

BRANDING MISHAVINË CHEESE: A CONTRIBUTION OF THE RURAL ALBANIAN ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

In Albania, the region of Kelmend is best known and valued for the Mishavinë cheese which is produced there. In this paper we analyse the farmers' experience of origin-based cheese and being part of the Slow Food Presidium of products in Albania. The role of local producers is fundamental not only in continuing tradition but also for the social and economic impact it has on farmers in the area. The survey in this study was conducted with face-to-face interviews with producers of Mishavinë cheese. The type of survey used was a semi-closed questionnaire. A descriptive analysis was conducted to evaluate the main problems facing the local producers and their collaboration among the relevant stakeholders. As Mishavinë is part of Slow Food the Ark of Taste project, it has a great opportunity to bring producers and consumers together with the aim of regenerating this lost tradition.

Key words: Mishavinë cheese, slow food, farmers, VIS Albania

JEL codes: D13, M31, Q01

INTRODUCTION

The livestock sector is one of the most important sectors for the Albanian economy, representing up to half of the output value of agriculture [Haas et al. 2019] and constituting an important source of livelihood for the rural population [Muça (Dashi) et al. 2013]. Cattle production in 2018 reached 467,318 heads, with a slight decrease compared to 499,600 heads in 2014 [INSTAT 2019]. The dominating category is that of dairy cows, which represent 73% of the total number of cattle [INSTAT 2019]. The main regions with concentrated cattle breeding are: Fier with 14%, Elbasan 13%, Tirana and Shkoder with 10%. Gjirokastrer is the region with the lowest number of cattle heads: only 4.7% of the total number [MBZRAU 2014].

On the other hand, the number of sheep heads has remained almost the same over the years. In 2018 there were 1,863,837 heads and the main category was represented by milked sheep with 74% [INSTAT 2019].

Most milk is produced by very small semi-specialized producers and from mixed farms, having less than 50 sheep or goats and cattle farms with less than five cows [MBZRAU 2014]. The milk factories are of medium and small size. However, both the production and processing milk factories apply traditional technologies. The milk price is not based on quality parameters, especially in the mountain territory. Albania has a long tradition of local cheese production which is considered to be one of the main food items in Albanian households [Imami et al. 2016].

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SLOW FOOD, NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR MISHAVINË CHEESE

Globalization has imposed social and cultural changes on rural communities, from local to national levels, by breaking the boundaries of globalization through increases in speed and consumption [Adıgüzel Özbek and Erikçi 2014]. So, in principle Slow Food¹ is a response against fast food. The Slow Food movement aims to preserve local production and to revitalize Albanian food traditions. It has been present in Albania since 2008, when it was introduced through the Italian NGO, VIS Albania. Founded in Northern Italy in the mid-1980s, it has become an international movement with more than 100,000 members in different countries around the world [Siniscalchi 2013]. This movement has contributed towards a new thinking of food consumption, through consumer orientation to new sustainable lifestyles and slow consumption as a solution to fast food and the globalized economic system [Hall 2012].

Slow food is a new alternative for rural community development [Brunori 2007] and can be considered as a sustainable model which respects the environment, cultural identities and animal welfare, and supports the right of every community to decide for itself what to plant, what to produce, and what to eat [Slow Food International 2017]. Slow Foods are catalogued and added to the Ark of Taste 7 Slow Food Convivias (food communities) with 2 Presidias and 44 products. Ark of Taste products are those selected as agro-food products at risk of extinction and needing to be preserved. The preselected products in Albania are in accordance with Slow Food principles: good, clean and fair (Slow Food Manifesto). So, for the products to follow the ancient production protocol, the environment needs to be respected and employment of the rural population is encouraged.

The production of Mishavinë cheese is encouraged by the mountainous territory which is suitable for breeding animals, whose milk is used mostly for cheese production. Manoli [2011] observes that it is crucial to understand the diversity of production sys-

tems in a given territory. In the Kelmend area, there are several small milk processing enterprises and most of them are not legally registered. The region of Kelmend is known and valued most of all for the Mishavinë cheese which is produced in this area. In local tradition, Mishavinë cheese is the first dish offered to guests as a gesture of respect and hospitality. This cheese is strongly linked with the pastoral tradition and its geographical position, as it is produced only in the villages of Selce, Lepushë, Vukel and Vermosh, in the region of Malësi e Madhe (North Albania), in the border areas with Montenegro.

