

Food shining amid nature: marketing potatoes in the Prades mountains (Catalonia, Spain)

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Montserrat Crespi-Vallbona

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

Francesc Fusté-Forné

Department of Business, University of Girona, Girona, Spain, and

Ester Noguer-Juncà

Department of Economics, University of Girona, Girona, Spain

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Abstract

Purpose – While gastronomy has become a major tourist attraction for rural territories, its study in protected areas remains underexplored. These places use their cultural and natural heritage and landscape, as well as their local identity, to charm visitors. Gastronomy plays a key role in this, and restaurants do their best to promote local food products. The aim of this article is to use a qualitative and case study approach to analyze the marketing and touristic impact of Prades potatoes (“Patata de Prades”), which are certified with a Protected Geographical Indication.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 16 semi-structured interviews with restaurateurs (11) and producers (4) and the manager of the local cooperative (1) are the basis for examining the importance of this potato as a form of tourist attraction, its commercialization processes and the role it plays in the development of this protected rural region of Catalonia, in the north-east of Spain.

Findings – The results show that despite the great success of restaurants and food-based tourism with regard to Prades potatoes, the sustainability and future of this starchy vegetable are not guaranteed due to the scarcity of production, as it is a seasonal commodity and there is a lack of generational replacement in farming.

Originality/value – Food tourism that relies on local produce represents a “green” model for community development, but a specific public program is required to support the agricultural sector in the isolated areas to prevent the disappearance of this economic sector.

Keywords Food tourism, Gastronomy marketing, Rural areas

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Natural and rural settings are traditional tourist destinations for people looking to escape from their urban routines and reach out to their ancestral roots. These environments are highly attractive places, and are also major drivers of economic development (Bauman, 2011; Alabart Vilà *et al.*, 2015). Natural protected areas feature a wide range of nature-based activities and gourmet cuisine, and local identity is an essential attribute that contrasts with today’s globalized society. Hence, destinations need to take strategic action to develop and create products that satisfy the consumer’s desire for authentic, profound, specific and unique experiences (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007). Food and beverages have a key role to play in this despite often being underrepresented in campaigns to promote natural protected areas.

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When rural and natural destinations support local produce, they are also indirectly supporting the agricultural production of traditional family farmers, and consequently the sustainability of these isolated areas, understanding sustainability as the development strategy that allows to ensure that resources are managed to satisfy economic, social and aesthetic requirements while preserving cultural integrity, ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (UNWTO, 2005). In the case of Prades potatoes, the link between local products and their unique origins and features is protected and promoted by quality labels, such as protected geographical indications (Bowen, 2010).

This paper is focused on the role of a local product in the development of tourism in a natural area in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain (Plate 1). This is the Prades Potato (“Patata de Prades”) that is grown in the Prades Mountains (“Muntanyes de Prades”). There are four municipalities (Prades, Capafonts, La Febró and Arbolí, located in the county of Baix Camp, province of Tarragona) that belong to the “Patata de Prades” Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and these are located in a natural area of extraordinary biological and paleontological interest (Cartañà i Martí, 1994; Molero *et al.*, 2016), whose tourist value is widely acknowledged (Bové Sans and Rabassa Figueras, 2020). The attraction of this tasty variety of potato is grounded on the strong relationship between place (Prades Mountains), practice (harvest and sale of potatoes) and people (local stakeholders). This study contributes to recent discussions that have shed light on the relationship between food and tourism in other potato-producing regions such as the Vall de Camprodon (Noguer-Juncà *et al.*, 2021).

The paper draws on existing food tourism literature to advance the understanding of the drivers of the relationships between food and tourism in protected areas. It adopts a case study approach to the restaurateurs’ and producers’ views of the “Patata de Prades” as a tourist attraction, focusing on the commercialization process from the consideration that gastronomy plays an important role in the development of rural environments. Qualitative analysis was based on data collected from semi-structured interviews with 11 restaurateurs and four producers from the “Patata de Prades” PGI area, and the manager of the local cooperative. The purpose of the research is to achieve a better understanding of the



Plate 1.
View of the
“Muntanyes de
Prades”

Note(s): Picture of a tree in the forefront with the immensity of Prades mountains at the background under the blue sky

