

## **A land of cheese: from food innovation to tourism development in rural Catalonia**

### **Abstract**

Cheese recently acquired a major role as a tourist attraction, cheese tourism appearing in parallel to the increasing regional impact of food tourism practices. As a means of valuing local produce, recovering cultural heritage and appreciating natural landscapes, cheese making became a significant activity for community development, diversification and innovation in rural areas. Here, tourism is an innovation process that allows the economic survival of local small agri-food companies. Drawing from phenomenological ethnographic fieldwork based on participatory observation, this research discusses the mutual relations between the innovative processes of artisanal cheese sector and food tourism in rural Catalonia. Results provide evidence on how innovation occurs through milk and cheese production in rural environments as, from their role as primary economic activities, they progressively became a crucial actor within the tourism industry. This research contributes to the understanding of the processes of diversification and innovation in rural and natural environments, based on the specific case of artisanal cheese making in the Catalan Pyrenees. In this sense, gastronomic tourism practices confirm the entrepreneurial role of local producers in economic and tourist development.

**Keywords:** cheese tourism, regional development, rural tourism, Spain.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Innovation is one of the key competitive elements for different economic sectors, and consequently for a particular tourist region (Hjalager, 2002; UNWTO, 2017). Both primary sector activities and tourism are strategic industries in rural, natural and mountainous areas around the world. The scenario of tourism businesses in rural areas is predominantly made of small and medium-sized family businesses (Ateljevic, 2009; Getz and Carlsen, 2000; Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018; Smeral, 1998). Here, although the societies in these regions have traditionally dedicated themselves to agricultural and livestock activities, for decades now tourism has been establishing itself as the most important economic sector. In many cases this has been done with the help of agriculture and livestock. Thus, tourism in rural areas has developed as a way of diversifying primary sector activities and a means of innovation in the economic progress of these destinations. Rural tourism has therefore been understood as one where visitors and tourists can experience the authenticity of these spaces (Bessière, 1998; Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi, 2015) and their unchanged landscape and return to the traditions that are more ingrained in a society's culture.

Within the framework of the relationships existing between agriculture, livestock and tourism, gastronomy is the example that most clearly reflects this communion. Gastronomic tourism, integrated as part of the products and services rural producers have to offer, allows a product to be developed that has a strong identity born and produced in the landscape itself, while also promoting sustainable development (Sims, 2009; Slocum and Curtis, 2018). The relationship between tourism and gastronomy is revealed through products, dishes, souvenirs, markets, fairs or visits to crop fields and farms (Hall and Sharples, 2003). This happens in a singular landscape environment, with its unique natural and cultural characteristics. Thus, ensuring that a product is identified with a territory requires not only that its trajectory be part of said territory's natural, social, and historical context, but also that it can be established as part of a destination's current cultural heritage - through tourism, for example.

In this context, the Catalan Pyrenees represent one of the most relevant Spanish and European territories when it comes to showing how tourism has been integrated into the territory. This was led by small and medium-sized family agri-food companies that have had to combine their traditional farms with the structuring of a tourist product. Particularly, this is the case of cheese in the Catalan Pyrenees, which is seen as a source of territorial identity and cultural authenticity (Fusté-Forné, 2015b; 2016a), and an example of the innovation processes that livestock has undergone in its transition towards awarding tourism value to milk and cheese.

Based on a phenomenological ethnographic fieldwork that has consisted of annual visits to the region studied over the last ten years, the objective of the present article is to analyze the processes of food innovation in rural and natural environments. Specifically,

it reviews how the artisanal cheese sector in Catalonia behind the process of modernizing sets a relationship between rurality and tourism. To achieve it, the case of artisanal cheese making in the western Catalan Pyrenees is examined. The area of study is a natural area par excellence in the context of Catalonia and has the only national park in the territory, the National Park of Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici. Its mountainous relief, its flora and fauna, the difficulty of access, and its rural landscape make it a unique place where milk and cheese production have defined the lifestyle of its populations over centuries. Firstly, as a stockbreeding industry, and now also as part of its tourist development.

