



The creative resilience and the myth of ‘made in Italy’ in the agri-food sector

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The creative resilience and the myth of ‘made in Italy’ in the agri-food sector

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how the Italian agri-food sector has developed original strategies of resilience in the face of multiple challenges posed by globalization, market crises, and evolving consumption patterns. Drawing on the concept of creative resilience - a form of resilience that combines adaptability and innovation with a strong symbolic dimension - the essay reflects on the distinctive ability of certain typical Italian products to reinvent themselves without severing ties with tradition. Through a critical reading of the literature on Made in Italy, the essay illustrates how the reputation of typical products is built on a blend of material and immaterial values, historical narratives, and creative marketing strategies. The construction of the myth of authenticity and tradition becomes a key asset for companies, especially in a globalized market marked by homogenized consumption. Through a multidisciplinary approach that connects economic

history, cultural studies, and marketing theory, the study investigates the historical roots and contemporary trajectories of three emblematic products: Parmigiano Reggiano, Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, and Vermouth. Despite their differences in origin and development, these products display distinct forms of resilience, all characterized by their ability to combine quality, storytelling, and territorial rootedness. Moreover, the paper highlights the crucial role played by institutions (consortia, certifications, public policies) in making this process both possible and visible. In conclusion, it proposes a multidimensional and active vision of agri-food resilience, conceived as a cultural practice capable of generating economic, social, and symbolic value.

Keywords: Resilience, Made in Italy, typical products, marketing strategy, storytelling, agri-food sector, tradition

La resiliència creativa i el mite del «made in Italy» en el sector agroalimentari

Resum

Aquest article aborda la qüestió de com el sector agroalimentari italià ha desenvolupat estratègies originals de resiliència davant dels múltiples reptes plantejats per la globalització, les crisis de mercat i l'evolució dels patrons de consum. A partir del concepte de resiliència creativa—una forma de resiliència que combina adaptabilitat i innovació amb una forta dimensió simbòlica—, l'assaig reflexiona sobre la capacitat distintiva de certs productes típics italians per reinventar-se sense trencar els lligams amb la tradició. Mitjançant una lectura crítica de la literatura sobre el Made in Italy, l'assaig il·lustra com la reputació dels productes típics es construeix sobre una combinació de valors materials i immaterials, relats històrics i estratègies de màrqueting creatives. La construcció del mite de l'autenticitat i la tradició esdevé un actiu clau per a les empreses, especialment en un mercat globalitzat marcat per un consum homogeneïtzat. Mitjançant un enfocament multidisciplinari que connecta la història econòmica, els estudis culturals i la teoria

del màrqueting, l'estudi investiga les arrels històriques i les trajectòries contemporànies de tres productes emblemàtics: el Parmigiano Reggiano, el Vinagre Balsàmic de Mòdena i el Vermut. Malgrat les seves diferències d'origen i desenvolupament, aquests productes mostren formes distintes de resiliència, totes caracteritzades per la seva capacitat de combinar qualitat, narrativa i arrelament territorial. A més, l'article destaca el paper crucial que juguen les institucions (consorcis, certificacions, polítiques públiques) per fer possible i visible aquest procés. En conclusió, es proposa una visió multidimensional i activa de la resiliència agroalimentària, concebuda com una pràctica cultural capaç de generar valor econòmic, social i simbòlic.

Paraules clau: Resiliència, Made in Italy, productes típics, estratègia de màrqueting, narrativa, sector agroalimentari, tradició

La resiliencia creativa y el mito del «made in Italy» en el sector agroalimentario

Resumen

Este artículo aborda la cuestión de cómo el sector agroalimentario italiano ha desarrollado estrategias originales de resiliencia frente a los múltiples desafíos planteados por la globalización, las crisis de mercado y la evolución de los patrones de consumo. A partir del concepto de resiliencia creativa —una forma de resiliencia que combina adaptabilidad e innovación con una fuerte dimensión simbólica—, el ensayo reflexiona sobre la capacidad distintiva de ciertos productos típicos italianos para reinventarse sin romper los lazos con la tradición. Mediante una lectura crítica de la literatura sobre el Made in Italy, el ensayo ilustra cómo la reputación de los productos típicos se construye sobre una combinación de valores materiales e inmateriales, narrativas históricas y estrategias de marketing creativas. La construcción del mito de la autenticidad y la tradición se convierte en un activo clave para las empresas, especialmente en un mercado globalizado marcado por un consumo homogeneizado. A través de un enfoque multidisciplinario que

conecta la historia económica, los estudios culturales y la teoría del marketing, el estudio investiga las raíces históricas y las trayectorias contemporáneas de tres productos emblemáticos: el Parmigiano Reggiano, el Vinagre Balsámico de Módena y el Vermut. A pesar de sus diferencias de origen y desarrollo, estos productos muestran distintas formas de resiliencia, todas caracterizadas por su capacidad de combinar calidad, relato y arraigo territorial. Además, el artículo destaca el papel crucial desempeñado por las instituciones (consorcios, certificaciones, políticas públicas) en hacer posible y visible este proceso. En conclusión, se propone una visión multidimensional y activa de la resiliencia agroalimentaria, concebida como una práctica cultural capaz de generar valor económico, social y simbólico.