Source(s): Own source, photo by Francesc Fusté-Forné

marketing processes of the Prades potato, its use as a culinary ingredient and its future sustainability as a tourist attraction. The conclusions are optimistic with regard to the important role exerted by this potato in developing the economy and tourism of this PGI area, but pessimistic in terms of future continuity due to the lack of young farmers to replenish the traditional workforce and the valorization of regional resources.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 *The uniqueness of local food products*

Food tourism “includes connecting tourists to local foodways which encompass food as well as all of the processes, contexts, and meanings associated with the production, harvesting, processing, cooking, serving, and consumption of food” (Knollenberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 380). All these ‘moments’ lead visitors to discover food tourism products (Sims, 2009). From a community perspective, the food tourism value chain boosts regional identity and integrity (Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Local food and beverages contribute to “a sense of place” that creates a unique experience for visitors – tasting a product is tasting the regional identity (Sidali *et al.*, 2015) – adds value to the destination and provides social and economic benefits for local residents (Haven-Tang and Jones, 2005; Noguer-Juncà *et al.*, 2021). According to Fusté-Forné and Mundet i Cerdan (2021), “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. Examples of this in Catalonia would be Priorat wine, Prades potatoes and Pyrenean cheese” (p. 171).

In this regard, the niche marketing of food specialties – for example, a locally produced potato – are a means to expose visitors to a local distinctiveness (Latorre *et al.*, 2021; Sidali *et al.*, 2015) that relies on cultural and natural capital. The sale of agricultural products at the local level – for example, in restaurants – contributes to the preservation of and respect for the landscape (Socher and Tschurtschenthaler, 1994), i.e. the natural capital of a destination. At the same time, local products reflect their growers’ expertise (Belletti *et al.*, 2007), hence showcasing a region’s cultural capital. This natural and cultural capital is also targeted by visitors who seek to connect both with nature and people (Ilbery *et al.*, 2005). A natural environment becomes more attractive when visitor experiences make use of local foods (Fusté-Forné, 2021).

2.2 *Food as a developer of tourism in protected areas*

The experience of food in its local context, in the same place as that where it is grown, endows visitors with “deeper human connections, wellbeing, and a greater sense of reciprocity with the natural environment” (Chassagne and Everingham, 2019, p. 1911). Tourism in the countryside directly engages visitors with nature (Lane, 1994) and acts as “an instrument for the conservation and renaissance of rural society and culture” (Boukas, 2019, p. 63). Nature-based tourism (Mandić, 2019) contributes to the well-being of both communities and visitors, and food in natural environments is an important ingredient of tourism experiences (Newsome, 2020), especially in protected areas (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013).

However, the role of food tourism in the development of protected areas is understudied. In this regard, “the international research literature documents that park administrations have tended to neglect the role of food and food-based experiences in parks, despite park visitors preferring more attractive eating facilities, purchasing opportunities and food-related interpretation” (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013, p. 417). Although this was pointed out a few years ago, academic efforts to further analyze the issue were scarce, and this paper contributes to the conversations and help to fill the gap in research. It is a particularly topical matter in Catalonia, where recent studies have also highlighted the meaningful impact of

geology on food tourism in the context of La Garrotxa Volcanic Zone Natural Park (Fusté-Forné and Pont-Llagostera, 2021) and the case of Santa Pau beans. This paper adds to that case study by exploring the role of the mountains and potatoes of Prades as a tourist attraction.

2.3 Quality labels protect and promote unique food

Food destinations must be able to define their competitive advantage (Knollenberg *et al.*, 2021). Both cultural and natural capital are at the source of geographical indications, which in turn are at the source of food tourism based on local ingredients and “regions with particular configurations of natural and cultural capital that allow for the development of geographical indications possess a competitive advantage in the development of local food tourism” (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013, p. 15). According to Contreras and Medina (2021), in the European Union, the valorization of agri-food products has been based on the quality labels linked to given regions, such as the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). To mention a few examples, in Catalonia there are such PGI as “poma de Girona” (Girona apple), “turró d’Agramunt” (Agramunt nougat) and “patata de Prades” (Prades potato), the focus of this research; and also PDO like “oli de Terra Alta” (Terra Alta olive oil), “fesols de Santa Pau” (Santa Pau beans) and “arròs del Delta de l’Ebre” (Ebro Delta rice).