[The structure of this paper is divided into five parts. After this introductory section, the study continues with the literature review. The theoretical section discusses the relationship between innovation, local entrepreneurship and tourism in rural environments, and it particularly approaches food tourism as an innovation arena for local food producers. Later, the study method and the results are presented. Finally, discussion and conclusion analyse the contributions of this study, together with limitations and opportunities for further investigation. The list of references is included at the end of the paper.](#)

## **2. TOURISM AND INNOVATION: THE ROLE OF FOOD TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS**

Innovation in tourism has been widely studied in recent decades ([see, for example, Hjalager, 2010](#)). Innovation plays a central role in creating value and maintaining a competitive advantage in all economic sectors, which includes both primary sector activities and tourism (UNWTO, 2017). Thus, innovation is essential for economic survival and maintaining business, sectoral and regional competitiveness, depending on the degree and capacity of innovation of a given business category or a certain territorial scale. At the same time, the tourism industry is also one of the main factors of information and communication technologies being consolidated in the services sector (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Hall and Williams, 2008; Yuan, Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2006), although this is an approach to innovation that is not addressed in this article.

### ***The relationship between innovation, local businesses and tourism in rural environments***

Innovation is defined as the generation and implementation of new ideas, processes, products or services (Moss-Kanter, 1983). Authors such as Eriksen (2015), Francis and Bessant (2005) and Hjalager (2010) have established different types of innovation. Innovation means improving or creating in relation to the product or service itself, processes, marketing or organization and business management. Innovation, now more

than ever, is playing a growing role in the services sector in general and the tourism sector in particular (Hjalager, 2002). Also, primary sector activities are becoming of increasing importance to tourism, which means that they require an ever-growing degree of innovation. Tourism is an innovative activity; this is seen, for example, in the rise of tourism products and experiences, in itself a form of innovation (UNWTO, 2017). Thus, the process of innovation in tourism primarily refers to the changes directly observed by its consumers -visitors or tourists-, in relation to the products or services offered (Hall and Williams, 2008).

The tourism sector is extremely heterogeneous, which means it requires a type of management that strikes a balance between competition and cooperation (Hjalager, Johansen and Rasmussen, 2015). Porter (1998), for example, highlighted clustering as a key tool for developing competitive advantages through collaboration with local authorities, combined with an entrepreneurial attitude from both tourism associations and companies (Jackson and Murphy, 2006; Lardies, 2004). Thus, clusters facilitate and promote the transfer of knowledge, which is at the same time a key element in the business and territorial innovation process. Also, collaboration between companies improves the individual capacity for innovation that these companies have (Faems, Van Looy and Debackere, 2005; Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018). However, this is easy to say but not so easy to apply. According to Weidenfeld, Williams and Butler (2010), this is because the transfer of knowledge and the dissemination of innovations between tourism products depends on factors such as degree of similarity between products or proximity in space. Thus, it is clear that competition in a globalized world such as today's does not benefit the creation of synergies that will certainly accelerate innovation processes (Jackson and Murphy, 2006).

These relationships between companies are even more important in rural areas, taking into account the key role played by small and medium-sized businesses in providing products and services to tourists (Ateljevic, 2009; Erkkila, 2004; Mungall and Johnson, 2004; Novelli-, Schmitz and Spencer, 2006; Smeral, 1998). This is essential to the development of any destination, but still more important in these rural, natural and mountain environments. Networking and the aforementioned clusters can help small and medium size enterprises in tourism in their innovation processes and should contribute to regional rural development (Lee, Wall and Kovacs, 2015) through the activities, actions and events produced as a result of collaborative work. Nonetheless, as mentioned before, the heterogeneity of companies comprising the service sector makes it a complex one where both innovation and internationalization practices vary according to their constituents (Novelli, Schmitz and Spencer, 2006; Shaw and Williams, 2004; Sinclair and Stabler, 1997).

In line with this, the challenges posed by innovation in tourism cannot be ignored in a global and rapidly changing context (Moutinho, 2000). This paper argues that relationships between primary sector activities and the tourism industry are one means

of addressing these challenges. At the same time, we must not forget that, as Hjalager (2010) pointed out, innovation often arises as a response to external factors. For example, today, climate change or the economic crisis, among others, are external barriers that on the one hand limit economic growth and innovation, but also stimulate it, as they make change a necessity. Therefore, while the nature of tourism as a sector is conducive to innovation, the tourism sector also faces difficulties with regards to innovation because it is characterized by: a predominance of small and medium-sized businesses and family management, a fragmented tourism product - particularly in rural areas, few economic resources, and a fear of risks posed by the changes that can derive from innovation (UNWTO, 2017).

Tourism innovation is not, then, an exclusive domain of large companies (Zahra, 2005) and its role in small and medium-sized businesses must be taken into account. As we have seen above, these companies are especially important in the primary sector, the tourism sector, and the rural environment, the three areas interrelated in this research. Thus, family businesses dominate the business landscape of tourism in rural areas (Flanigan, Blackstock and Hunter, 2014; Getz and Carlsen, 2000, 2005; Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018; Morrison, 2006; Nordqvist, Sharma and Chirico, 2014; Peters and Buhalis, 2013). However, they have heterogeneous organizational structures (Calabrò and Mussolino, 2013; Getz and Carlsen, 2005).

