



Reviving Traditional Food Knowledge Through Food Festivals. The Case of the Pink Asparagus Festival in Mezzago, Italy

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The article investigates the link between food festivals and traditional food knowledge and explores the role played by tourist events in disseminating local agricultural and gastronomic knowledge. This article presents the ethnographic case of the Pink Asparagus Festival in Mezzago in Italy, analyzing how the festival supported the continuation of crop production and its associated traditional knowledge in the village. In the face of a decline of asparagus production, the article highlights the role of the festival in fostering a revival of local food knowledge, which is also able to embrace modernization, at the same time maintaining a strong sense of the past and Mezzago's legacy. Thus, the article suggests that festivals are not just events aimed at commodifying local knowledge, but can be important tools to refresh and maintain local expertise, which is vital and pressing in the context of modern society, and strengthen and expand the relationship between members of the community, thus converting the festival into an endeavor to foster sociocultural sustainability.

Keywords: pink asparagus, ethnography, food festivals, local development, food knowledge, rural development

INTRODUCTION

A growing attention to the themes of food and its origin, quality, sustainability, and safety marked the beginning of the twenty-first century (Albala, 2013). In an attempt to cope in an age of risk (Beck et al., 2000) and individual and collective uncertainty (Bauman, 2007), consumers have moved from mass-production toward innovative and different products that range from healthy foods to geographically typical foods; and from “free-from” foods to environmentally and socially sustainable foods (Corvo, 2015). In particular, the new demand for food is no longer fuelled by the fear of hunger or the experience of insecurity (Cocchiara, 1980; Camporesi, 1981; Artoni, 1999; Grimaldi, 2012), but by a search for leisure, as well as security (Belasco, 2008; Blackshaw, 2010). In this context, these new appetites to explore food have boosted the rise of culinary tourism (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Wolf, 2006; Mkono, 2011; Hall and Gossling, 2013), making the sector one of the key areas of contemporary tourism (Hall and Sharples, 2008; Getz and Robinson, 2014; Garibaldi, 2018; Dixit, 2019; Guigoni, 2019). Food festivals have become the fulcrum of this new form of tourism (Dixit, 2019).

Food festivals are public events aimed at celebrating specific food products. They come with straightforward names that identify the event, the products that are promoted, the year of the festival, and the place where it is celebrated (e.g., Taste of Springfield Festival 2019, Byblos en Blanc et Rosé 2019, Sagra del Canestrel di Montanaro 2019). With the clarity of their names, festivals

promote a specific place by emphasizing their gastronomic particularity. They are hallmark events, “of limited duration, developed primarily to enhance the awareness, appeal, and profitability of a tourism destination in the short and/or long term” (Ritchie, 1984). The touristic competitiveness of a hallmark event derives from its ability to create interest and attract attention through its uniqueness and timely significance (Hall, 1989). Food festivals achieve this by promoting a specific experience that draws from a bundle of selected foods and landscapes, both elements ostensibly unique to the event. In so doing, they are able to address both the tourists’ desire for a unique culinary experience and their search for new, exotic, and beautiful locations to be explored at the moment of their maximum splendor (Bessière, 2013; Bessiere and Tibere, 2013; Timothy and Ron, 2013; Brulotte and Di Giovine, 2016; Laing et al., 2019). Their success as tourist events raises questions concerning how festivals can construct a local gastronomic identity, and what possible role the festivals have in revitalizing local gastronomic knowledge and production practices. In particular it poses questions concerning sociocultural sustainability of these events because it is often pointed out that the festivals lead to a commodification of local knowledge (Çela et al., 2007; Sabanpan-Yu, 2007; Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2014; Wu et al., 2014; Meretse et al., 2016). As highlighted by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), facing the success of these events, and the economic profit generated by use of local folklore and landscape peculiarities as economic asset for the festivals, communities risk being entrapped in a vicious circle of “re-ethnization,” in which local actors invent, enact and embody folkloristic elements in order to appeal the taste of the public in support of the economic success. This process involves also gastronomy and the invention of traditional cuisine (Wilk, 1999). This wide-spread phenomenon sparked a heated debate about authenticity and heritage tourism, reviewed by Theodossopoulos (2013). In the field of tourism and hospitality, this debate has opened relevant questions on how find sociocultural sustainable strategies in order to articulate a gastronomic offer able to promote local heritage and products without triggering phenomena of heritage commodification (Forné, 2015), stepping away from paradigms of frugal sustainability (Peveri, 2019) and seizing the opportunities of local, economic development that tourism promises.

