

DIVERSITY OF TRADITIONAL ROMANIAN PRODUCTS: CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT IN RURAL REGIONS

Elisabeta P. CALIN (DRAGOMIRESCU), Adrian TUREK-RAHOVEANU

University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, 59 Marasti, District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, E-mail: elisabeta_80@yahoo.com, turek.adrian@managusamv.ro

Corresponding author: turek.adrian@managusamv.ro

Abstract

The article explores the diversity of traditional products in Romania and their impact on rural areas from a cultural and economic point of view. The characteristics and specificity of traditional products are analyzed, highlighting their essential role in preserving the country's different regions' cultural identity and gastronomic heritage. Then, the influence of these products on the local economy is investigated, with a particular emphasis on the development of small agricultural businesses, supporting traditional farmers and stimulating rural tourism. The article presents the importance of diversifying traditional products to increase their competitiveness in the national market, highlighting successful examples from the South Muntenia Region in their valorization. Last, a series of challenges encountered in promoting and protecting traditional products are presented, including legal regulations, market access and risks related to the loss of authenticity. The article's conclusions propose a series of solutions for supporting traditional Romanian products, considering both economic and cultural aspects.

Key words: traditional Romanian products, influence, valorization, promotion, support, authenticity, diversification

INTRODUCTION

Diversifying traditional products is an effective strategy for attracting a larger number of customers. It not only improves a business's offering but also responds to the diverse needs of consumers. Somehow, Diversification can attract more customers by offering unique and authentic products, noting that traditional products are often handmade and reflect the cultural specificities of a region. This uniqueness gives them a competitive advantage as consumers increasingly seek authenticity in their choices. Diversifying the product range allows businesses to offer items that are not commonly available on the market, thus attracting customers who appreciate originality [20].

By diversifying the offer, businesses can improve brand visibility. A diverse range of products can attract consumer attention and generate positive discussions in the community.

Participating in local fairs and events to present directly to the customers and create an emotional connection.

Diversification allows businesses to better

serve the needs of different customer segments. For example, introducing gluten-free or vegan products can appeal to consumers with specific diets, thereby expanding their customer base. By offering a variety of options, businesses can cater to the diverse preferences of the market. Each traditional product has a unique story related to local crafts and traditions. This story can be used in marketing to create an emotional connection with customers. Consumers are often drawn to products that have cultural or historical significance, which can build customer loyalty and lead them to return for repeat purchases [5].

Product diversification can facilitate collaborations with other local producers or influencers in the field, thus expanding the distribution and promotion network. These partnerships can bring in new customers by accessing different audiences, thus increasing brand exposure.

Diversification gives businesses the flexibility to adapt quickly to changes in consumer preferences or emerging trends. This allows companies to remain relevant and competitive in a constantly changing market, which is essential for attracting a diverse clientele.

In conclusion, diversifying traditional products not only improves a business's offer but also significantly contributes to attracting a larger number of customers through uniqueness, adaptability and captivating stories. This strategy is essential for the long-term success of local businesses in the context of a competitive market. In this context, the paper aimed to explore how the diversification of traditional products can enhance the competitiveness of local businesses and strengthen their relationship with consumers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper uses data collected from the EU Eurostat Database [12] and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development [17, 18, 19]. Aspects such as National quality schemes and European quality systems aim to raise traditional products to international standards, noting that at the European Commission, they are currently being evaluated/verified for registration for another 6 emblematic traditional products for Protected Geographical Indication. In the following period, from the list of products identified with potential for registration on a quality system, documentation will be submitted for analysis, which will determine the increase in the number of products recognised as Geographical Indications at the European Union level (practically doubling their number). Research methods used in this paper include both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The quantitative analysis is based on data collected from official sources such as the EU Eurostat Database and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, while the qualitative approach involves the review of policy documents related to the registration and promotion of traditional products within national and European quality schemes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The European Union aims to become a reference model in the field of food production, promoting both modern and traditional methods. The goal is to provide high-quality, healthy and nutritious products. [9], [11].

To protect certain products that fall within the quality schemes imposed by the EU, support and media coverage related to the uniqueness of the origin and the method of preparation of each product is sought. Such products benefit from a certain regime and protection to combat counterfeiting and illicit marketing.

This category of products also includes wines with a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and spirits recognised as Geographical Indications (GI). Another group of products protected by the European Union consists of those labelled as 'Traditional Speciality Guaranteed' (TSG) [17].