Generally speaking, such companies are rooted in the territory, with a family background that has a history of decades, and closely linked to the local economy, its culture and history (Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018). The literature emphasizes that innovation in this type of company is mainly based on ideas that are generated as a solution to certain problems -external factors- (Hjalager, 2010), as we have seen above. In addition, in these cases, and in the relationship between primary sector activities and tourism, innovation is not immediate (Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018; Pikkemaat and Peters, 2006).

Some authors emphasized that the role of innovation is especially relevant in small family businesses located in rural settings. This is seen in the case of accommodation (Reiwoldt, 2006), for example, a business which is diversified according to changes in the attributes of its supply. This happens, for example, through its gastronomy, leisure products and services, the infrastructure itself or the improvement of aspects of management related to respect for the environment, all examples that show the capacity for innovation in the hotel service (Enz and Siguaw, 2003; Hjalager, 2010; Pikkemaat, 2008). Innovation in products and services related to both natural and cultural heritage is also increasingly relevant, starting with the commodifying of rural resources (Ashworth, 1994; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Lowenthal, 1985), which also includes food.

### ***Food tourism as an innovation process in local food industries***

Innovation as a way of creating value for small and medium-sized agri-food companies in rural areas is found, for example, in the conversion of products or services into [activities and experiences](#) (Eriksen, 2015; Pine and Gilmore, 1998; Sundbo, 2009; Tsai and Wang, 2017). [This conversion refers to the planning and development of food fairs and festivals, food museums or food tours, added to eateries and restaurant as the most typical example of food tourism-based practice.](#) This is represented in the present article in the conversion of cheese from a food product to a tourist resource -and later, to an experience-, as the result of a process of innovation in the local and regional cheese industry in the Catalan Pyrenees. In this sense, it is clear that small agri-food companies play an important role in local and regional economic development, which benefits the region as a whole through gastronomic tourism practices. These practices constitute a powerful instrument for said development (Bèssiere 1998; Berno, Laurin and Maltezakís 2014; Gössling and Hall 2013; Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis and Cambourne 2003; Hjalager and Richards 2002; López-Guzmán, Di-Clemente and Hernández-Mogollón 2014; Millán, Morales and Pérez, 2014; Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi, 2015; Sims, 2009; Torres, 2002; Valdés, Menéndez and Torres 2010).

In this sense, previous studies emphasize that rural entrepreneurs in tourism are characterized as people with few business skills, which means that they have a limited capacity for innovation (Hjalager, 2010; Lerner and Haber, 2000; Morrison, Rimmington and Williams, 1999). However, specific segments are considered to have a greater capacity for innovation, since entrepreneurs in these segments base their products on awarding value to their lifestyle (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Getz and Petersen, 2005; Hjalager, 2010). Rural spaces, despite having a low economic weight, have traditions and cultural values that make them places with a marked identity (Molina and Gómez, 2011). Thus, the attractiveness of rural tourism lies precisely in the authenticity of its tourism supply, which allows direct contact with residents and their lifestyle (Bessière, 2013; Lane, 1994; Pearce, 1990). Among the elements that make up rural traditions and lifestyles we find culinary heritage.

[Recent research highlights the existing and potential relationships between food tourism and regional development drawing from different innovation categories. Within this context, Rachão \*et al.\* \(2019\) state that there are five types of innovation: product or service innovation, process innovation, managerial innovation, management innovation, and institutional innovation. They primarily include the changes implemented by local producers, and directly observed by the visitors and tourists on the product and service offered, but also the ways of structuring and promoting their businesses, and collaboration between stakeholders, to cite some examples.](#)

4- [In this sense](#), the regional origin of products and the characteristics of the territory -the terroir- are of great importance when integrating food production and its

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consumption into the tourism sector (Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014; Fonte and Papadopoulos, 2010; Fusté-Forné, 2016b; Hjalager, Johansen and Rasmussen, 2015; Nilson et al., 2011; Sims, 2009). Gastronomic tourism practices allow tourists to acquire a knowledge of these idiosyncrasies. The combination of local products, livestock breeding and tourism (Slocum and Curtis, 2018) are the basis for a gastronomic tourist destination's sustainable development, which goes hand in hand with the innovation capacity of its rural entrepreneurs - the producers.