This article responds to these interrogatives by exploring the case-study (Yin, 2018) of the “Sagra dell’Asparago,” the Pink Asparagus Festival in Mezzago in Italy, and its contribution to the revival of the production and food knowledge of pink asparagus in the area. In so doing, the article reveals the transformation of the role of asparagus in the region, and analyses the festival and strategies linked to the promotion of local asparagus. It highlights that the festival has fostered the creation of stronger social ties between the old member of the community and new entrants (e.g., migrants, national and international stakeholders such as small scale producers from other villages, scholars, chefs, asparagus producers from abroad) that have taken part both to the asparagus production and the organization of the fair. From this perspective, the festival represents a strategic tool for promoting a more socially and culturally sustainable and

inclusive environment. Concurrently, the festival has helped local producers to expand the market of the pink asparagus and increase the commercial value of this product, thus contributing to a virtuous process of local development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The ethnographic research was conducted in Mezzago (MB) (45°37′47″64 N 09°26′45″24 E), between January and July 2019 to explore the reality of asparagus cultivation in the Brianza area.

Mezzago is a town of about 4,500 inhabitants, located in the district of Vimercate, Milan. Since the Middle Ages, its agricultural development has been steady, especially its horticultural and cereal production. The municipality has developed since the nineteenth century, thanks to the diffusion of sericulture (Cento Bull and Corner, 1993; Ghezzi, 2007) which quickly became the main occupation for about 10% of the population, mostly women and minors (Agostini, 2015). During the twentieth century, the population continued to grow despite the lack of industrial development in other neighboring municipalities.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Mezzago was a community of farmers whose livelihoods combined agricultural activities (mostly cereal and horticulture) with the employment in the nearby factories of Monza, Milan, and Bergamo. Therefore, by the first decades of the twentieth century a daily commute between these places was already established. After the end of the Second World War, Mezzago retained this demographic characteristic and remained a predominantly residential and agricultural community (de la Pierre, 2011). The Pink Asparagus Festival, which celebrated its 59th anniversary in 2019—the last for the time being due to its suspension in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—has become a particularly important part of life in Mezzago and at the national level (Agostini, 2015).

Methods

The research encompassed historical analysis and observation of the festive events, as well as 28 in-depth interviews and two focus groups that involved 12 organizers of the event and 15 asparagus producers. Participant observation was carried out on the days in the weekends of May and June 2019, when the festivals were held, conducting short, semi-structured interviews with the volunteers and participants. Participant observation included an analysis of the activities of the festival as well as of asparagus production by the Asparagus Production Cooperative of Mezzago. During the observation, material documentation such as flyers and leaflets was collected.

Interviews with volunteers, local administrators, and producers of asparagus were conducted using the life story methodology (Rosenthal, 2018) to explore the history of the festival and cultivation of asparagus in Mezzago. The interviews focused on the relationship that links the interviewees to the festival, the motivations and expectations that underpin the participation and organization of the festival as well as the involvement of the interviewees in the pink asparagus production. The narrations have revealed not only the origins

of and motivations for these contemporary lay rites but also the emotions and meanings that define the human, gastronomic and natural landscape of the community. We also explored the reasons for linking the celebration with this agricultural practice, the specificities related to the organization of the festival, the production, and marketing of asparagus.

Interviews were conducted in Italian by the researchers and lasted ~1 h each. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained and interviewees were informed in advance about the rationale, aims, methods, and expected outputs of the project.

Alongside this work, historiographical research was carried out in order to reconstruct the oral history (Abrams, 2010) of local agriculture and festivals. The data thus collected forms the basis of the present ethnography of the festival.

The study was largely based on an ethnographic analysis (Ellen, 1984) of the materials gathered during the observation of the Pink Asparagus Festival, and historical and bibliographical materials collected during the research. The analysis has combined life-history method (Goodson, 2001) and participant observation into a historical anthropological approach (Schmitt, 2008) aimed at presenting the dynamics of the festival and reconstructing the cultural biography (Kopytoff, 1986) of the pink asparagus in Mezzago.

RESULTS

Asparagus in the Italian Foodscape

The term asparagus encompasses over a hundred species belonging to the Liliaceae family, with *Asparagus officinalis* L. being one of the most important edible species. *A. officinalis* is an herbaceous perennial plant which has a hypogeal part (rhizome and roots), commonly called “crowns,” from which the young edible shoots of the plant, called “spears,” originate.

The asparagus crop consists of two main types: green (and green-purple) and white. Botanically, both types are a single species. The color of the shoots varies according to the cultivation methods. When the crop grows in the open field, the shoots have a green color tending to purple. If the crops are grown under the soil in the absence of light (i.e., forced cultivation), spears appear white as the plant cannot synthesize the chlorophyll (Aliotta et al., 2004).