Products with a geographical indication also help to make tourism more sustainable because they are culturally distinctive (Durlu-Özkaya *et al.*, 2013), but also because they are a means to transfer the local culture and environment to future generations (Akdağ *et al.*, 2016; Everett and Slocum, 2013). Previous research on the links between food products, quality labels and tourism activity show that products with a quality label help to diversify the forms of tourism in rural areas (Armesto and Gómez, 2004; Contreras and Medina, 2021), but that tourism can also help to boost the identity of products with food quality labels (Millán *et al.*, 2014; Contreras and Medina, 2021). Geographical indications support a region’s sustainability through the protection of heritage and traditions (Murgado, 2013). This is particularly relevant when there is tangible heritage at risk of being neglected and abandoned, for geographical certifications can help to protect and even recuperate it. A specific example of this is the PDO ‘Pla de Bages’, which led to the recovery and preservation of the large wine vats, which as a form of cultural heritage were in ruins (Crespi-Vallbona and Mascarilla-Miró, 2020). It also happens in areas where traditional practices are very important, then, this intangible heritage should also be considered and preserved along the tangible ones (Crespi-Vallbona and Richards, 2007). In the case of the municipalities that are part of the ‘Patata de Prades’ Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), all of them have an agriculture tradition transmitted generation after generation.

2.4 Food in culture, culture in nature, nature in tourism experiences

In recent years, the range of tourism options in rural destinations has increasingly focused on the commercialization and promotion of intangible cultural resources, such as food-based products and cuisine (see, for example, Varisco, 2016; Noguer-Juncà *et al.*, 2021). This encourages tourists to visit the regions where food is produced. Local food hence plays a major role in the marketing of destinations (du Rand and Heath, 2006) and for motivating visitors (Armesto and Gómez, 2004; Kivela and Crofts, 2006; Pamukçu *et al.*, 2021). In particular, several authors have highlighted the prominent role of restaurants as venues for socioeconomic consumption (Mendes *et al.*, 2021; Everett, 2019; Robinson *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, marketing efforts in food tourism are “not directed at tourists alone and residents are important actual or potential consumers of special food products. Many restaurants and events depend on local support, which helps to alleviate any adverse consequences of a

seasonal pattern of tourist arrivals” (Henderson, 2009, p. 320). This makes restaurants especially relevant for protecting their regions and promoting an authentic experience. This research adds to this conversation by examining the case of Prades’ potatoes and mountains.

In line with what was observed in previous paragraphs, “tourists seeking nature and culture are particularly interested in sampling local food products and tasting authentic regional recipes” (du Rand and Heath, 2006, p. 212). Therefore, as Crespi-Vallbona (2021) states, there is currently a demand for emotional experiences that include local content, significant knowledge, participation or interaction with local residents and food producers and the opportunity to taste local food. These aspects all produce moments of nostalgia and pleasure and help rural locations to develop economically, although the study also observes that there is no guarantee that farm businesses will be able to continue (Crespi-Vallbona and Plana-Farran, 2023). Hadelan *et al.* (2021) adds that products with geographical indications contribute to the development of tourism. A quality label protects and promotes the quality of agricultural products, the places where they are produced and the people who produce them. Drawing from this win-win relationship between the primary and tourism sectors, this paper focuses on Prades potatoes, a product with a quality label in a protected area in the south of Catalonia, Spain.

3. Materials and methods

This study explores the promotion of Prades potatoes as a tourist attraction in the municipalities that are part of the “Patata de Prades” Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (Figure 1). The PGI was approved in August 2002 by the Catalan government, and included in Community Register N° 148/2007 on 15 February 2007. Prades potatoes are white and have a distinctively hard, smooth skin, a consistent sweet, floury texture and a slightly brownish smell (Cooperativa de Prades, 2022). The main tourist attractions of the area are outdoor activities and cultural visits, while in addition to Prades potatoes, the food tourism offer also includes Reus hazelnuts, which are also acknowledged with a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO).