Thus, Socher and Tschurtschenthaler (1994) categorized agriculture and livestock breeding through their distribution linked to tourism. They claimed that it consists of the local sale of agricultural products based on the preservation of and respect for the landscape itself, which acts as the tourist setting. Equally, local products are seen as foods that require a great deal of expertise and dedication from their makers (see, for example, Belletti et al., 2007; Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1999). Food is closely rooted to the heritage of a region, its nature -the landscape- and its culture - the ingredients, recipes, techniques, machinery, and history. To taste these products is to taste the territory's identity (Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi, 2015). Little by little, their consolidation means that in the framework of the relationship between gastronomy and tourism, gastronomic products can be jointly promoted with the name of the region in which they are produced, which consequently increases the particular attractiveness of a destination (Hankinton, 2004; Hjalager, 2010). Examples of this in Catalonia would be Priorat wine, Prades potatoes or Pyrenean cheese.

To bring this theoretical section to an end, it is worth noting that Hall and Mitchell (2000) contextualized gastronomy tourism within four main categories: gastronomy as a component of local culture, as an instrument of tourism promotion, as an element of local economic development, and as a pattern of the local population's consumption habits. In this context, one of the points that must be taken into account refers to the change in the role and motivation of tourists themselves, which has gone from an activity that was predominantly controlled by travel agencies only two decades ago to a current context whereby consumers directly access the creation of their own tour packages (see Aldebert, Dang and Longhi, 2011, for example). All tourists have become individual managers of their own experience and this leads to the development of a segmented and specialized market where activities are unique and associated with a particular place (Nylander and Hall, 2005, Robinson and Novelli, 2005). This context also encourages the co-creation of innovations [within the host-guest service encounters](#) (Williams and Shaw, 2011).

Tourists motivated by the rural environment contribute to rural development and cultural sustainability (Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi, 2015). This is achieved thanks to their being reconciled with nature, which, as we saw earlier, is based on personal contact with the local population and participation in activities, traditions and lifestyles typical of local culture (see, for example, Cànoves et al., 2014; Fusté-Forné, 2015a;

González-Ávila, 2011), among which we find the discovery of gastronomic tourism products (Sims, 2009). In this context, as rural entrepreneurs -and innovators- cheese producers are an example of how gastronomic tourism can become a tool for rural development that contributes to the integrity of primary sector resources, improving the rural economy and maintaining traditions (Hall and Jenkins, 1998). At the same time, gastronomic tourism -based on cheese- helps to diversify and energize the traditional sectors of the rural environment (Tirado Ballesteros, 2017).

### 3. STUDY METHOD

The methodology used in this research is based on a phenomenological ethnographic study consisting of participatory observation. Also, the study of specialized secondary sources allowed to gain in-depth understanding of the historical and sociocultural context.

Participatory observation is a technique that has been used widely in research in the social sciences (Bruner, 2005; Ness, 2003; Salazar, 2010; Smith and Brent, 2001; Urry, 1990). As Dwyer, Gill and Seetaram (2012) indicated, most of the studies that have applied the participatory observation technique to tourism have done so to analyze the impact of tourism development on local communities. Specifically, there are a number of previous studies that have used participatory observation to investigate the impact of tourism development on traditional economic activities (Davis and Morais, 2004; Johnson and Orbach, 1990; Kottak, 2005), which also includes primary sector activities such as livestock breeding. In addition, in ethnographic research participatory observation is a technique that is mainly used to study cultures (Corbetta, 2007). In this study, it is combined with unstructured interviews with local food producers and retailers, which serves to analyze the context of rural culture based on cheese production.

This research project was conducted in the Catalan Pyrenees (Figure 1). According to the General Directorate of Food, Quality and Agri-Food Industries (2010), the area of Alt Pirineu and Aran -western Catalan Pyrenees- has the largest number of cheese makers per number of inhabitants. [Thus, Previous studies acknowledged that, from the food producers' perspective, quality is regarded as a critical attribute \(Armesto and Gómez, 2006; Hughes, 1995\). In this sense, production, processing and quality controls of the products, and the ways to maintain and communicate traditional values, are also significant for food producers in order to gather competitive advantage in terms of sustainable, marketing and tourism development \(Fusté-Forné, 2015b\) -specially in mountain areas \(Bentivoglio \*et al.\*, 2019\). Local and regional foods can be distinguished because of their quality attributes – this especially refers to food produced under certified quality standards linked to both unique cultural and natural idiosyncrasies \(see, for example, Blanco and Riveros, 2005\). Within this context, the Pyrenees counts on a](#)