Asparagus grows optimally on sandy soils with good drainage. After the germination of the seeds, the plants are grown for 1 year, transplanted to the open field and left for another year to develop a strong root crown. From the third year of cultivation, the spears can be harvested for up to 10 to 12 years. In Europe, harvesting usually takes place in spring (late April until mid-June), although earlier harvesting is becoming successful through greenhouses (Falavigna and Palumbo, 2001).

Native to the fertile half-moon of Mesopotamia, asparagus spread westward through Asia Minor and Egypt, and eventually arrived in the Mediterranean region (Aliotta et al., 2004). As mentioned by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (79 BC), Romans knew asparagus and used it for both medicinal and culinary purposes. With the expansion of the Roman Empire, asparagus was introduced in the conquered territories, especially in Spain and Germany. However, with the decline of the Empire,

the cultivation and consumption of asparagus slowed down. During the medieval period, asparagus was cultivated in feudal gardens or monasteries and used exclusively as an ornamental and medicinal plant (Falavigna and Palumbo, 2001). The cultivation of asparagus for human consumption spread from the fifteenth century as a result of new cultivation techniques for the production of white asparagus, invented by the German botanist Hieronymus Bock, which made it possible to partially overcome the problem of late frosts. Given this technical innovation, in the following centuries, asparagus production expanded to the central-northern part of Europe (i.e., The Netherlands, France, and Belgium) and, later on, to North America (Falavigna and Palumbo, 2001).

While in the past asparagus was a luxury food item, in recent decades it has become more widely grown and consumed. At the global level, there are currently 60 countries with temperate and tropical climates where asparagus is grown (Knoema, 2018). Due to the globalization of its production, asparagus is now available throughout the year. China and Peru are the main producers accounting for around 90% of the world supply. In Europe, Germany, Spain, and to a lesser extent, Italy are the countries with the highest level of production (Future Market Insights, 2017).

In Italy, the production of asparagus has been developing since the fifteenth century, starting from the northern regions and then spreading to the rest of the country. With regards to quantity, the green asparagus is the most widespread, though there are some differences according to regions. White asparagus is concentrated almost exclusively in the north east, violet asparagus on the Tyrrhenian coast, while green asparagus can be found throughout the country, especially in the southern part of Italy (Falavigna and Palumbo, 2001). According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2013), asparagus production covers an area of 5,950 ha with an annual production of 371,302 quintals. Puglia, in particular the province of Foggia, Campania, Tuscany, Lazio, and Emilia Romagna are the main producers of green asparagus in the open field. White asparagus is still grown mostly in the northern regions, especially in the lower Po Valley, where the climate, the loose soil, and the proximity to coastal areas favor its cultivation.

From a production point of view, asparagus cultivation is mainly carried out on a small and medium scale by non-specialized farms. Since the harvesting season takes place in spring, when few other crops are ready to harvest, growing asparagus allows farmers to integrate their income as this crop has a higher market value compared to other horticultural products (Falavigna, 2007). However, in the last decades, due to the reduction in the number of agricultural workers and an increase in the demand for asparagus, intensive production has emerged, based on the modernization and mechanization of production techniques and the introduction of more productive cultivars (Falavigna, 2000). The phenomenon has been more marked in the southern part of Italy, where the early entry into spring production and the long growing season enable higher and longer yields.

Besides the growing industrialization of production (especially for green asparagus), its cultivation still has an artisanal dimension and a strong link with regional and

rural foodscapes (Morganti and Nardo, 2009). Given the embeddedness of this crop in the food and agricultural heritage of Italy, and its potential role as a tool for local development, several local cultivars have been recognized as PDO (protected designation of origin) or PGI (protected geographical indication). The most important and well-known of these are the white asparagus of Bassano (PDO), the white asparagus of Cimadolmo (PGI), the green asparagus of Altedo, the asparagus of Badoere and the asparagus of Cimadono. Similarly, other cultivars have been documented and included in the PAT catalog (*prodotti agroalimentari tradizionali italiani*), a project promoted by the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, and Forestry Policies (MIPAAF), and intended to preserve the food and agricultural heritage of Italy. In addition, the safeguarding and promotion of asparagus and its associated traditions have been at the center of some projects undertaken by the Slow Food movement, specifically the Ark of Taste and Presidia projects; the one involving the pink asparagus of Mezzago is among the most developed (Slow Food, 2012).