Note(s): The symbol of ‘Patata de Prades’ PGI in yellow with the Prades fountain at the centre in blue

Source(s): Cooperativa de Prades (2022)

Figure 1.
“Patata de Prades” PGI
symbol

The four municipalities of the PGI are Prades, Capafonts, La Febró and Arbolí (Figure 2), all of which lie in the “Muntanyes de Prades” Natural Protected Area, which is also considered a Natural Site of National Interest and a Special Protection Area (SPA) of the Natura 2000 Network. Due to its biological diversity and richness, variety of habitats and landscapes, and the archeological sites included in the UNESCO World Heritage list since 1998 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021) as part of the Rock Art of the Mediterranean Basin on the Iberian Peninsula (UNESCO, 2021), there is also a project to declare the region a Natural Park in the near future. Since October 2021, the region has been recognized as a Starlight Tourism Destination and is the largest area in Europe to have a protected night sky (Starlight Foundation, 2021).

This paper adopts a case study approach to the restaurateurs’ and producers’ views of Prades potatoes as a tourist attraction. It focuses on the commercialization processes from the consideration of the important role that gastronomy plays in the development of tourism in protected areas. Due to the need to adopt an exploratory approach, the research uses a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews in order to capture in-depth details about phenomena that cannot be conveyed in quantitative data (Bryman and Bell, 2015). According to Walsh (2003), a qualitative methodology is essential to study subjects in their natural settings and to understand the reasons why individuals hold certain views on specific issues, and also to study the circumstances from a local perspective (Bartunek and



Figure 2. Map of the municipalities in the county of Baix Camp, province of Tarragona

Note(s): Map of the municipalities of Prades, Capafonts, La Febró and Arbolí in the northern part of the county of Baix Camp, province of Tarragona

Source(s): Institut Cartogràfic i Geològic de Catalunya

Seo, 2002). The validity of this qualitative research is based on analysis of the interviewees' comments (Tracy, 2010).

Using non-probability purposive sampling, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted until reaching the entire universe. The interviews were held with 11 restaurant managers from the four municipalities of the "Patata de Prades" PGI and with the manager of the PGI, the local cooperative (Table 1). The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors of the research between November and December 2021. The interviews were carried out using video conference platforms and telephone calls and lasted between 30 and 40 min. They were recorded for further analysis.

The interview questions emerged from the existing academic literature on local food products and gastronomy in the promotion of rural areas and the marketing of food-based tourism (see, for example, Noguer-Juncà *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, the interviews were based on three blocks of questions: (1) the marketing and promotion of the Prades potato and partnerships between public and private organizations; (2) the economic repercussions of the product for the restaurant industry in the region and the development of rural tourism and (3) the sustainability of food tourism in the municipalities of the PGI in the natural area of the Prades mountains.

Additionally, interviews with producers (Table 2) were conducted in January 2022 to better analyze the promotion and impact on tourism of Prades potatoes. A question about current and past production of potatoes was added to the interview script. There are 14 producers, 13 of whom are members of the Prades cooperative and one who works independently. It is worth to mention that, currently, all the producers are from the

Interviewee	Type of stakeholder	Organization	Municipality	Number of years in the business	Gender	Age
I1	Restaurateur	Fonda Espasa	Prades	+60 years	Male	+60
I2	Restaurateur	Hotel Restaurant La Botiga	Prades	+20 years	Female	+50
I3	Restaurateur	L'Hostalet	L'Arbolí	+22 years	Male	+40
I4	Restaurateur	DPrades	Prades	+6 anys	Female	+40
I5	Restaurateur	Gastroteca				
I6	Restaurateur	Tretze Pams	Prades	-1 year	Male	+40
I7	Restaurateur	Braseria La Taverna	Prades	+10 years	Female	+30
I8	Restaurateur	Bar Braseria Gran Recorregut 17	Prades	+10 years	Male	+50
I9	Restaurateur	Camping de Prades	Prades	+31 years	Female	+30
I10	Restaurateur	Hostal de La Perdiu	La Febró	+20 years	Male	+60
I11	Secretary of the Regulatory Council of the Patata de Prades PGI	Cooperativa de Prades	Prades	+75 years	Female	+50
I12	Restaurateur	Bar Restaurant El Grèvol	Capafonts	-1 year	Female	+40
I13	Restaurateur	Restaurant La Font de Prades	Prades	+50 years	Male	+28

Source(s): Own elaboration

Table 1.
Profiles of restaurateurs

municipality of Prades because the majority of hectares of this crop are located in the municipality of Prades, and the rest of towns are smaller and produce the potatoes mostly for their own consumption (Cooperativa de Prades, 2022). Four interviews were carried out via video conference platforms and telephone calls and they also lasted between 30 and 40 min. They were also recorded for further analysis.