In 2017, products covered by quality schemes accounted for approximately 7% of the total sales value in the European food and drink sector. Among these, wines represented more than half of that value, followed by agricultural and food products at 35%, and spirits at 13%. Out of the 3,207 product names registered in 2017, wines made up 49%, agri-food products 43%, and spirits 8%. [10].

The marketing of these products in Romania is usually done in fairs and markets, although very few are displayed on the shelves of large stores. However, the products accumulate annual sales of over 100 million euros, according to statistics from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR). Since 2013, the European Union has introduced improved regulations to support both producers and consumers, enabling agri-food products to be recognized under quality schemes such as Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). That same year, the label 'Mountain Product' was introduced, and starting in 2014, the designation 'Produced on my farm' also gained official recognition [23], [8].

According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), more than 4,000 traditional products have been registered in Romania, with the majority coming from the dairy, meat, milling, and beverage sectors [18].

Following the increasing demand for traditional products, companies decided to

conduct studies to understand consumer requirements regarding these products better. The results obtained referred to the main criteria that a food product must meet to be considered traditional Romanian: not to contain preservatives and E-numbers (29%), the recipe must be traditional (27%), to be natural, obtained with natural ingredients (23%), mentioning the area where it was originally produced (17%).

The identification and promotion of registration of products with the potential for protection and registration will encourage the production of high-quality agri-food products, which will have a positive impact on the Romanian agri-food sector as a whole.

Recognizing and registering products will make markets more competitive in the domestic and international markets, attracting the attention of consumers and opening up new business opportunities.

Participation in international fairs, exhibitions and events will contribute to increasing the exposure of Romanian agri-food products on foreign markets, thus attracting the attention of new trading partners and consumers from other countries.

Traditional products from the EU

Product names originating from specific regions possess distinct qualities and reputations that are closely tied to their geographical area of production. These products are protected under the European Union's geographical indications system. The main distinction between PDO and PGI lies in the proportion of raw materials that must originate from the designated region or in the specific stage of the production process that must occur there. The Geographical Indication (GI) label is used exclusively for spirits. The European Union safeguards a wide range of traditional products from its member states, including Romania. These products are granted designations such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) [23], [8].

Romania has 14 food products registered on European quality systems [4], [12], [13]:

Protected Geographical Indication:

1. "Magiun de prune Topoloveni" – registered

in 2011; [16]

2. "Salam de Sibiu" – registered in 2016;

3. "Novac afumat din Țara Bârsei" – registered in 2017;

4. "Smoke Danube Smurf" – registered in 2018; [7]

5. "Cârnați de Pleșcoi" – registered in 2019;

6. "Telemea de Sibiu" - registered in 2019;

7. "Cașcaval de Săveni" - registered in 2021;

8. "Tulcea pike caviar salad" - registered in 2021;

9. "Plăcintă Dobrogeană" - registered in 2023;

10. "Pită de Pecica" - registered in 2023;

11. "Salinate de Turda" – registered in 2023.

Protected Designation of Origin:

12. "Telemea de Ibănești" – registered in 2016 [6]

Traditional Speciality Guaranteed:

13. "Traditional salad with carp roe" – registered in 2021

14. "Marinated sardine made according to Romanian tradition" – registered in 2024.

The following products are auto-register entries under evaluation/verification at the European Commission to register them as Protected Geographical Indications [23],[8]:

1. "Deltaic sturgeon blog"

2. "Babic de Buzău"

3. "Vâlcea axe sausages"

4. "Teaca kneaded cheese"

5. "Poiana Mărului salami"

6. "Bere Sadu"

These products not only illustrate the gastronomic wealth of Romania but also contribute to promoting the cultural identity of the respective regions.

The protection offered by the EU helps to preserve trade options and support local producers.

In Italy, the country with the largest number of registered products at the European level, the food industry is spread everywhere; it can be said that it is the most evenly distributed industrial branch in the territory.

Italy stands out for its pastry products, olive oil, sugar, canned fish and wine (Table 1). Compared to Italy, Romania is in a lower place for specialities in this ranking at the European level, but this does not mean that Romanian traditional guaranteed specialities are not recognized and appreciated both internally and

externally. Although Romania has a long agricultural tradition and Romanian agri-food products have long been known and appreciated abroad, at the national level, there has been a lack of effective and adequate legislation that would capitalize on the elements of traditional and popular culture reflected in these products.