The Pink Asparagus Festival

There are about 70 festivals in Italy dedicated to asparagus (Bianco, 2009). One of the most representative is that of Mezzago. In 2019, the 59th Pink Asparagus Festival in Mezzago was celebrated from April 27th to May 24th. The festival, organized by a local grass-roots organization, called the Mezzago Pro Loco, took place at the Architi Palace, one of the oldest buildings in the municipality (nowadays, it is owned by the Mezzago Coop and is intended to function as a multi-purpose center equipped for catering). The diary of events during the festival includes public meetings, workshops, concerts, dances, small markets, and exhibitions. Annual regular features include the MEZVAGO, the official closing event of the festival. In addition, the 2019 programme included meetings in support of agricultural, environmental, and nature conservation activities, such as the MezzAgro initiative, a collaboration between the Municipal Administration, the North East Agricultural Park (www.parcoagricolonord.it), and Ciboprossimo (<https://ciboprossimo.net>) which is currently in its second year (in 2019 it concentrated on the theme “seed exchange, plants, and surroundings” and was intended to bring the festival closer to social and environmental issues). As the organizers pointed out during the interviews and focus group, villagers from Mezzago and the neighboring municipalities of the Brianza area represent the main visitors of the Pink Asparagus Festival, though people from the other provinces of the Lombardy region.

The fundamental focal point of the festival, however, was the restaurant that catered for about 500 people per meal thanks to a large professional kitchen, which has been set up over the years by the Coop and the Pro Loco in the large spaces of the hall and the arcade, and above all, with the help of a large group of volunteers. The president of the Pro Loco, Alessio Colnago, said:

A hundred volunteers, coming from Mezzago and from the neighboring countries, made the success of the event possible ... they cooked and served in the dining room and strived for the success of the events. Thanks to their commitment, it was possible

to grow the event and serve over 6,000 people in the restaurant during the holiday month, which confirmed the festival as one of the most attended gastronomic events in the Brianza area.

The restaurant has a professional kitchen equipped with professional furniture. Recently the Pro Loco has also provided for the purchase of specific asparagus processing tools, such as a special machine for trimming and peeling the spears. Previously, volunteers carried out this operation manually.

The gastronomy of the festival is mainly inspired by Lombard and Milanese traditions and focuses on pink asparagus as a distinctive element of such dishes as risotto with Mezzago pink asparagus, Mezzago pink asparagus with eggs, and beef in oil with Mezzago pink asparagus. The downloadable menu from the site of the Pro Loco (www.prolocomezago.it) demonstrates the range of dishes available.

The menu centers on pink asparagus used in traditional recipes (e.g., as an ingredient for risotto, or boiled and accompanied by eggs) or in innovative dishes resulting from research into the gastronomy of Lombard (e.g., with lasagna or as an ingredient in desserts) conducted by the Pro Loco volunteers in collaboration with catering experts such as a chef from a Michelin-starred restaurant near Milan. The innovations that characterize these courses often result from a creative process, which starts with the volunteers, and then expands outside the boundaries of the mid-town community to involve various participants from the regional and national gastronomic sector.

Given the centrality of pink asparagus, the food and wine are drawn from the local food specialties and the broader Lombard territory: raw vegetable ingredients, meat, and pastry products are purchased locally; fresh pastas are produced by an artisan pasta factory in the neighboring municipality of Usmate; and the cheeses (including the ancient Stracchino of the Orobiche Valleys and the Salva Cremasco) come, respectively, from small dairies located in the provinces of Bergamo and Crema. Drinks too, thanks to the voluntary collaboration of experts in the wine sector, are intended to promote the products of the territory.

To quote one of the Mezzago volunteers:

We are proud of our menu, because it tells our story. Research, discussions, attempts, failures, and many satisfactions come with each recipe. Overall, we are certain that this menu can best highlight the product of Mezzago, our asparagus.

The different ways of presenting the asparagus showcase this local product, which is regulated and protected by a municipal denomination (De.Co., formerly DCC Mezzago 11/2004). Moreover, the product has been registered in the Slow Food Ark of Taste (<https://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/it/arca-del-gusto-slow-food/asparago-di-mezzago/>) as *Asparagus officinalis*, locally grown and characterized by a white shoot and a pinkish apex, whose production is concentrated between April and May. It is cultivated in Mezzago and in the neighboring municipalities (Bellusco) by the partners of the APC Mezzago and seven other agricultural enterprises subscribing to the production discipline (formerly DGC Mezzago 35/2019).

