

## **Chestnut festivals: an opportunity to redesign chestnut-growing territories in Italy**

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### **Introduction**

The Greeks called the chestnut "*Jovis glandes*", Jupiter's acorn; Apicius recommended using it instead of lentils; Marziale enjoyed them at the end of lunch, cooked over a low heat and toasted; Xenophon, ancient greek writer and historian, defined the chestnut tree as the "bread of the poor".

These examples give a good idea of the longevity of the tree and its fruit.

World chestnut production is concentrated in two large macro-areas, Asia and Europe, which represent 82% and 10% of world production respectively (FAO, 2021). China is the main world producer, with a 78% share, equal to approximately 1.7 million tonnes of chestnuts produced. In Europe (from Turkey to Portugal), Italy, together with Turkey, is the main European producer. In 2021, Italy produced 43,000 tonnes of chestnuts, equal to 19% of European production. Followed by Portugal, Greece, Spain and France. Looking at international trade, Italy plays an important role: it is the second exporter, after China, and the first world importer of chestnuts in volume. The chestnut is therefore one of the representative products of Made in Italy.

With around 15,000 farms covering an area of just under 40,000 hectares, chestnut fruit cultivation is present throughout the country. The chestnut tree characterizes the Italian landscape: the gentle giant (Adua, 2009) is widespread throughout the Apennines where it plays an important role in the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of the territory.

Despite these numbers, the sector is experiencing a continuing production crisis linked to the problems of economic sustainability of the crop and phytosanitary emergencies: the relaunch of the sector is required through a process of valorization of local peculiarities with a wide-ranging strategy from an economic point of view, environmental and social.

### **Overview**

Despite the difficulties of the sector, Italian chestnut growers take care of and defend their chestnut groves; For chestnut growers, the chestnut tree represents much more than a simple fruit plant: it was the energy basis of the mountain people's diet (it was called "bread") and expresses their and their ancestors' love for a "generous plant" ( of food and wood), for the territory (which it held with its roots), for biodiversity, for the landscape and for an authentic symbol of the man/nature relationship.

The economic sustainability of chestnut fruit cultivation, therefore, cannot pass through an industrial agriculture model which leads to a process of "liberation from the territory" in which the inhabitant and every type of relationship with a living and hospitable territory is denied and replaced from the producer-consumer (Magnaghi, 2000). The economic development model for the relaunch of chestnut cultivation must, however, go through a process of "re-territorialization" understood as awareness of the need to take care of one's natural environment and to find in this care a world rich in lifestyles and identities (ibidem, 2000).

### **Description of the proposed method and data**

The identification of territorial identity (at the different scales of the geographical region and of the single place) is fundamental to start processes of re-territorialization, i.e. acts that reconstruct the relationships between the local community and the territory. Referring this reasoning to chestnut fruit growing and chestnut-growing territories, it is necessary to identify those actions and practices through which this

reappropriation of the territory and of one's identity can be achieved, so that consumers can once again become inhabitants, building sociality. Chestnut "sagra" can represent an instrument of this type.

Taking the definition from the Treccani online dictionary (<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sagra/>), the "sagra" is a popular festival of local character and annual frequency, which traditionally arises from a religious festival, used to celebrate the harvest or promote a local food and wine product. During a festival the local fair, the market and various celebrations generally take place.

The "sagra" are a cultural phenomenon that has origins far back in time. The term "sagra" has Latin origins and derives from the adjective sacer, meaning sacred. The "sagra" is therefore originally characterized by its religious dimension: its were first and foremost moments of communion between men and the sacred. Popular "sagra" in ancient times were celebrated in front of temples or, in the Christian era, churches.

During ancient festivals, animal sacrifices or offerings of land products were often carried out, which were then consumed by the entire community. This original symbolic rite remains as a trace even today in the various gastronomic festivals that revolve around a traditional regional or local dish.

Italy is still dotted with traditional celebrations and festivals throughout the year which represent a great heritage of non-material culture.

Chestnut festivals are organized in small mountain villages along the entire Apennine and partly pre-Alpine range in the same limited time span that coincides with the harvest period (October). Therefore, we can say that they have both a local and national dimension, precisely because the chestnut is one of the few products that is present throughout the Italian territory (along with the wine). There are chestnut festivals whose origins are very ancient, such as the one organized in the small village of Soriano Cimino, in the province of Viterbo, which dates back to the 15th century or the Combai festival now in its 76th edition.

However, there are no specific studies on chestnut festivals in Italy, nor is there a mapping of the festivals and a contextual assessment of the impact on local economies. The aim of the work is the analysis of the economic relationships and networks of relationships that are established at a territorial level thanks to the chestnut festivals in order to identify specific local identity markers.

To this end, through a desk analysis and territorial focus groups organized together with the Italian Chestnut Towns Association, we propose an initial mapping of the chestnut festivals in three case study regions and subsequently an analysis of the local economic relations generated.

## **Conclusions**

The chestnut is a strong identity marker. Strong socioeconomic relationships can be created around this tree: the chestnut allow the material and immaterial heritage of the territories to be enhanced.

Enhance the festivals and strengthen territorial and extraterritorial relations, create a network of chestnuts festivals can represent an opportunity for chestnut-growing territories to rethink their development paths.

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