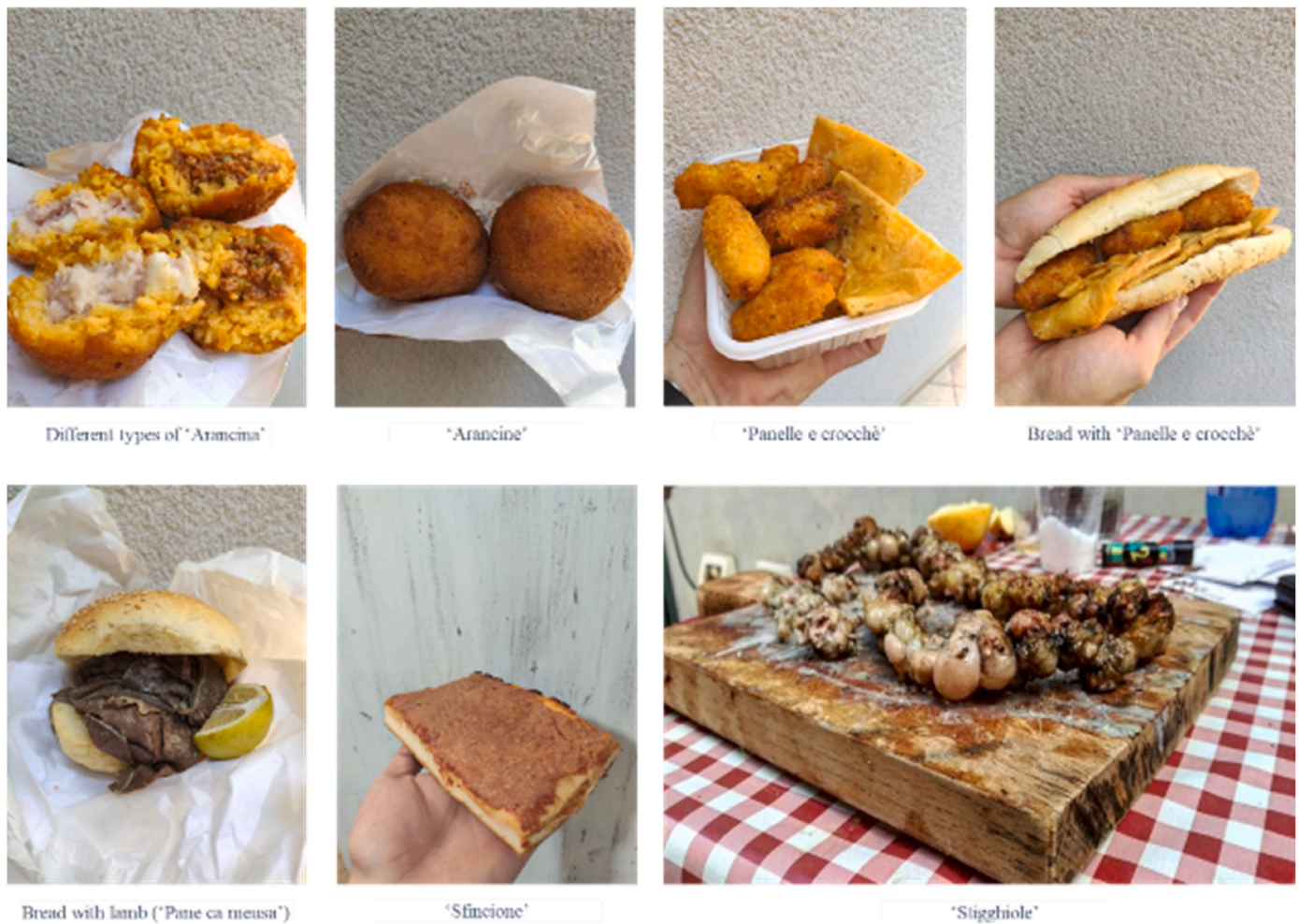


Fig. 2. Street food in Palermo.

what it is while in the remaining two cases they declared that they do not know the meaning despite producing and selling it. Those who said they knew the meaning replied that street food is the history and culture of the territory, it is a food that can be consumed easily and quickly and is still a low-priced food compared to the same amount of calories that the consumer takes through other foods. Some street food vendors have stated that street food is not only culture but also friendship; in fact, often in their stores the purchase is made by groups of friendly people who take a lunch break or snack in the middle of the morning or afternoon. Therefore, street food also represents that value of friendship that unites different people and cultures and is eaten standing up and exchanging a few words.