The festival is not only a showcase of local production, but also the main commercial outlet of pink asparagus. This product is sold preferentially by the APC and by other producers at the festival, where about 60% of the total harvested crop is consumed; the remainder is marketed at regional level in retail outlets (e.g., Esselunga, Coop, Gigante, and Eataly) and in markets (e.g., Slow Food Earth Markets and Coldiretti's Mercato Campagna Amica) in Lombardy, particularly in Milan and Monza, in its characteristic pink and black packaging (Figure 1). The pre-eminence of the festival as an outlet for local production is deeply connected to the history of Mezzago and is rooted in post-unification history, especially in its more recent past.

The History of Pink Asparagus in Mezzago

The origins of asparagus cultivation and the specific reasons for its introduction in Mezzago are uncertain. However the inhabitants tend to link its appearance to the history of "Muschen":

Giovanni Brambilla, whom everyone called "Muschen," was from Mezzago and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, announced his departure to America: nobody knew if he would return. He returned and brought with him the roots of a strange pink asparagus, which immediately adapted to the soil of the area, so much so that it became its symbol in a few years. Thus, according to this legend, the pink asparagus of Mezzago was born (Malvasi, 2012).

Perhaps this is only a legend. However, it introduces the specific reality of a rural Lombard village in the early twentieth century that was coming to terms with growing emigration toward urban centers and abroad, and attempting to diversify its production at a time when sericulture was in decline (Cento Bull and Corner, 1993). Until then, the production of asparagus represented, alongside mulberry and silkworms, a possible source of income for the small farmers of Mezzago. From the interviews, we learned that farming families had a few rows of asparagus, usually grown in association with vegetables from the Liliaceae family, such as garlic, shallots, and onions. In this context, the asparagus was produced almost exclusively for sale; it was not an ingredient of the local gastronomic tradition, and was rarely consumed by farmers.

In the years after WWI period, asparagus cultivation was deeply integrated into the fabric of local agriculture. In a municipality of about 2,000 inhabitants, there were around 400 producers growing a total of ~4,000 kg (on average 10 kg per producer) per day during the collection period (Agostini, 2015). Each family grew its own asparagus in small plots along with other horticultural products. The success of the crop was connected to the early harvest period of the asparagus, between April and May, which was earlier than other horticultural and cereal crops, and it thus provided families with a much-needed source of income after the winter.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mezzago people specialized in the production of white asparagus by adopting artisanal agricultural practices similar to the current ones: in January, the soil is prepared and vegetation from the previous



FIGURE 1 | Photo of the packaging used by APC (photo from: <https://www.asparagorosa.it/index.php/asparago-rosa>).

year is cleared; in February, the soil is plowed and fertilized; in March, when the first shoots begin to appear the soil is tugged in and mounds of about 30 cm are prepared to prevent photosynthesis in the shoots; from April to May the asparagus is harvested daily; between June and July the soil mounds are leveled, the plants rest, and new seeds are produced. Differently from the rest of Italy, where producers grow asparagus that have completely green or white shoots, the asparagus cultivated in Mezzago have a characteristic pink apex. The color of the tip is due to exposure to sunlight for a limited time (a few hours) from dawn to harvesting, which takes place daily in the early morning. This characteristic is also due to local soil and climate conditions, i.e., clayey soil with a particular concentration of minerals such as iron.

Given the widespread use of the crop in the area, in 1959, the Municipality of Mezzago created the festival. Antonio Colombo, mayor of Mezzago from 2004 to 2014, recalled that:

The festival at the time had nothing to do with its present version. It used to be a competition between asparagus producers who were awarded a prize for the largest asparagus, the most beautiful bunch, the greatest production, and so on. Surely, that tells us how much asparagus production was felt by the community, but the history of the festival as we see it today was born later and in a different context.

The current festival, which was intended to be a celebration of food and focussed on the asparagus, was initiated in 1982, when Mezzago farming families were abandoning small-scale horticulture, cattle, and pig farming and turning to full-time employment in local industries. The transformation of the festival was promoted by the ARCI club of Mezzago together with other local volunteers (de la Pierre, 2011), “making the festival an important opportunity for participation and involvement of the community of Mezzago” as Colombo says. Over the course of a few years, the festival expanded and since 1989, with the birth of the Pro Loco, its organization has become one of the main responsibilities of the new association.

Right from its early years, the “new” festival presented a gastronomy focussed on the asparagus but encountered increasing difficulties in finding local products. “Mezzago had changed and fewer and fewer people had the soil for asparagus production” as Giovanni Vitali, president of APC, recalls. “By the end of the eighties, finding asparagus for the festival had become virtually impossible. We started buying them in Veneto ... until we went back into production with the APC.”