Mishavinë cheese has been present in this area for more than 100 years and it is possible that it was produced even earlier than that [Regional Environmental Center 2016]. According to the local people this cheese was traditionally produced in the territory between the two borders of Albania and Montenegro, and the word *Mishavinë* is a Slavic word. *Misha* means animal leather. It is presumed that in the past this cheese was seasoned within animal leather. However, historically this cross-border area, Albania-Montenegro is of Albanian ethnicity [Durham 1920]. The village of Lepushe also borders Montenegro.

The Medieval-originated Code still survives in these areas and it regulates the community and personal lives of the inhabitants. A Code is based on the conservation of honor: the Kanun Code. Thanks to this Code, many local traditions have been preserved [Dragovaja 1996]. These traditions represent one of the most fascinating aspects of the communities. The people here are used to being isolated, but hospitality is very important to them. The arrival of a guest in these areas is a sacred event. According to Kanun Code, “the home of an Albanian belongs to God and to the guest”. The culinary tradition is simple but full of flavour. Natural products, such as meat, cheese, rakia, etc. are served in great quantities to the guest, to show respect and to honour them.

This cheese is considered a fundamental food for getting through the long and cold winter. It can be eaten alone or used as an ingredient in other typical Albanian recipes, such as Byrek, or the Kelmend traditional

¹ Slow Food was founded for the first time in 1987, in Italy. Today this organization counts more than 100,000 members, in about 130 countries around the world.

recipe Kaçimak. Producing Mishavinë cheese is a way to discovering the lost roots of the region, since it is produced in the same way as their predecessors made it in the Kelmend area.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The region of Kelmend consists of a 384.50 km² area and includes eight principal villages: Tamara, Selcë, Lepushë, Vermosh, Broje, Nikç, Vukël and Koshnje and 79.3% of the territory is mountainous. This territory is the area of the Mishavinë cheese production. During April 2019 we conducted 25 face-to-face questionnaires with Mishavinë producers at the Kelmend area for the following reasons:

- The territory is in the North of Albania and the other types of interviews are not relevant.
- We were interested to learn the expectations of the farmers, which is easier to read from face-to-face interviews [Flick 1998].

The sample method was used as the questionnaire was directed only to the Mishavinë cheese producers. Semi-structured questionnaires were then used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The questions were divided into closed questions, multiple choices or open-ended questions including: socio-demographic characteristics, farm data on livestock production, market access, farm income, period needed in Mishavinë production, reasons to participate in Slow Food convivium, the future of Mishavinë cheese.

The factors influencing the Mishavinë production impact are summarized using the descriptive statistics method [Ethridge 2004]. This model was the most

appropriate to evaluate the data from questionnaires due to the small number of respondents for Mishavinë cheese. Descriptive statistics illustrate differences between individual farms and familial or multi-family farms ranging [Wheeler and Childress 2004] in Kelmend area.

RESULTS

The production process of Mishavinë is the same for all families, except for the type of milk used (sheep, cow or both of them) and some other details during the production process. Each family owns on average 10–30 sheep and 3–4 cows up to 13 [Dimitrova et al. 2014]. The milking process is carried out manually, and the milk is used partially for daily use and the rest for cheese production. Each family processes the milk and produces the cheese in their own kitchen. The families have sheep and cows, which are from local breeds. The data collected from the questionnaires provide an ample overview of farmers' activities related to the whole value chain of Mishavinë cheese. The majority of Mishavinë cheese producers are women, (64%) with an average age of 45 to 60. The next biggest group is aged 35–44, with 32% of farmers. Only 8% of producers are less than 34 years old.

Referring to the demographic data it is essential to increase the number of young producers as it is important for continuity of Mishavinë production and for the preservation of the tradition. Another important element for the product continuity and sustainability is linked with the quantity of Mishavinë production through the years (Fig. 1).