[cheese Protected Designation of Origin - \*Formatge de l'Alt Urgell i la Cerdanya\*. These two Catalan counties – Alt Urgell and Cerdanya – are also areas of the Catalan Pyrenees, and this quality label specifically appreciates a quality production which is set on a specific landscape \(Tresserras and Medina, 2008\), which also offers a range of tourist attractions such as cheese markets and cheese tours.](#)

[In particular,](#) fieldwork was [specifically](#) carried out in the western part of the Catalan Pyrenees -in the counties of Pallars Sobirà and Alta Ribagorça- over the last ten years, with annual visits by the principal author during different periods of the year, as detailed below (table 1). [There are seven cheesemakers in the region \(four of them in Pallars Sobirà and three of them in Alta Ribagorça\), and all of them were included in this study.](#) In particular, the ethnography field method consisted of:

- Visits to farms and pasture areas, [where understandings of both agriculture and livestock activities, and landscape values were gathered](#) (I)
- Visits to cheesemaking facilities [in order to explore cheese as a product and cheesemaking as a process, and to analyse the challenges and opportunities faced by local food producers within the relationship between primary and tertiary sectors](#) (II)
- Attendance at local food fairs and festivals, [which allowed to draw on the significance of these events as examples of cheese distribution](#) (III)
- Visits to retail food establishments and restaurants [to observe the participation of cheese in hospitality industry and its promotion to visitors and tourists through restaurant menus](#) (IV)

Table 1: Detailed phenomenological ethnographic study

Year	Pallars Sobirà		Alta Ribagorça	
	Period of study	Actions	Period of study	Actions
2008	June (1 day)	III	-	
2009	November (2 days)	II	-	
2010	February (3 days)	I / IV	-	
2011	-		June (1 day)	III
2012	July (1 day)	IV	-	
2013	December (2 days)	II	April (1 day)	II
2014	July (3 days)	I / IV	November (3 days) July (3 days)	IV I / II
2015	-		February (3 days)	I / II
2016	-		April (5 days) August (1 day)	I / II / IV III
2017	December (1 day)	II	December (2 days)	IV

As observed in table 1. Therefore, the researchers have carried out long-term research in the field that has allowed them to have direct contact with local agents, one of the characteristics of the study method. The authors have been able to see first hand both the context of artisan cheese production, the opportunities and difficulties that these small producers currently face, and how they have been incorporated as tourist products and services based on innovation and diversification in their production. The research also analyses the changes that have taken place in the cheese making industry in the Catalan Pyrenees over recent decades. Finally, it should be noted the limitation nature of the chosen method. In consequence, although on its own this methodology may not be enough to draw enough conclusions for politics and practice (Dwyer, Gill and Seetaram, 2012), it certainly provides results that allow tourist products to be developed and awarded value by the industry (Bowen, 2002) based on the innovation emerging from local, food based, and rural family businesses.

#### **4. FOOD AND TOURISM INNOVATION IN MILK PRODUCTION AND CHEESE MAKING IN CATALONIA**

Milk production and cheese making date back thousands of years in Catalonia, and go hand in hand with agricultural and livestock activities. The livestock breeding tradition in Catalonia, documented since the beginning of the Middle Ages, means that cheese making has been forged for centuries in this territory of the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula. As a product made in the fields, cheese did not take long to reach the kitchen, and this is also reflected in the first medieval cookbooks written in the Catalan language, such as “El Llibre de Sent Soví”, from the 14th century. Some of the recipes in this book already included cheese as one of their ingredients (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Action, Autonomous Government of Catalonia, 2008). Nonetheless, Pla and Civís (1995) stated that cheeses were already mentioned prior to this date, in the twelfth century, when the abbot of the Pyrenean town of Gerri gave men working at the monastery meals that included eggs, milk and cheese.

However, this rural cheese tradition had always remained largely for purely family consumption, and besides being a way of preserving milk for self-consumption, was only used for commercial exchange at local markets and fairs. In fact, there is no long tradition of milk production forming an important part of the primary sector economy in Catalonia, it being first introduced at the beginning of the 20th century. Farmers only then began to look at the dairy industry as an economic sector with prospects for the future. The high productivity of cows mostly imported from the Netherlands made milk a more commonly consumed food with a high demand, especially in urban environments such as Barcelona (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Action,

Autonomous Government of Catalonia, 2008). This led to the swift creation of cooperatives like Cooperativa del Cadí (1915) or Lleteries de la Seu d'Urgell (1923).