The APC was founded in 2000 following specific circumstances that brought public attention to the municipality, the territory, and the actual state of asparagus production in Mezzago. In the late nineties, a local newspaper published an interview with a citizen who declared: “There is no such a thing as the Mezzago Asparagus Festival; asparagus is no longer produced in Mezzago.” Vittorio Pozzati, currently president of Coop Mezzago and Mayor of Mezzago from 1996 to 2004 explained what happened next: “it was a cold shower, but it was a great opportunity to re-launch the cultivation by combining new opportunities with the need to preserve the territory of the municipality from further overbuilding.” The municipal administration in those years had been engaged in soil protection and the enhancement of the agricultural and environmental heritage of the municipality (de la Pierre, 2011). The Municipality's activities to promote asparagus culture began in 1998 (after the first failed attempt in 1983). It created a collaboration with the Experimental Institute for Horticulture of Montanaso Lombardo. In 2000, in addition to providing technical support, the Municipality (in association with the Lombardy Region) purchased 70,000 roots; 60,000 for the members of newly formed APC and 10,000 for other small local farmers intending to revive cultivation.

As Antonio Colombo recalls, the beginning of the collaboration with the institute of Montanaso Lombardo also coincided with a substantial modification of the system and the agricultural practices linked to the production of asparagus. Following the advice of the institute, various innovations concerning the cultivation of the asparagus were introduced: the width of the asparagus production area was widened from 120 cm to 2 meters; the number of asparagus rows was reduced from three to two; and the soil and the heaps were prepared with a tractor. Black plastic sheets were also introduced to protect the vegetables from sunlight and to prevent the tips of the asparagus from turning green. In following years, experience gained thanks to the collaboration with a community of cultivators from the German city of Reilingen encouraged the introduction of

further technological innovations related to the production, collection, and cleaning operations. According to Colombo and other members of the APC, the old generations of Mezzago cultivators at first seemed skeptical about the innovations, which had been introduced.

In addition to the reticence of the older growers, “the real initial obstacle,” explains Vitali, “was to find owners who wanted to rent the land for us.” Asparagus cultivation lasts for 10 to 12 years. “In a historical period of rapid urbanization, everyone saw the ownership of agricultural land as bank checks to be held because in the following years that would have become building land of much higher value. Finding someone who was available to rent a field for 10 years was not simple” concludes Pozzati. The APC began its activity with 3 hectares of land and gradually expanded to the current 6 hectares, with a production capacity per cultivated hectare of about 4,000 kg of annual harvest. In the current year, the Cooperative members have harvested exactly 25,291 kg of pink asparagus. Actual production began in 2003 and in 2004, and the product was subject to one of the first De.Co. Right from the start the product was primarily intended for the festival and packaged with its characteristic brand.

In the mid-2000s, the Mezzago Festival returned to being the Festival of the Mezzago Pink Asparagus, grown by local producers through an economic collaboration involving the Pro Loco, the APC, and other asparagus cultivators. As a matter of fact, the Pro Loco is committed to purchase the quantity of asparagus required for the festival from the APC which, on the one hand, prefers to sell to the Pro Loco and, on the other, guarantees a fixed purchase price thus completing a supply chain agreement based on assuring the sale of the product and the security of the price.

Therefore, through the festival this economic system generates a clear and positive benefit to the local economy and creates a synergy between producers and the world of volunteering. The success of the festival is linked to the Pro Loco's ability to aggregate and activate a large part of the local population. The Pro Loco's president, Alessio Colnago, underlines the essential part volunteers play:

This year we had over 90 volunteers in the kitchen and serving at the tables. Others helped us with the events. We have volunteers of all ages and from every political and religious background. Whoever wants to help is welcome and we are happy to have them on board. The success of the festival is in the ability to network with all the positive people in the area, creating a festival that involves the whole community.

The synergies and initiatives promoted by the Pro Loco during the festival also extend to other companies operating in the local agri-food business. In addition to local producers and artisans involved in the supply of materials, and associations operating in the environmental field, the event also involves small businesses and projects in the social, cultural, and educational field operating in Mezzago and its surroundings. One example is the start-up “MicroOrtaggi” (www.microortaggi.it), a small agricultural company, and the educational farm “Passo Trotto Galoppo” (<http://sbaraglio.blogspot.com>).

Giorgio Monti, mayor of Mezzago from 2014 to 2019, explains:

The festival works because all the actors of the territory collaborate. It is a platform that brings together the Municipality and civil institutions, the population of Mezzago through voluntary associations and the parish, and companies and producers through the APC and the Co-op. It is through this collaboration we recreated a profound bond between the community and its rural history and landscape. The Festival is pivotal in this work.