After data collection, all of the interviews were transcribed. Both the interviews and the analyses were carried out in Catalan, and the quotations presented in this paper have been translated from the original language into English. Analysis of the interviewees' responses included codification and categorization into thematic topics, as discussed and agreed on by the authors of the paper. As a result of the thematic analysis, three main topics were identified: (1) marketing of Prades potatoes; (2) the role of potatoes in tourism and (3) the future of potato-based tourism.

4. Results and discussion

This section analyses the data collected on the restaurateurs' and producers' views of the Prades potato as a local food resource and tourist attraction, and discusses the successful way in which these potatoes have been marketed, the role of gastronomy in the development of rural tourism in the local municipalities, and the future outlook for food tourism based on the Prades potato.

4.1 Marketing identity of Prades potatoes

The Prades potatoes have a notorious image and recognition in Catalonia. In this sense, several interviewees argue that there is no need to promote the Prades potato in the local market because it is already prestigious. I6 claims that "Prades is already known both for its potato and for its mountains, hiking trails and hazelnuts" and I12 claims that "the Prades potato sells itself." As I7 mentions, "some visitors certainly come to Prades because they know the name of the town through the potato. Many of them, when they finish eating dishes made with the Prades potato will ask where they can buy these potatoes." Hence, marketing through the restaurant industry evidently has a positive effect on knowledge of this variety of potato in the region, and plenty of local stores sell bags of potatoes as part of the region's culinary identity (Plate 2).

However, the restaurateurs in three of the municipalities of the "Patata de Prades" PGI, namely Capafonts, La Febró and Arbolí, feel a certain disappointment that the population only associates the potato with Prades, leaving the others somewhat in its shadow. This is exemplified by how the PGI symbol features the famous Prades fountain (Plate 3). Some of the interviewees describe this situation in their own words: I3 points out that "the promotion of the Prades potato has not had a positive impact on my business . . . it may be because we are on the geographical boundaries of the Prades massif" and I11 says that "Capafonts lives in the shadow of Prades. People think that the potato is only from Prades and they don't know that the PGI has more towns. Prades is like the capital and we're in second place." This

Interviewee	Type of stakeholder	Municipality	Number of years in the business	Gender	Age
I13	Producer	Prades	+40 years	Male	60
I14	Producer	Prades	+40 years	Male	+60
I15	Producer	Prades	+40 years	Male	+55
I16	Producer	Prades	+40 years	Male	55

Table 2.
Profiles of producers

Source(s): Own elaboration



Note(s): Picture of a bag of Prades potatoes certified with a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) lying in the landscape, with the Prades mountains in the background

Source(s): Own source, photo by Francesc Fusté-Forné

Plate 2.
Bag of Prades potatoes



Note(s): Picture of the Prades fountain, a spherical Renaissance fountain, in the main square of the village

Source(s): Own source, photo by Francesc Fusté-Forné

Plate 3.
The Prades fountain

centrality of Prades is also manifested by it being the point of departure for some of the walking and cycling trails into the Prades Mountains.

The “Cooperativa de Prades”, which manages the “Patata de Prades” PGI, oversees the production and quality of this potato. It assigns a number to each farmer. As I1 explains, “bags of potatoes must display each farmer’s reference number and the day the sack was packed.” I9 adds that “any potato that does not meet the quality standards or required measures is considered second class [and cannot be sold under the PGI]. Everything is very controlled.” This also applies to the packaging of these second-class potatoes (Plate 4). Production is strictly controlled, for as I13 states, “I sell my potatoes at the cooperative, from home and in restaurants. If the potatoes weigh more than 300 grams they can’t be sold under the PGI, so I can only sell them from home or to some restaurants in Prades, Cambrils [a popular coastal resort], and Montblanc [a popular medieval town]. In some cases, there are very loyal families, grandparents, parents and now children, who come to my house to buy potatoes.” I11 adds that “we classify the potatoes as first class, the ones that are sold with the PGI label, and second class, which are rejected by the PGI.”