According to the Government of Catalonia's General Directorate of Food, Quality and Agri-Food Industries (2010), recent innovation in the Catalan cheese making sector is due to the fact that this wave of artisan cheese making did not take place until the 20th century, which means that it has no solid historical references like those found in other countries such as France. This means that in those areas where there are cheeses that already offer added value and high demand, innovation is more difficult. Innovation in the case of Catalan cheese is therefore also a consequence of the need to structure a supply that until very recently had only few references - while not forgetting those that do have a thousand-year tradition and with a strong territorial base, such as *mató*, or the Pyrenean cheeses, *serrat* and *tupí* (ACREFA, 2012). Indeed, Mestre, Palau and Masats (2000) stated that *tupí* cheese is the most vivid and representative example of a pastoral economy with few resources, such as that of the Catalan Pyrenees.

That said, the craft cheese industry has re-established itself in Catalonia over the last thirty years through the creation of new cheeses with a traditional base, the application of forms of cheese making to other cheeses, and bringing back products that were innovating in their time to the present day. An example of this is found in the maturation technique, which, although possible to do differently today, is in some cases done in a traditional way with the added value this gives to the product. Therefore, innovation in cheese making consists in applying improvements to both the manufacturing and maturation processes, without losing sight of the product's characteristics as a food transmitter of *terroir*. At the same time, innovations in cheese making can apply to both milk and cheese, and also refer to the packaging or the development of new varieties of cheese -cheeses with spices, for example-.

Thus, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that cheese making began to become consolidated as an industry. In particular, small cheese producers began to appear from the 1980s onwards, leading to the creation of ACREFA -the Catalan association of artisanal cheese producing farmers- in 1982. On the one hand, these producers helped to preserve traditional cheese making methods, and on the other they began to innovate in the search for cheeses with new forms and flavors, which saw their relationship with tourist activity gradually increase. These farmers were found to have two distinct profiles. Firstly, livestock farmers who, prior to the introduction of milk quotas by the European Union, had had to cease activity or reconvert their holdings, one of the means of diversification being cheese making. And on the other hand, young people moving from the cities to depopulated rural areas, where they took up the search for cultural roots and a more natural diet, inspired to some extent in the hippy culture. In this sense, previous studies (ACREFA, 2012; General Directorate of Food, Quality and Agri-food Industries, 2010) have stated that many of these young people have university studies and moved to the country motivated by the rural life, willing to take advantage

of everything that nature has to offer. They were the driving force behind the process of modernizing the artisanal cheese sector in Catalonia and soon saw tourism as a means of innovation that was and still is necessary for their economic survival – for example, by organising farm tours or taking part in local events.

The Catalan Pyrenees are one of the most favorable areas of Catalonia and Spain for animal herding, and consequently for cheese making. The climatic and orographic configuration of the mountain range, its natural landscapes and ancient rural culture lend it the characteristics for producing singular and unique milks and cheeses, and also determines their taste. For example, this is the region where Alt Urgell [and](#) Cerdanya cheese is produced, which has the Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) label [as mentioned above](#), as well as other traditional Catalan cheeses such as *mató*, *recuit*, *brossat*, *serrat*, *tupi* and *garrotxa* -the latter is in the process of obtaining the label Protected Geographical Indication- which are some of the most important Catalan autochthonous varieties. However, most of these cheeses, unlike those with the PDO label, have little regulation in relation to their manufacturing process or demarcation of their territory.

This western area of the Catalan Pyrenees has the peculiar distinction of being home to both Catalonia's largest cheese makers –the aforementioned Cooperativa del Cadí- and its smallest and most artisan, which make up the rural and gastronomic landscape of the Catalan Pyrenees. These cheese makers do not only produce [cheese as](#) their leading product, but also derivatives such as milk, yoghurts, butter or even dairy-based desserts such as creams, flans and cheesecakes. At the same time, all of these products are parts of the Mediterranean diet, which helps in ensuring that local demand is maintained, as they also form part of traditional recipes [and daily eating habits of people](#). Thus, these recipes can be largely found both in family and restaurant menus.

In consequence, another important element in the context of artisanal cheese making is sales and distribution. Since this is a sector that, given its particular characteristics mentioned in the theoretical framework, looks for the most direct -local and regional- marketing and distribution channels, since businesses have to use their own means for this. First of all, via the production sites themselves -farms, dairies, on-site shops- and then through the region's restaurants, fairs and markets, specialized stores and small and medium-sized supermarkets located in the area where the cheeses are made.