DISCUSSION

The Festival and a Revival Through Reconstitution

The pink asparagus of Mezzago is a renowned product nowadays, known across the country and sold in different outlets across Northern Italy. Its name is strictly linked with the community where it is produced; and a strong narrative concerning its past—and the link with the history of Mezzago—is spun around it. Its success is a recent phenomenon and is linked with a revival of its production that is intertwined with the history of the “Festa”; these events are so bound together that one could conclude that there would have been no pink asparagus if the people in Mezzago had stopped the celebration once the cultivation disappeared from the local countryside. The festival is indeed the one element that signifies an uninterrupted cultural continuity in the history of the asparagus of Mezzago, and it contributed to a partial renovation and actualization of this production and its associated traditional knowledge.

First of all, whether the pink asparagus is native to Mezzago is not a matter of genes. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, when asparagus was consistently cultivated in Mezzago, the crop was not based on a local cultivar and the distinct color was not the result of a genetic selection, but relied on the particular techniques used for its production (Aliotta et al., 2004). Thus, the revival of the Pink asparagus after its marginalization and disappearance is not analogous to places where the reintroduction of a specific cultivar or breed is crucial for triggering and sustaining the process. In Cortereggi, for example, a small village on the outskirts of Turin (which is internationally known today for its white bean production), until the 1950s people were used to cultivating a local cultivar of *Phaseolus vulgaris* named *Piattella Canevasa*. After the Second World War its cultivation declined, and the white beans disappeared from the fields and gardens. Their cultivation was reintroduced only in the 1980s, by planting a sample of the lost cultivar taken from the University of Turin Gymnosperms Bank. Starting with this first sample, local cultivation expanded and has become the most characteristic and remunerative crop for the farmers of Cortereggi (Fassino, 2015).

The recovery of the pink asparagus of Mezzago has neither been linked to the reintroduction and/or the protection of traditional techniques, as happened for the revival of other threatened foods such as the Colonnata Lardo in Tuscany (Leitch, 2003) and the Serpa cheese in the Alentejo region of

Portugal (West and Dominigos, 2012). In these cases, local producers in collaboration with national and international actors (e.g., Slow Food) conducted activities aimed at recovering the traditional knowledge connected, respectively, to the processing of pork meat and the production of dry-aged sheep' milk cheese. Through activist campaigns and the development of product specifications, producers overcame the risks of losing the traditional techniques and the associated knowledge due to the introduction of new food safety regulations, as in the case of the Colonnata Lardo, and to changes in the preferences of local customers who shifted from aged cheese to younger, softer cheeses, as happened in the case of Serpa cheese. In the latter instance, while the project managed to guarantee continuity with the preservation of traditional food knowledge, it faced difficulties in achieving commercial viability—customers were no longer used to the taste of dry-aged cheese produced using traditional techniques. In turn, this risked the transformation of knowledge and practices linked to traditional foods into “museum production” rather than “new rural livelihoods” (Bowen and De Master, 2011).

Conversely, in the case of Mezzago, the revival is linked with a reactivation of local knowledge that does not rely exclusively on the rescue of local cultivars or landraces, or on the recovery of specific techniques and practices from the past. The protest of the farmer about the “allochthony” of asparagus used for the festival in the 90s is revealing. In Mezzago, the marginalization of the cultivation caused the disappearance of practices and the rarefaction of agricultural knowledge. Facing such a situation, the revival of cultivation promoted by the local stakeholders and farmers led to a reshaping of local knowledge by revamping the residual knowledge with new elements coming from research organizations, such as the Experimental Institute for Horticulture of Montanaso Lombardo, and the experience of farmers from other areas, in Italy and abroad, such as the asparagus cultivators of Reilingen. Overall, therefore, the revival is linked to the reconstitution of local knowledge. In this process, the festival played a role in embedding this new knowledge in the community.

The Pink Asparagus Festival illustrates the possibility of fostering new actions concerning the recovery of rural heritage that passes through the transformation of the landscape and actualization of local, traditional knowledge. Such process, as the case of Mezzago demonstrates, is not limited to an antiquarian effort (Momigliano, 1950) aimed at identifying objects of the past and keeping them immaculate. It opens agricultural and gastronomic products to modernization exploring new ways of presenting local products and preparations to the public. In so doing, it opens up local gastronomic heritage to innovation and contribution from new members of the community, who then become co-makers of the local tradition. It is a process that entails local and non-local actors, as Monti suggests. During the field research a strong link emerged between innovation, the spirit of cohesion, and social inclusion that distinguishes the mid-town community. Considering this connection, it is possible to explain the organizers' ability to introduce innovations both in the production and in the context of the festival, and the success deriving from these changes. This dynamic can be

observed in the creation of the current gastronomic offer and in the choice of the ingredients used in the festival menu, in the agricultural innovations that come from the collaboration with the Experimental Institute for Horticulture of Montanaso Lombardo and with the asparagus cultivators of Reilingen, in the promotion of the initiatives set up by young people from the area who work in the agri-food, social and educational sectors, as well as in the involvement of seasonal workers, both Italians and foreigners, in the cooperative during the harvesting season.