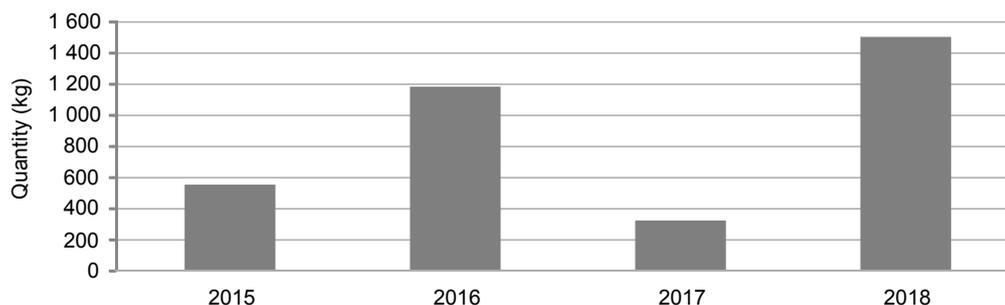


Fig. 1. Mishavinë cheese production

Source: Authors' research.

The data collected from the questionnaires indicates the levels of Mishavinë cheese production. The lowest production level was seen during 2017 due to the following reasons:

1. Product stock from 2016. There were just two years where Mishavinë was reproduced from the farmers and it was difficult to find market distributors.
2. High level of emigration affected Mishavinë producers (opportunity costs).
3. Lack of production knowledge. This tradition is inherited only from the farmers of Lepushe and Vermosh villages.
4. Long period of Mishalvinë cheese processing. Farmers prefer to exploit other alternative resources which are more profitable for them.
5. Price and quantity are two factors which impact the product volatility. The actual market price of Mishavinë is approximately 10 GBP·kg⁻¹, which is low compared to the production costs. Referring to the branded protocol, 1 kg of Mishavinë required 17 l of milk. On the other hand, considering the total number of livestock declared by farmers, we calculated that in the area today up to 3,000 kg per year of Mishavinë can be produced.

The quantity produced was increased during 2018 with 1,497 kg, due to the increase of the demand and

the number of producers. However, factors such as knowledge, farm conditions, opportunity costs and the market price have played an important role in Mishavinë distribution.

The Mishavinë market is still limited and the main buyers are three restaurants organized by the Albanian Chiefs' Association.

Figure 2 shows that farmers' age is linked with the income level provided by this product. The estimation was made only for the last year. The farmers aged between 45–60 years old generate the highest income level due to their experience and better farming conditions. The small number of producers and the future market sustainability was important to build the SWOT matrix (the table, p. 45) in order to forecast future opportunities for Mishavinë cheese.

Mishavinë cheese is considered to be a product that will contribute to the welfare of rural farmers of the Kelmend area. The first step in this process is the foundation of a Mishavinë cheese producers association. Operating through a legal association, farmers can have an international brand name for Mishavinë². The creation of an international brand will contribute to better valuation of the product compared with other similar cheeses.

Farmers should also find other forms of product valuation as it is not possible to sell slow food

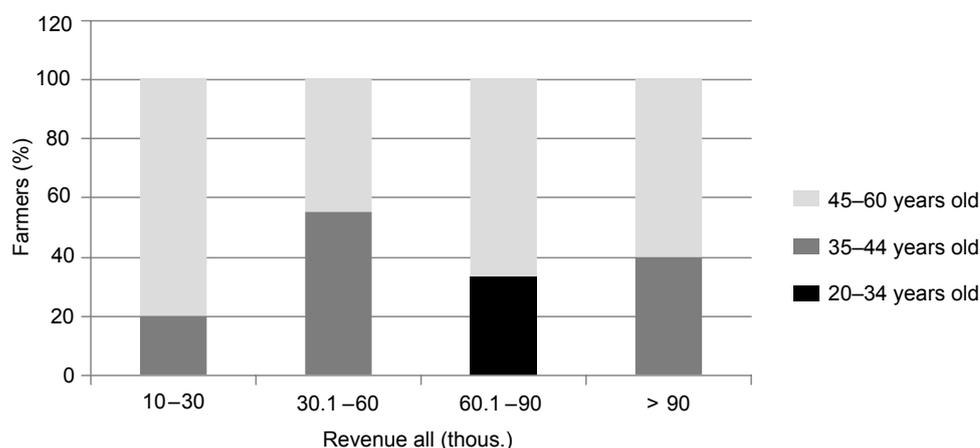


Fig. 2. Revenue from Mishavinë cheese

Source: Author's questionnaires.