Within this context, a first channel to highlight is its sale through restaurants. Artisanal cheese makers [have](#) been able to develop thanks to the support and demand of restaurants and traditional hotels, which have gradually incorporated the use of locally-made artisan cheeses into their gastronomy. In this sense, it is important to note the great culinary versatility of cheese, which can be used, for example, in starters to prepare salads, in main courses to combine with principal foods such as meat or potatoes, or even in desserts such as cheese tables or the famous cheesecake. This has

been very important for the visibility of the product and its subsequent awarding of value at the tourism level. It comprises distribution to local restaurants with a tourist demand, although this is mainly seasonal and concentrated on weekends and at traditional holiday periods such as Christmas, Easter and summer, which is still an important problem in rural and mountain areas.

On the other hand, cheeses have also achieved great acceptance at fairs and markets, from the local population, visitors and tourists, this being another form of selling and distributing the product also very much related to tourist activity. [These examples are also manifestations of the innovation processes carried out by local food producers as part of their efforts to connect primary and tertiary sectors.](#) The presence of local cheese makers at these fairs is increasing as a response to the growing demand for this product, which is diverse and versatile in terms of its culinary uses, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Demand is therefore very heterogeneous, but mostly consists of local tourists, who are looking for an authentic local product with roots in the territory and distributed by the farmer or cheese maker themselves, which endows them with this sense of *terroir* from the field to the plate. These fairs where cheese is the main product are abundant in Catalonia, especially in the Pyrenees. Outstanding examples of this are Sant Ermengol fair in La Seu d'Urgell, which includes the Pyrenees Artisan Cheese Fair –celebrating its 24th [edition](#) in 2018- and the artisan cheese fairs in Lladó, Bellver de Cerdanya and Borredà.

Also, the municipality of [La Vall de Boí](#) -declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000 thanks to its Romanesque heritage- has held the International Cheese Fair since 2015, a further example of the growing interest in this product and the strength that small producers are achieving when it comes to incorporating new communication channels for their products. Consumer tourists who attend this type of event are characterized by their concern for the sustainable management of resources and their desire to know and value the effort behind the development of a product that is made and consumed observing respect for the local territory, landscape and culture. In this context, the tourist and gastronomic experience plays a significant role, whereby visitors and tourists can visit farms, observe the production or maturation process, and taste the product where it is produced and where it retains all of its rural essence. Thus, cheese forms part of an increasing number of programs that are committed to regional development, based on rural appeal and sustainability, and in line with movements such as that of Slow Food.

To sum up, then, tourism is a form of innovation that helps producers make their farms profitable. The relationship between agriculture and livestock breeding and tourism is an increasingly relevant one, as is the fact that the primary sector became less prominent as the 20th century progressed. This loss of economic relevance is now being recovered through tourism, however. The value of cheese making industry, via the own products and dishes, or through visits to workshops and attendance at fairs as examples of tourist

products, show how the territory largely influences products' taste –literally and symbolically-, understanding them as the sum of its physical and human landscapes. In this learning context, discovering the processes associated with milk and cheese –also as pedagogical resources- is also increasing in importance, school visits becoming another important form of tourist activity.

Finally, there is a need for a commitment to collaboration. This can be achieved by cheese producers through the establishment of associations that gain resources by uniting several producers, allowing them to start new innovation processes such as internationalization. Collaboration can also be structured through the combination of different food products, as already happens in the Catalan Pyrenees with cheese and wine or cheese and honey. This grants tourists entry into the local gastronomic culture in a wider way, through more visible tourist resources, such as joint tastings or visits. The industry also benefits from many of these local producers being part of other tourist resources -museums on rural living, for example- and products and services being offered through tourist offices, which is the definitive step to forming part of the gastronomic tourism of a destination in a structured way.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Cheese in Catalonia, and specifically in the area of the Pyrenees, has been produced and consumed on family farms for centuries, and only the surplus has been sold at markets. Milk was not a highly-consumed product in Catalan society until the beginning of the twentieth century, when the arrival of Dutch livestock -more productive than the native breeds- led to milk having an increasingly larger supply and demand. Later, this resulted in a rise in cheese making, which was not consolidated until well into the second half of the century. Artisan cheese makers began to proliferate as a form of diversifying primary sector activities, innovating to survive, with cheese coming to occupy a place in the consumer imaginary. This article contributes to the understanding of how innovation has been used to structure a niche tourism, namely cheese tourism. First, based on diversified production as a form of product innovation, and then as a form of process innovation within the tourism industry.