We asked how long it has been in the street food production business. In all cases we have recorded that these are activities that are in the second or third generation. This data confirms that these are particular business activities which, however, are capable of generating attractive income and favoring generational turnover. A fundamental aspect that we have rediscovered is the strategy implemented with customers, in particular the utmost attention to cleaning in order to achieve customer satisfaction. Over time, the business has been modernized and adapted to make it comfortable for customers' needs. Street food is also valued in relation to the place where it is sold. These businesses are born in places where many people are concentrated during the day (central station, near schools or public offices, squares and places near historical monuments which therefore favor the concentration of tourists). In nine out of ten cases, entrepreneurs declared that business activity is the only source of income, in the remaining case it is not. In the nine cases they

are sellers of multi-product street food (i.e. bread and panelle, bread with spleen). If only one product is offered, they are producers of stigghioli. Over time, economic affairs have gone well, as demand has not decreased as a testimony that street food is a product that creates value for the company.

In addition, an important thing highlighted by several entrepreneurs is that the production and sale of street food is not a boring thing and thanks to its production, social relations are maintained with customers who are always habitual due to local demand. More than one seller of bread with panelle pointed out the following: "here it is fantastic, many people come here: for the lunch break, it is construction workers near the shop; moreover, during the day there are many students, tourists (from other Italian regions, Germans, English, Americans, Spaniards) and retired people". In other words, the 'panelleria' translates into an attractive store that captures the attention of customers of all ages and income conditions. Customers in general represent the core of the success of the business activity and in the case of street food they also play a fundamental role. In this sense, there is a distinction to be made between the tourist (Italian and foreign) and the Palermitan, who is a regular consumer of the point of sale and hardly moves to buy in other points of sale. The geographical location of the point of sale plays an important role in Palermo in retaining the act of consumption, as well as the kindness and courtesy of the person who prepares and sells street food.

In particular, in all the interviews it emerged that during the purchase the Palermo consumer converses with the operator who prepares the street food and this conversation represents a source of competitive advantage for the company. The way of dealing with the customer is

therefore a distinctive feature of the street food company. The tourist who, on the other hand, stops to buy only once and is attracted by the image that the store has and the geographical location (if the store is close to the monuments they visit or near the traditional and historical markets of Palermo) is a one-time consumer and therefore does not represent a loyal consumer. In this case the source of the competitive advantage is represented by the location in the Palermo area. All respondents stated that they try to meet the needs of the customer. This happens through the selection of the raw materials used in the production process, the cleaning of the store and last but not least all have declared that at the request of customers they make their products taste. This taste very often favors the marginal propensity to buy a greater variety of products. The sales strategy tested in ancient times in the historic markets of the city of Palermo (Ballarò and Capo) is now applied by street food outlets and is very effective. All the interviewees declared that they offer excellent street food of the Palermo tradition and that recalls history. In particular, when we went to the points of sale for interviews, there was the psychological feeling that point of sale made us immerse in the past, especially in terms of the smells and flavors that arise from the products offered which today represent a food in all respects which is an integral part of the food and urban economy of the city of Palermo.

Palermo street food represents a good that satisfies the need to eat with little income to spend and with the peculiarities that we have highlighted above. A particular aspect was the 'abbanniata' of the sfincione sellers. The 'abbanniata' born in ancient times in historic markets has the task of promoting agri-food production. This form of promotion represents the first form of marketing, and in particular agri-food communication as the owner of the point of sale communicates that the product is excellent and also that the selling price is competitive. Voices and smells that merge have become the essence and competitive advantage of Palermo's historic markets. With regards to the challenges of the street food phenomenon, suppliers have described various concerns for the near future also in terms of social media and the impact they have on the consumer. Social media have a major impact on customer persuasion. Retailers said they have dedicated social media pages to promote their products. Among the initiatives undertaken are the Facebook and Instagram pages where street food photos are advertised in order to increase the sales and build customer loyalty.

Regarding the impact of the pandemic, everyone declared that the impact was devastating in the first days of total closure (March–May 2020) due to the decrease in the movement of people and the cancellation of tourism. However, they have also equipped themselves to make home deliveries which, however, did not work very well. On this aspect, the lack of success of home delivery is evident, as street food is not suitable for complete meals seated at home. It can be consumed at home, but in tradition it is done once in a while. The sellers stated that for the products examined they are always in demand and there is no seasonality apart from the arancine which, according to the Palermo tradition, are consumed on the day that the church celebrates Santa Lucia on 13 December. On this day, the demand for arancine has an exponential growth and the product is also offered not only with meat but with other condiments (i.e. vegetables, fish, chocolate). Street food in the city of Palermo is an integral part of the history and culture of the city. Among the food products of history, street food has reached our days while maintaining its originality.

