

Discovering Lombardy's reality on mountain products

In the beginning of autumn 2015, our Italian member ERSAF – the Regional Agency for Services to Agriculture and Forestry in Lombardy - welcomed our intern working on mountain products for twelve days. They showed her the day-to-day life of the farmers living in the alpine valley of Valtellina. It was also the opportunity to get familiar with the everyday work of ERSAF and to find out how the EU optional quality term 'Mountain Product' is currently implemented in Italy and more specifically in Lombardy.

Last July, Alice Dos Santos, student in Innovation and Rural Development at Wageningen University (Netherlands), joined Euromontana's secretariat to work for one year on mountain food products. One important part of her work is to gather information of the implementation of the EU (European Union) optional quality term 'Mountain Product'¹ at national and regional level. Mountain products are equally an essential part of the work of ERSAF. The visit of Alice was the occasion for ERSAF and Euromontana to exchange on this key topic. She further met farmers working with ERSAF in alpine pastures, attended the final events of the E.CH.I 2² project about the alpine intangible heritage, in which ERSAF participated, and met the person in charge of the implementation of the EU optional quality term 'Mountain Product' in Lombardy.

Italy and mountain products

Why are mountain products an important topic for ERSAF? With the most PDO³ and PGI⁴ products registered at the EU level, Italy is a country famous for producing quality food. Food is a central feature of the Italian lifestyle going beyond the mere need to feed yourself. During her stay in Lombardy, Alice had the opportunity to explore the relationship between food and Italians from different perspectives.

First of all, this relationship could be seen in the theme chosen for the Expo2015 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life' held in the capital of Lombardy. The Milanese Universal Exposition proudly highlighted the diversity and the quality of Italian traditional food products.

Alice witnessed it also during her stay in Morbegno, town of the low Valtellina valley. Every autumn, the local population is organising the wine festival "Morbegno in Cantina"⁵. This popular event attracts many people that sometimes are coming from far outside the valley's borders. Beyond wine tasting, it is also for the visitors, the opportunity of tasting the local products like the local cheeses.

Another aspect that showed it is the passion and the pride that farmers communicate when they talk about their production. But surely the most obvious way to see it was for Alice to share a meal with Italians.

Alpine intangible heritage and the project E.CH.I 2

In the last days of September, two events of E.CH.I 2 took place. This project of cross-border cooperation between Italy and Switzerland is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) under the Interreg mechanism. It aims at mapping the local practices in order to promote the alpine intangible heritage. ERSAF is one of the partners involved in the project.

On the 24th September, the event "*Etnografie italo svizzere per la valorizzazione del patrimonio immateriale*" was held. It was the occasion to present to the public the outcomes of the project. The local actors came to explain their traditions. One of the practices shown was the art of building dry stone walls used to make the terraces or *terrazzamenti* in Italian. They are a strong element of Valtellina's landscape.



¹ The (EU) N°1151/2012 regulation on the use of the EU optional quality term 'Mountain Product' was adopted in 2012 and supplemented by the Delegated Act (EU) N° 665/2014 in July 2014.

² *Etnografie italo-svizzere per la valorizzazione del patrimonio immateriale* or Ethnography of Italian and Swiss territories for the promotion of intangible heritage in English. More information can be found on the project website <http://www.echi-interreg.eu> (only available in Italian).

³ Protected designation of origin.

⁴ Protected geographical indication.

⁵ <http://morbegnoincantina.it/en/>

The second event with E.CH.I 2 was the journey on board of the Slow Train⁶. The Slow Train is an initiative created for the Expo2015. During this slow journey from Milan to Tirano, guests of the E.CH.I 2 project were served a gastronomic dinner prepared with typical products of Valtellina and Valposchiavo. This journey was a witness of the richness of the alpine culture made of innovation and tradition.

From Tirano, the journey ended in Val Poschiavo. Val Poschiavo is a Swiss Italian-speaking valley in the south of the canton of Graubünden (Grisons). The region of Val Poschiavo⁷ is another partner of the E.CH.I 2 project. Val Poschiavo is an ambitious and innovative valley. Driven by its president Cassiano Luminati and the local population, the valley has the ambition to rival with cities on innovation and thus launched the project of Smart Valley. It aims to convert the local agricultural systems into producing 100% organic food. Asked about it by Alice, Cassiano Luminati said about the initiative: "We wanted to make use of the resources available locally to strengthen the economy of the valley. Future farmers are trained in the vocational school of the valley to learn local practices as the making of dry stone walls but also how to grow food organically. The food is sold locally and used by our local restaurants [...] We borrowed the term of 'smart' from the cities because, in Val Poschiavo, we do not think that innovation and good living conditions -as for instance access to ICT- should be limited to urban areas." This initiative on how to promote mountain products to make the local economy more resilient is definitely an example to keep an eye on.

ERSAF in Valtellina

In the second part of her stay in Lombardy, Alice met the farmers that are working closely with the staff of ERSAF in the local offices. It was the opportunity for Euromontana to get an impression of mountain farming in the area of Valtellina.