The cooperative also deals with the dissemination and promotion of the local product, not only sales, which depend on each producer. As I10 explains, “the PGI is only in charge of advertising. Each operator coordinates its own sales.” Prades has also held a Potato Festival, organized by the Prades Cooperative with the support of Prades Town Council, annually since 1990 on the Sunday following September 11 (Catalonia’s national holiday). The event is also supported by Tarragona Provincial Council and the Government of Catalonia’s Ministry of Agriculture. I2 comments that “during the potato festival we create a special menu.” The



Plate 4.
Prades potatoes sold as
second class

Note(s): Bags of potatoes grown in Prades and
packed as second class

Source(s): Own source, photo by Francesc Fusté-Forné

interviewees view the event positively, as illustrated by the words of I4, who recognizes that “there is an annual harvest festival, which has probably done a lot of good.” These partnerships between public administration and private organizations emphasize the shared effort to keep rural areas and their natural and cultural capital attractive, in line with [Belletti et al. \(2007\)](#), as the expertise of all the restaurateurs in this PGI area fosters respect for and preservation of its identity.

Some interviewees consider there to be few shortcomings with the promotion of the Prades Potato. I9 says that “the Prades potato doesn’t need promoting. It has more demand than supply.” However, there are others who disagree and would like to see greater efforts put into promoting the product. I3 argues for the “need to get the word out and work more as a network” and I5 says that “there is a lack of promotion. Sure, there are a lot of ads for the potato, and also for hiking trails and wine tourism . . . but more is needed. They just hold a festival and nothing else.” On the same matter, I10 says that “we have been advertising on the radio for two years . . . the federation of quality labels runs joint marketing campaigns for several PDOs and PGIs at levels that we could not afford . . . but I think we should move more . . . above all to be more present on social networks.” Here, I11 comments that “with the pandemic we thought we wouldn’t be able to sell the produce but one of my sons sold them through Instagram [[@patatesdalmau.prades](#)]. It was a great idea.” While the potato can evidently be sold in communication spaces that are not viable for a single producer and whose costs can only be assumed if there is collaboration between stakeholders, small actions are required to increase the Prades potato’s visibility with a focus on small business innovation ([Antão-Geraldes and Sheppard, 2020](#)).

4.2 A food product for developing tourism

Regarding the commercialization of the Prades potato, all the interviewees agreed that its popularization has helped to attract tourists to the region, in line with [Haven-Tang and Jones \(2005\)](#) and other research that has analyzed how synergies between food and tourism are developed (see [Fusté-Forné and Wolf, 2023](#)). Although the area had been popular among tourists for years due to the attraction of its natural environment in contrast to the city, little had been done to exploit the beneficial characteristics of this specific variety of potato. As I1 explains “Prades is at an altitude of 1,000 meters and in summer, people come from the city of Barcelona to take in the pure air, but also in winter when the cold air is dry and not humid like in the city.” The potato has boosted the image of Prades as a tourist destination. Thus, following [Hadelan et al. \(2021\)](#), the data collected in this research confirms that products with geographical indications help to develop tourism.

This research also analyses the degree of importance of the Prades potato to the food tourism industry in the region and as part the future economic and social sustainability of the rural municipalities included in the Patata de Prades PGI. In tune with [Varisco \(2016\)](#), the attraction of this particular tourist destination is its natural environment, as well as its intangible cultural resources, such as food-based products and cuisine. As [du Rand and Heath \(2006\)](#) state, the Prades potato is a local food that has a relevant role to play in the promotion of the Prades Mountain region where it is grown and harvested. This is illustrated in [Plate 5](#), which shows the town of La Febró with the Prades Mountains in the background.

Data collected and analyzed show that the restaurants in the PGI region use the Prades potato because it is a very versatile product, with the particularity that no matter how long it is cooked, it never crumbles. Furthermore, it can be served in different ways, both as a garnish and as the basis for a main dish. As I2 explains, “you can leave the potato boiling for an hour and it doesn’t matter, which is why we use it in many stews and roasts.” I5 adds that “we sometimes fry them directly to make *bravas* and there are other times when we make *parmentier* with a potato base, or steak tartare with potatoes.”