From this study that examined street food in the urban environment of Palermo, we can highlight that street food truly represents still today that distinctive trait of the food culture of the city of Palermo, with the tradition of how it is eaten (especially standing up) where it is sold and the repercussions on the psychology of the consumer as it evokes the history of a city that in some ways takes away the frenetic daily activity. The consumption of street food therefore represents that moment to stop and relive the history and popular traditions of the area. It is a new model of food consumption, not habitual, but which is practiced with a certain frequency by some consumers, while by others sporadically and

by tourists only when they are in the city as a meaningful and memorable food experience. Vendors, as we have seen, have in them the 'art of knowing how to sell' to dialogue with the consumer and in recent times they have enhanced local products for the preparation of the dishes offered. This aspect is very important as it connects the city with the agricultural and rural context of the territory, so a real union between food and local agriculture is negotiated. The study highlights that despite globalization, food consumption remains highly concentrated and linked to the territory according to food traditions, climate and the type of work that consumers do. The urban food economy of the city of Palermo, as well as that of other cities, remains strongly linked to the traditions and lifestyles of consumers.

Over time, street food in Palermo has made it possible to create businesses that continue the generational turnover. This aspect highlights important economic and social aspects. In fact, the generational turnover of the company highlights the transfer of know-how from generation to generation. Generational change is possible if there are companies that are 'vital' from an economic point of view. Street food is a low-priced food product which is demanded by everyone, locals and visitors. It is also a food known throughout the world and it makes the city of Palermo famous. Street food in Palermo is featured by low price, location, and the flavors of the gastronomic tradition. These three elements represent the strategic variables of success that guarantee the competitive advantage of the companies that produce street food.

5. Conclusions

Street food is a path to taste a portion of a territory, to ephemerally acquire the sense of a place which includes the understanding of the identity values. Since street foods are "inexpensive local traditional foods that are normally sold in open-air complexes and often located in urban centers" (Chong and Stephenson, 2020, p.1), this research has analysed the configuration of the street food landscape in the city of Palermo, whose streets communicate a specific involvement with 'iconic food' to visitors, and show that a strong connection with history is manifested in the offer of street food. Food practices usually have their origin in homemade cooking, which includes traditional recipes and methods of cooking. The connections between home foods and street food culture provide an interesting background for the further analysis of the origins of products and recipes (Fusté-Forné, 2020). In this sense, the preservation of dishes and cooking methods throughout time and space is crucial (Bae, 2008) and street food protects and promotes the place identity.

The research we have conducted highlights, from a qualitative point of view, that street food is part of the history and food traditions of the cities of the Mediterranean. Today, street food represents a distinctive trait of the urban economy that contributes to the definition of traditional food landscapes. The elements that emerged from the research are that street food is strongly linked to tradition which is consumed by both residents and visitors regardless of spending capacity. It is usually eaten on the spot alone or with other people and it represents a moment of socializing that evokes the tradition of the past. Its production, even today, recalls the historical one of the Greek 'thermopolies' and its smell and taste protects and promotes that distinctive trait that has represented the food tradition of Palermo for centuries. In this food tradition, agriculture and nutrition (countryside and rural-urban) are blended, an essential combination for the survival of people in the ecosystems. The urban supply of the city of Palermo is undoubtedly still today impregnated by the various dominations that have followed one another in the city and which have left their mark. Street food is history, culture, agriculture and gastronomy, distinctive features of the food economy of a territory which are also a source of tourism planning and development, management and marketing.

The theoretical implications of the research rely on the relevance of the practices and perceptions of the street food vendors which confirm the role of both people and places in the market strategy of street food.

This was studied from the perspective of entrepreneurs in a pandemic environment. In this sense, departing from the preservation of the traditions embedded in street food dishes, the vendors promote the values of past generations both from a cultural and natural perspective. In this sense, rural and urban ways of life are valorised in the street food landscape from the origin of products and the motivations of customers. Also, this research offers practical implications for the further integration of street food as part of the city landscapes which understand the values of the vendors and its participation in the city lifestyles. While several studies have analysed the relation between the street food experience and the behavioral intention of tourists (Ozcelik and Akova, 2021), further research is required to understand the role of the physical environment which also contributes to create a unique attraction. Recent research also referred to the study of “how consumers use food to anchor, express and traverse cultural identities in a globalizing world” (Seo et al., 2015, p.501). In this sense, urban areas are relevant spaces for social exchange, where future studies must focus on the street food consumption (Abrahale et al., 2019) in order to understand the relationship between the values offered by the vendors and the values gathered by the visitors.

Author statement

The authors designed, implemented and wrote the research.

Implications

This research contributes to the understanding of street food values in urban environments. Departing from the study of street food vendors' perspectives in Palermo (Sicily, Italy), results show the relevance of history in the food culture and nature of the Mediterranean regions. Since street food protects the tradition of a specific territory, the selling of street food dishes promotes the relationship between people, places and products which attracts both residents and tourists. This research valorizes the iconic street foods in the Palermo gastronomy, and how they are embedded in the practices and perceptions of the vendors.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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