These examples highlight the social dimension of the festival and the different actors that make up this social event and the way in which they interact. **Figure 2** illustrates this relationship. The festival involves the entire community and its stakeholders: the public administration, the community, and people from other communities all working together. It is the positive and mutual collaboration among these actors that supports the event and makes it successful and able to strengthen the prestige and cultural relevance of pink asparagus within and outside the community (Fontefrancesco and Zocchi, 2019). At the same time this inclusivity makes the entire community participate in the narration the festival tells: which is a story of local identity that hinges on the pink asparagus. While the festival motivates the organizers and the members of the community at large to rethink their territory and to search for value in the community's history and geography, it also suggests that local uniqueness lies in the asparagus and the knowledge and practices that keep it alive. In so doing, the festival celebrates and legitimizes the present produce made by the APC and the other farmers participating in the De.Co. Thus, it legitimizes the knowledge and practices that underpin the production, which is an expression of reconstituted local knowledge. In this way, the festival makes the renewed knowledge of asparagus part of the community, emphasizing aspects of continuity with the past that it expresses and implicitly endorsing constant innovation, both of the agricultural and the gastronomic aspects of asparagus production. As a matter of fact, the festival strengthens the prestige of the product and its cultural relevance, expands the market, and creates an opportunity for dialogue, confrontation and new knowledge among the inhabitants of the community and the countryside. In this sense, the festival can be read as a folkloric institution capable of strengthening both the economic capital of the community and the social and cultural capital.

The relevance of the Mezzago case can be read in the mutuality of the social actors involved and their ability to support all the fundamental aspects of a community's capital, undoubtedly the result of a fragile equilibrium that made the festival an effective tool for local development.

CONCLUSIONS

Food festivals are a fundamental part of the modern foodscape, and their success is deeply related to the growth of gastronomic tourism. Many festivals promote local products and their history. In this respect, this article interrogates the relationship between food festivals and local, traditional knowledge as well as the role of such events in transforming this heritage into an asset than



can help local communities in promoting the territory and local products. The ethnographic study of the Pink Asparagus Festival of Mezzago suggests a particular role.

The organization of the festival responded to the need for municipal administrations, local associations, and producers to make their territory and products known to a wider public. In doing so, the festival drew from local agricultural specificities to meet the demand of the public (Aime and Papotti, 2012). This attention, however, did not couple with the fabrication of new, traditional products, and ethno-commodities (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009) able to satisfy the public, but rather it fostered wide research that aimed to reinforce a fading practice. In so doing, the process engendered a reconstitution of local knowledge through the insertion of new competences.

The case of the Mezzago festival is useful to define the role that a gastronomic festival can have for a territory. The case study suggests that a festival can be an important and positive accelerator of local dynamics of social and economic development. It highlights the necessary elements of such positive development, such as the collaboration between public institutions, civil society and local producers on the basis of principles of mutuality that strengthen the economic, social and cultural capital of the community.

In this sense, it stands as a warning against the easy conclusion that, in an age of great interest for local kitchen and traditional foods, a good gastronomic offer or a local specialty is enough to trigger positive development processes. Which brings the discussion to a deeper reflection on the importance of the full involvement of the various actors of the territory within a shared project of territorial design. Precisely, in this perspective, the case opens up further reflections, suggesting a non-top-down participation model, but rather a horizontal one of leadership distributed among the various actors who are able to support and

stimulate each other. Therefore, it highlights the importance of subsidiarity between public and private, and between market and non-market, which is often forgotten in the public debate.

In conclusion, the pink asparagus and food knowledge the festival promotes are new wine in a renewed wineskin, and are able to support the community, endowing it with new perspectives of sociocultural sustainable and inclusive development.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary materials, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MFF supervised the research team and conducted fieldwork research in Mezzago, completed the first draft of the entire article, read, and approved the final manuscript. DMZ conducted fieldwork research in Mezzago, integrated and completed the draft of the article, read, and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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