



Foodstuffs and territory. Tradition, institutions and development.

Basic hypothesis

Throughout history each and every area has used mainly local products to feed the local population. Tradition, culture, economic factors and the landowning structure have influenced the way these products have been used and processed. It is clear that certain regions have a strong and deeply rooted vocation for food and wine, with effects on the economy, as a result of their socio-economic characteristics and evolution. The economic aspects in particular have attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. The delocalization of manufacturing, a pressing issue in many places, is being increasingly countered by greater identification of products with an area. Local resources can in fact provide a response to delocalization. In other words, the attempt is being made to use resources, which by their nature cannot be moved away from an area, to fight delocalization of economic activity and the ensuing economic stagnation. The reasoning is simple: although almost all manufacturing processes can be moved to where production factors cost less, there are certain categories, typical specialty products, which cannot. This type of product has market value only in relation to the place it is made. Moreover, an area may also be home to other cultural goods, such as monuments, artisan crafts, history, folklore, local celebrations etc.. and these strengthen the idea of using local products for the purposes of economic development or competition¹.

Typical products are thus entwined with cultural tourism, particularly where it involves food and wine. Cultural tourism today accounts for a small share of tourism, but it is seeing big growth, as part of the current trend for differentiation in tastes and trends. There is growing interest in consumption processes and a new awareness that consumer trends are not fully explained by mathematical models of rational choice. Buying a product means buying history, part of a community and a place.

Food and wine, cookery traditions and typical products are not in themselves purely economic goods. They can generate secondary economies by identifying an area and affecting to some extent local development processes. And of course there are often close links between artisan and industrial production of the same good. The food industry has often used the reputation of a product to sell an industrial product of the same name perhaps from the same place. It can even be the case that the artisan product and production area benefit from this²

¹ We use the concept of “economic competition” cautiously. Certain economic development policy institutions such as UNIDO believe that typical products can drive economic development even before they are fully developed, but it is far from clear that this is in fact the case.

² The case of the very well-known Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena and its industrial “copy” is an example of cooperation between typical and industrial producers which has yielded mutual advantage.

Food Lab

Food Lab, the laboratory or observatory within the Economics Department of Parma University, aims to conduct research in to this rich and varied field, with a focus on historical aspects. We aim to reveal the economic importance of typical foods in terms of employment, profits and export value etc.. from a broad chronological perspective using historical series and data.

Food Lab also intends to investigate aspects of quality, culture and history. It will investigate:

- the role of local institutions in protection and promotion as well as “invention” of tradition.
- the role of associations and consortia in monitoring and quality control.
- the role of national and supranational institutions in various certification and labeling schemes.

It will also investigate long term factors such as the development of farming, land management, economic relationships, sales channels and the role of guilds in establishing processing and preservation techniques. An important focus will also be to identify links with the primary sector and with services such as retail, catering, tourism, local government etc.

The book *Delizia! The epic history of the Italians and their food* by British historian John Dickie tells the history of the nation from the gastronomic point of view, and the success of the book shows that food history is in itself a wider topic than gastronomy or agrarian history. The combination food-area is central to the interpretation of economic development in Italy, and can also be an insightful tool for tracing development in other regions too. Food Lab intends to extend its focus outside Italy to embrace European and other contexts world-wide.

The relationship between food and place is significant from the perspective of consumption and demand, as well as production. Food consumption in a given area is determined by the availability of local products as well as the social and political changes impacting on tastes and traditions, in new fusions and new uses for imported products.

David Landes, historian of post-Industrial economic development, notes that “If we learn anything from the history of economic development it is that culture makes all the difference”. Clearly, if this is true of industrial development, it will be particularly so for production and consumption patterns rooted even further in the past.

The history of food, including all dimensions of production, preservation, trade, transport and consumption is clearly a strand of economic history. At the same time it is also an important part of cultural history. These two branches have until now seen very few points of contact. David Landes strengthens our conviction that one of the main advantages of research under Food Lab will be the attempt to combine in an innovative and useful way these two seemingly distant branches.