Table 1. Situation of the products registered at the European level

Country	Quality system (No. products)			Total General
	I.G.P.	D.O.P.	S.T.G.	
Italy	114	183	2	299
France	127	125	1	253
Spain	91	112	4	207
Germany	86	34	-	120
EU + other countries	703	690	59	1,452
Romania	11	1	2	14

Source: MADR

Old traditional food products in Europe

1. Feta (Greece)

- Origin: Antiquity
- Description: Feta cheese is one of the oldest cheeses in the world, mentioned as early as ancient Greek writings, such as Homer's "Odyssey". It is produced from sheep's milk or a combination with goat's milk [13].

2. Parmesan (Parmigiano-Reggiano) - Italy

- Origin: Middle Ages
- Description: This hard cheese has been documented since the 12th century, being produced in the Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy regions. It is known for its long maturation process and intense flavour [21].

3. Whiskey (Ireland)

- Origin: 6th century
- Description: One of the oldest spirits in the world, Irish whiskey has been distilled since the 6th century and was originally used for medicinal purposes [14].

4. Bordeaux Wines (France)

- Origin: Roman period
- Description: Wines produced in the Bordeaux region have a tradition dating back over 2,000 years and are some of the most famous wines in the world [2].

5. Cassoulet (France)

- Origin: Middle Ages

- Description: This dish based on beans, sausages, and meat (duck or pork) comes from the south of France and has its origins in medieval recipes [4].

Old traditional drinks

1. Pálinka (Hungary)

- Origin: 14th century
- Description: A spirit distilled from fruit, originating in Hungary, with a long tradition [3].

2. Grappa (Italy)

- Origin: Middle Ages
- Description: A spirit obtained by distilling the remains left after wine production, originally consumed by peasants [15].

These products reflect the cultural diversity of Europe and the importance of preserving culinary traditions passed down through the centuries. Many of them are now protected by European schemes such as PDO or PGI to preserve their authenticity.

National quality schemes

There are 3 quality schemes regulated at the national level, namely [22]:

- 1) **traditional product** ("Order No. 724/2013 on the certification of traditional products, as subsequently amended and supplemented") [19].

Romania has 792 products certified as traditional [1].

The counties with the most certified traditional products are Braşov – 170, Maramureş – 50, Argeş and Alba – 45.

- 2) **product registered according to a well-established recipe** ("Order no. 151/1460/213/2021 on the registration of well-established recipes, as well as the certification of food products obtained according to well-established recipes") [19].

At the national level, some 29 recipes are approved, and 73 products obtained according to well-established recipes are certified and registered [1].

The small number of products obtained according to established recipes is explained by the fact that the regulatory act regulating the obtaining/registration of these products was repealed, and the implementation of the new order began in the fall of 2022.

- 3) **mountain product** ("Order no. 174/2021 approves the Procedure for verifying the

conformity of data included in the product specification required to grant the right to use the optional quality term “mountain product”, as well as for conducting controls to ensure that economic operators who have obtained this right comply with both European and national legislation, including any subsequent amendments and additions”) [19].

Currently, over 4,300 mountain products (4,320) are registered in Romania [1].

European certification increases quality, but costs more

Products registered under national quality schemes and European quality systems have specific quality characteristics, which define and represent the gastronomic, cultural and traditional particularities of certain geographical areas. The raw materials used, the production methods, the intrinsic link with the geographical area and the human factor give added value to this category of products, a fact confirmed by the growing consumer demand for these products, which have applied on the labels/packaging logos/symbols provided for by European or national legislation.

Advantages of registering agricultural products on European quality systems:

- opportunities to access global markets;
- increased export potential;
- provides producers with the tools to identify and promote those products that have specific characteristics and can be certified through quality systems;
- raising awareness among European consumers about the quality of traditional Romanian products that are part of the national culture;
- participation in the European Commission’s promotion policy, ‘Enjoy, it’s from Europe’, supports professionals in the sector by helping them access international markets or strengthen their presence within them. This new policy is designed to enhance the visibility and competitiveness of European products globally.

CONCLUSIONS

Consumers are eager to consume traditional products because they bring a series of health benefits, as they are less processed, contain

natural ingredients and can also be recommended in certain diets.

The main goal of marketing traditional products is to support small producers and the local economy.

By consuming traditional products, one helps to promote and preserve the cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation.

A traditional product is a product made with local raw materials, of very good quality, without using additives or preservatives, made in an artisanal way, over a stove flame, in a pot or over a wood fire, in a cauldron, in small quantities, with manual packaging and labelling. These products should be niche products, not in industrial quantities, with a presence in all supermarket-type stores. The raw material should be cleaned by hand, produced seasonally, when the raw material is harvested in the respective area.

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