The first stop was in ERSAF Morbegno with Simone Proh. He brought Alice to visit some farms that are leasing alpine pastures to ERSAF. She met first Daniele Codazzi and his family who own a dairy farm in a village of Valtellina. Besides, the family Codazzi have another place in the mountains, located in a small neighbour valley named Val Gerola and leased from ERSAF. Named the *Bar Bianco*, it is an agro-tourist establishment located at an altitude of 1506m. In the summer, the cows of the family are grazing in the Alpine pastures and the family is offering food to the hikers. With the milk from the cows, the family is producing several types of cheeses. Among them are two PDO, the Bitto (produced in the alpine pastures) and the Valtellina Casera (produced in the valley).

The day after, Simone and Alice went to visit Giuseppe Giovannoni. The goatherd is producing cheese from a very specific breed of goats. Named the Orobica, referring to the Italian name of this part of the Alps, the goats are a historical breed of Val Gerola, recognised by the Slow Food Presidia⁸. The goatherd makes the totality of his production in the summer in the isolated alpine pastures of Val Lesina, another small neighbour valley. All his production is sold to the hikers at the refuge nearby.

The last day in Valtellina, Alice joined Alessandro Rapella from ERSAF Lecco. They first visited two agro-tourist farms in the village of Canzo. The first one 'Agriturismo in Valentina' is owned by a young farmer. He started his full production two years ago. His main products are goat cheese, ice-yoghurt and salami and he is aiming to develop his structure into a more elaborated restaurant.



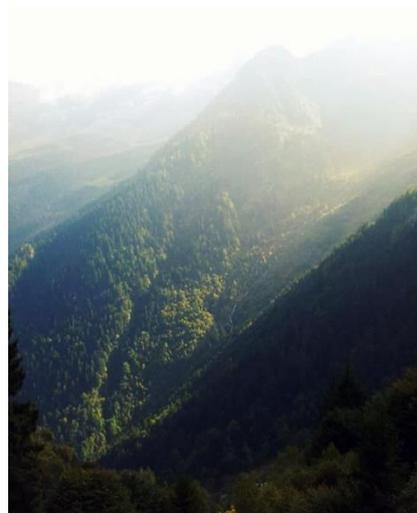
⁶ <http://www.slow-train.it/en/index.html>

⁷ <http://www.regione-valposchiavo.ch/>

⁸ <http://www.fondazioneSlowFood.com/en/slow-food-presidia/orobica-goat/>

Further on the *via per le Alpi*⁹, was Terz' alpe¹⁰, a structure owned by ERSAF and leased to a young couple. This family left everything to start this agro-tourist business. They own cows and goats and produce a large range of products including homemade cakes. They also have a second structure that they own themselves in a neighbour valley. The final stop with Alessandro was back in Morbegno at 'La Gramola' his cousin's poultry farm. His egg production is sold under the name of 'uovodiselva'¹¹ (eggs from the forest). The farmer developed a very unique concept where hens are able to walk freely in a delimited area in the forest. His farm got famous by words of mouth and eggs and meat from the hens are sold directly to consumers. Among them, he supplies his products to gastronomic restaurants.

These five portraits gave different perspectives on the small producers in Valtellina. What united them was the passion they communicated for their work. The hard conditions of the mountains would not stop them from farming. However, it does not mean that agriculture in Valtellina does not face many challenges. The phenomenon of reforestation is well present in Valtellina. Vestiges of former farming systems can be seen in the mountain forests. An important challenge faced by many of the farmers Alice met was bureaucracy. There is a lack of understanding of local problems by government agencies. Regulations are not adapted to the reality of mountain farming and bureaucracy is slowing down the process of innovation.



The implementation of the EU option quality term in Italy

During her stay, Alice also had the opportunity to meet Laura Ronchi from the region of Lombardy. Daniela Masotti who is working for ERSAF and who is helping the president of ERSAF Elisabetta Parravicini with Euromontana was also present at the meeting. Laura Ronchi is working in the agriculture department of the region Lombardy precisely on the attractiveness and promotion of food products. She is the representative of the Lombardy region in the taskforce created by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture to adapt the EU regulation at Italian level. At the time of the meeting, Laura Ronchi was the one in charge to collect the opinions of the different regions of Italy on how to adapt the regulation to the Italian context. The meeting also contributed to give Euromontana and ERSAF fresh insights on the future implementation of the EU optional quality term in Lombardy. The complete information on the meeting will be published in a further article detailing the current situation on the implementation of the UE quality term in the Member States.

An opportunity to exchange on mountain products

These twelve days in Lombardy were an opportunity for Euromontana and ERSAF to exchange on mountain products, a key topic for mountain areas. For Euromontana, getting familiar with the daily work of ERSAF and the reality of Valtellina farmers was an important learning experience. It was an opportunity to better understand the working scope of ERSAF and the regional strategy on mountain food products in Lombardy. For ERSAF, the visit of Alice gave them a different perspective on the local reality of mountain products and an occasion to reflect on their work on the topic. For both organisations, it provided the chance to discuss current developments and challenges of mountain products and to think about opportunities to develop their work on the topic together. Last but not least, these twelve days also gave a human dimension to the partnership between ERSAF and Euromontana. Alice and the secretariat of Euromontana would like to warmly thank the staff members of ERSAF who contributed to this rich learning experience.

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⁹ Literally 'the way to the Alps'.

¹⁰ <http://www.terzalpe.it>

¹¹ <http://www.uovodiselva.it/>