Plate 5.
La Febró and the
Prades mountains

Note(s): A panoramic view of the village of La Febró surrounded by the Prades mountains and the blue sky

Source(s): Own source, photo by Francesc Fusté-Forné

The interviewees affirm that the Prades potato helps to offer the customers of local restaurants a more satisfactory gastronomic experience as they get to enjoy a product that is grown just few meters away. I4 claims that “the goal for our business is to work with our own products and those of zero food miles, we feel really happy and it helps us a lot.” I9 adds that “in the town of Prades, I can assure you that there was a before and an after the creation of the PGI. It helped my business. More than attracting customers, it helped me make the customer happier and more satisfied because they had enjoyed eating.” Hence, in line with different scholars (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013; Knollenberg *et al.*, 2021), the Patata de Prades PGI and its associated cuisine has created a competitive advantage for this region in the development of local businesses and food tourism, and consequently, its economic and social sustainability which must also contribute to the holistic well-being of the destination.

Another important aspect to consider in the case of gastronomic products is seasonality (Fusté-Forné, 2022). Three of the interviewed restaurants have their own fields where these tubers are grown, and so they do not need to buy them in. As I6 points out, “we plant them organically. We don’t sell them. We only use them at home and in the restaurant. So we have potatoes for the whole year and we don’t have to buy any.” ‘Farm to fork’ is even more relevant in these businesses. Restaurants that do not produce their own potatoes have to buy them from the cooperative or directly from the producers. As I7 states, “I buy them from two or three growers. First, I buy from one and when he has no more potatoes, I buy from another. As of Easter, when they no longer have any, I buy a potato with the” *trumfa del Pirineu* “certification, which is also of the *Kennebeck* variety.” This also confirms one of the statements made earlier, that demand is higher than production, and that the Prades potato has a particular role to play in promoting food tourism in the area, thus helping to preserve its natural and cultural identity (Socher and Tschurtschenthaler, 1994; Noguer-Juncà *et al.*, 2021).

4.3 The future of a local resource as a tourist attraction

Finally, with regards to the future outlook for food tourism based on the “Patata de Prades” PGI, the interviewed restaurateurs are not very hopeful. Most of them mention the lack of

continuity among farmers and potato producers: there is no generational replacement. As I8 states, “production is scarce . . . there are no young people working in this . . . and what’s more, we don’t have this product for the whole year . . . so, scarce production and seasonality are certainly the main limitations of the Prades potato.” Another respondent (I2) says that “there is no replacement, there are no young farmers” and I1 adds that “there are no young people because the crops depend on the weather and farmers never know if they’ll be paid or when or how much.” This is also the case in other local production environments in mountain areas, whose future remains uncertain (Fusté-Forné, 2020), and the protection and promotion of local food depends on the perspectives of local stakeholders. I7 observes a contradiction between the promotion and production of this tuber, stating that “we cannot promote the Prades potato or otherwise we’d have supply problems because there is less production every year.”

Therefore, the near future is not invigorating. With less Prades potatoes production, new organic ways to work the field and get the harvest, and the need to maintain (even reduce) costs in businesses, the restaurateurs could also change their way of doing to contribute to the economic and social sustainability of the region. Currently, the Prades potatoes are on the menus of all the restaurants in the four municipalities in the PGI, with just one exception (I3), who says that “we don’t use it because it’s very expensive . . . 1 euro per kilo . . . even though it’s true that it’s better, it doesn’t pay for me. My supplier brings me another kind that may not be so good, but it’s cheaper.” The issue of price is also raised by I6, who says “maybe I should tell you that they sell it very expensively.”

The scenario is even more pessimistic from the producers’ point of view. All interviewees agreed that the Prades potato will only survive for another decade at the very most. I14 says “it will end up disappearing. I give it four or five years of life. All the producers are over 55 years old” and I15 confirms that “this is coming to the end.” The producers feel that the production of Prades potatoes, like other products such as hazelnuts, will disappear due to the lack of generational replacement. People prefer to receive a decent, fixed salary, but potato harvests vary and are weather-dependent. In short, the agricultural sector is extremely demanding. As I16 explains, “there are no young people because they want a salary and not uncertainty. In my case, in February I’ll deliver the last potatoes to the Cooperative but I will not get paid until July.” This feeling is shared by other producers such as I13 who states that “now we are going to sell the potatoes and the hazelnuts, but I won’t be paid until July or August” and I14 says that “you can’t make a living . . . for example, fertilizers are three times more expensive than last year . . . but I have to sell the potatoes at the same price.” So, it is evident, as in other rural regions, that the main problem is the lack of producers and the challenges embedded in rural work. Some producers comment that they do not want their children to work as producers, such as I14 who says: “I have a son and I don’t want him to stay here” and I12 who says “I have two sons. I like them coming here to help me to pick potatoes or hazelnuts but they went to university and work in the city. They have to make their own lives . . . but it doesn’t mean that I’m not glad when they come to help me.”