² Mishavinë cheese is already registered in Albania at the Albanian Directorate of Industrial Property, Ministry of Finance and Economy in Albania.

Table. SWOT analysis for the Mishvina cheese value chain

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – National heritage of cheese production – Quality of the product – Specificity – Part of the Ark of Taste and Slow Food products – Demanded from alliance of chefs’ association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Low number of producers – Lack of Mishavinë producers association – Lack of branding – Long period of production – High production costs – Not well known by consumers – Lack of contracts with customers
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Registering the product as Geographical Indications – Tourism development in the zone of Mishavinë production – Mishavinë production in the other villages of Bjeshket e Namuna area – Involvement of the young farmers – Commercialize the product to the retail markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Extinction of Mishavinë product – Change of consumer preferences – Massive farmer emigration

Source: Author’s estimation.

products at the retail markets. The Slow Food movement recently has proposed the adoption of Presidia into Narrative labelling [Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity 2019]. This label can be used as a supplement for Mishavinë, by providing additional information regarding animal welfare, cheese processing methods, area of origin and storage conditions.

Another possibility for Mishavinë producers, considering the product characteristics is the registration as Geographical Indications (GI). This kind of registration is crucial to defend the existence of the Mishavinë cheese, as a first step in product sustainability. Another first step needed in this purpose is to precisely identify the breeds and to start activities for registering them as local ones. The cheese produced from autochthonous races, in a specific territory, embodying the traditional techniques and using food security standards can easily be registered as a GI product.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Local restaurants in Shkoder and Tirana buy the majority of the production. The rest is used by the producers themselves in their guesthouses for tourists. The Mishavinë cheese producers need to be more active in the Slow Food network which plays an important

role in consumer-producer interaction [Rombach and Bitsch 2015] and contributes to their increase in income.

The producers claim that Mishavinë cheese production is a very long process and that the selling price does not justify the effort and uniqueness of this product. They have high transaction costs in all the steps of the Mishavinë cheese value chain. Considering the new market requirements, Mishavinë producers need to be present in the retail markets throughout the promotional period of the tradition.

Through ‘narrative labelling’ or GI signs, Mishavinë is going to be valued not only at the local markets but as well to the national or international markets. Albanian policymakers need to identify the main instruments to support the local producers for the GI certification. Local initiatives need to be promoted by local government as instruments in preserving cultural and environmental heritage.

Mishavinë cheese is at potential risk of disappearing due to the continuous migration and emigration from the Kelmend area, in the Alps of Albania. Furthermore, the reduction of the number of animals per family is causing a continuous decrease of the cheese quantity produced, discouraging Mishavinë producers and making the raw material (milk) more expen-

sive. In fact for approximately 1 kg of Mishavinë it is necessary to have 10 l of cow milk and almost 7 l of sheep milk.

A possible path to oppose this tendency is the development of sustainable tourism in the area, focusing on the potential given by a strong traditional gastronomy and the reinforcement of its trade possibilities inside Albania.

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OZNAKOWANIE SERA MISHAVINË: UDZIAŁ GOSPODARKI WIEJSKIEJ ALBANI

STRESZCZENIE

Region Kelmend w Albanii jest najbardziej znany i ceniony za produkowany tam ser Mishavinë. W artykule przeanalizowano doświadczenia rolników dotyczące produkcji i sprzedaży tego sera, a także uczestnictwa w prezydium Slow Food produktów w Albanii. Rola lokalnych producentów ma fundamentalne znaczenie nie tylko w kontynuowaniu tradycji, lecz również w społecznym i gospodarczym wpływie na rolników na tym obszarze. Przedstawiono wyniki badania przeprowadzonego w formie wywiadów bezpośrednich z producentami sera Mishavinë. Narzędziem badawczym był częściowo zamknięty kwestionariusz. Przeprowadzono analizę opisową w celu oceny głównych problemów lokalnych producentów oraz ich współpracy z kontrahentami. Mishavinë jest częścią projektu Slow Food Ark of Taste, stanowi więc doskonałą szansę do zjednoczenia producentów i konsumentów w celu odtworzenia utraconej tradycji.

Słowa kluczowe: ser Mishavinë, slow food, rolnicy, VIS Albania