Cheese is an example of culinary culture and therefore of cultural and rural identity. In this sense, artisan cheese generates wide acceptance and now increasing interest for several reasons, including the fact that cheese is a local, natural and traditional product. Visits to production areas also represent a key factor in promoting the product, as they allow tourists and visitors to see the actual artisan, the person who, in short, lives the reality behind the product and the consequent authenticity that this entails. This article has analyzed the recent history of cheese making in the western Pyrenees, a key region for understanding rural Catalonia. The results show how a sector can be transformed through innovation, first via the product itself, and then thanks to its interaction as part

of the tourist and gastronomic products offered by a region. Thus, [while this study is limited to a region in Catalonia](#), one of the main contributions of this research is to show how innovation in the cheese making industry helps to transform a territory. Interaction between primary activities and tourism has then been the result of innovative management by the cheese producers themselves. As we have seen in the theoretical section, and despite the characteristics of the sector, entrepreneurship is one of the determining forces for innovation (Jackson and Murphy, 2006; Lee, Wall and Kovacs, 2015; UNWTO, 2017). Within this context, gastronomic tourism practices serve to confirm the entrepreneurial role of local producers in regional tourism development.

Cheese making has undergone various transformations during its history, just as production and sales processes have also evolved. What has not changed is cheese being rooted in a territory, and its ability to transmit the cultural and natural idiosyncrasies of a place; in short, the taste of its landscapes and the characteristics of its lifestyles. Each cheese therefore has its unique nuances and is associated with a unique place, which is very relevant when it comes to positioning and promoting the product and the destination through the differentiation and competitiveness that derive from it (Henderson, 2009). At the same time, it is also necessary to take into account the variety of flavors the product has throughout the year, since feeding of the animals from which milk is obtained also varies according to the conditions of each season. This reinforces the importance of the meanings associated with its *terroir* and helps to justify tourists' gastronomic motivations (Stanley and Stanley, 2015), who appreciate rural identity through cooking and gastronomy (López-Guzmán, Di-Clemente and Hernández-Mogollón, 2014).

Thus, the relationship between primary sector activities and tourism is an example of innovation in itself. In this article, the relationship between rurality and tourism is shown through cheese as a gastronomic product. This product generates different levels of attractiveness and a great variety of resources, which include visits to multiple places that are conceived as innovative formats for reaching the gastronomic tourist -for example, local fairs-. [This also matches with recent studies which have developed innovation as a process that, applied to food tourism, can contribute to regional development. Here, Rachão et al. \(2019\) define a range of examples that illustrates these linkages, which were also observed in this research. This is primarily the case of new cheeses or new ways of interaction with visitors and tourists, and of collaboration with other food producers.](#) -As the literature review revealed, gastronomic tourism is a key tool for local and regional economic development and demonstrates the social value of gastronomy from a sustainable point of view, based on empowerment of the rural economy (Slocum and Curtis, 2018). Since food and culinary traditions are the sum of all the elements that make up the landscape of a region (Bessièrè, 1998), gastronomic tourism therefore reflects the importance of food in culture -including today's postmodernist one-. Furthermore, in the case of cheese tourism in particular, it highlights the role of local producers in its economic development and that related to

tourism. [In other words, how local, food, and rural based businesses award tourism value to cheese.](#)

This is one of the main practical implications of the investigation, where food tourism emerged as an innovation process that largely contributes to the economic survival of local small agri-food businesses. That said, there are several challenges still facing the cheese making industry in rural Catalonia, and in particular in its relationship with tourism. Tourism in rural areas is seasonal, and in some places, access is made difficult by the lack of infrastructure and adverse weather conditions in the winter months. These external factors continue to demand constant innovation in relation to the product and its distribution and sales processes, as detailed in the previous section. The key to the growth of this sector must continue to be working in the same direction that has led it to become consolidated for over three decades: traditional cheeses, with a great variety of products, and direct marketing (ACREFA, 2012) with special relevance awarded to traditional fairs, as earlier revisited. These characteristics can be maintained thanks to the family structure of these small and medium-sized agri-food companies in rural areas (Flanigan, Blackstock and Hunter, 2014; Getz and Carlsen, 2000; Kallmuenzer and Peters, 2018). Among the future challenges and future research opportunities, in line with what establishes the General Directorate of Food, Quality and Agri-Food Industries (2010), further efforts must be made to catalog existing cheeses, promote associations between milk producers and cheeses makers, boost livestock farming with native livestock, and help diversify the sale of cheeses through promotion, marketing, and the physical distribution of the product.

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