This lack of generational replacement in family agricultural businesses is constant and widespread throughout Catalonia. Not only in rural areas like this and other cases (Crespi-Vallbona and Plana-Farran, 2023), but also in urban areas where farmers’ markets are popular but declining in number because new generations prefer jobs in other sectors and value their leisure time much more than their forebears (Crespi-Vallbona and Dimitrovski, 2018). In this regard, the future of the Prades potato as a tourist resource is not guaranteed, and presents a challenge for the economic and social sustainability of local stakeholders. Nonetheless, it is clear that the pairing of local food and tourism in rural areas holds major economic and social value. Both contribute to the preservation of local food heritage and cultural traditions as a source of attraction in protected areas.

5. Conclusions

This paper examines restaurateurs' and producers' views of the Prades potato as a local resource and a tourist attraction, focusing on the commercialization process from the consideration that gastronomy plays an important role in the development of tourism in protected areas. The data collected leads us to conclude that the Prades potato plays an important role in the economic and touristic development of its PGI area. However, its future is in danger due to the lack of young farmers to replace traditional ones. Nevertheless, destination management organizations must work to promote this local product. They must emphasize the whole area (all four municipalities) and safeguard the particular identity of this region. It is well-known that there is constant tension between harnessing the collective offering of a region to attract visitors and the more local differentiation that occurs to try to win the visitor's attention within the region (Knollenberg *et al.*, 2021).

Food tourism that relies on local produce represents a "green" model for community development (Dougherty *et al.*, 2013), but a specific public program is required to support the agricultural sector in these isolated areas to prevent the disappearance of this potato crop. If there are no more Prades potato producers, the local food base ceases to exist and, consequently, the region will lose one of its main attractions. This is a controversial issue that requires innovative strategies and the involvement of different ministries, such as agriculture, entrepreneurship and tourism. There is a need for public economic support to encourage people to replace traditional farm businesses and for incentives to be offered to entrepreneurs interested in creating their own organizations related to the preservation of local food production and to the repopulation of these protected areas, which are faced with an aging population and the loss of local youths who prefer to move to urban areas to get an education and seek better jobs and a wider range of cultural and leisure options. Furthermore, the Prades Cooperative should have a more notorious role, with specific agreements to ensure Prades potatoes production to restaurateurs and grocery stores. In this sense, it could fix and control final price to avoid wiliness attitudes. It should also determine a minimum productivity level to guarantee its supply during all the year, despite of seasonal scarcity of harvest. Additionally, the cooperative could develop an education program for schools to achieve the promotion of Prades potatoes among future generations, and emphasize the values of the local product from a perspective of healthy and sustainable eating.

Rural tourism is about going to places where the local identity and gastronomy has been preserved, which includes immersion in quality label products. Local producers, restaurateurs and residents have a key role to play here, while the challenge for public administrations is to promote their survival and continuity. Hence, it would be interesting to analyze tourists' experiences with food in protected areas (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013) such as the potato-based tourism described here which expands recent conversations about the tourism value of potatoes (Giampiccoli *et al.*, 2023). Local residents should also be questioned, as they also help to keep restaurants open during the low tourism season (Henderson, 2009). Future research should also analyze potato-based initiatives, such as events, to further understand the relationships between food and tourism, and the protection and promotion of local foods as part of a unique destination portfolio.

Maybe the new movie entitled *Alcarràs*, which depicts the modern-day farming life of Catalonia, will spark a new trend among our society and foster a revival of rural towns and all their splendors. Awareness of and pride in the land and roots with which a place is identified are crucial to preserve its tangible and intangible traditional, natural and cultural heritage. Hence, public administrations need to make every effort (funding and promotional campaigns) to create synergies among all stakeholders (residents, farmers, entrepreneurs and business owners) to reinforce its rural identity and values. Without this union of interests, rural tourism will lose its basic essence and ultimately disappear.

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Corresponding author

Ester Noguer-Juncà can be contacted at: ester.noguer@udl.cat, esternoguer@gmail.com