Palabras clave: Resiliencia, Made in Italy, productos típicos, estrategia de marketing, relato, sector agroalimentario, tradición

Introduction

In today's context, which is characterized by various crises and shocks (financial, climatic, health-related, etc.), the topic of resilience is extremely relevant. In recent years, it has been the subject of numerous economic studies, particularly focusing on the resilience of individual areas or regions. In this regard we were wondering about which definition of 'economic resilience' could be suitable to the features of the agri-food sector or if we need to focus also on other elements of resilience closer to this sector. In this perspective we need a concept that could emphasize the ability of companies to interpret social and cultural changes and create new markets, engaging with current fashions and trends.

Given the peculiar characteristics of the Italian food and beverage (F&B) sector, we felt that the concept of 'creative resilience', which we will discuss later, was a more suitable way to describe its evolution over time and its capacity to resist or avoid shocks through creative skills developed over time, as well as the characteristics of the products themselves. We therefore asked ourselves: are companies in this sector (or at least in some sub-sectors) able to withstand the crisis thanks to these creative capacities? To answer this question adequately, we must analyze some key concepts that distinguish Italian agrifood, which we will discuss in the next chapter. These concepts include the topic of country of origin and, more specifically, the myth of 'Made in Italy'. From this perspective, we will investigate the relevance of 'typical products' in the F&B sector and the roles of tradition (and the invention of tradition), myth creation and storytelling. To ground our analysis, we have chosen to apply a case study methodology, examining three emblematic products of the Italian F&B sector in particular: Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Balsamic Vinegar of Modena and Vermouth. Each product is the subject of a specific chapter.

Conceptual framework

The concept of resilience in economic studies is predominantly associated with that of regional economic resilience, on which numerous studies have been produced in recent years (Christopherson, Michie and Tyler 2010, Simmie and Martin 2010, Martin and Sunley 2015). The long-standing question of why some regions manage to maintain a high quality of life for their residents in the face of short- or long-

term economic adversity, while others fail, has been the subject of much debate. This concept is effectively declined according to different interpretations of the type of resilience (engineering, ecological, evolutionary or transformative) (Sutton et al. 2023). However, these interpretative schemes find it difficult to fully grasp the complexity and distinctiveness of the food and beverage (F&B) sector.

The agri-food sector is subject, like other economic sectors, to market fluctuations, but it presents structural characteristics that confer upon it a certain uniqueness, particularly the Italian one, in which a multiplicity of entrepreneurial forms and product typologies (from artisanal to industrial) are present, with significant international reputation and a rich historical tradition.

Enterprises need to understand evolution of the society and the changes of the markets to catch new trends. Therefore, businesses need sometimes to reinvent themselves through mythmaking, which is often the result of marketing strategies, effective brand management, creative entrepreneurial skills. The expression of «creative resilience», used today by various organizations (e.g. UNESCO¹) to explain the crucial importance of creativity in overcoming crises, could be inspiring for this case we are dealing with. Lifestyles and consumption styles change over time, as do tastes. It is therefore often necessary to rethink agri-food products. In this process of renewal there is sometimes a component of qualitative improvement, linked to technological innovations, but there also strongly emerges a component of image construction: a mix of social construction, storytelling and ability to interpret trends.

Beyond the qualitative aspects, the ability to adapt to challenges and overcome crises that have occurred over time, both nationally and in international markets, is clearly a strength of the Italian agri-food sector. We can say that it is through its extraordinary creative capacity that the F&B sector has built up its strength over time, capable of creating the myth of Made in Italy that is recognized internationally.

The agri-food sector is one of the most significant components of the huge Made in Italy domain. According to Law No. 166/2009, Article 16, paragraph 1, the concept of Made in Italy is identified with the set of products entirely manufactured within Italian territory or that have undergone substantial processing

¹ UNESCO provides practical guidance to policymakers as they fight for the inclusion of the cultural and creative industries in social and economic recovery plans. <https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-resilience>

in Italy, resulting in their transformation into a new product.² However, Made in Italy is in fact a complex, partly abstract, and multidimensional concept, which has been extensively studied in the literature of various fields from its emergence in the post-World War II period to the present day (Bertoli and Resciniti 2013). The Made in Italy status not only identifies the intrinsic characteristics of a product but is also capable of evoking in the consumer's mind an imaginary composed of traditions, culture, values, and craftsmanship of a given territory (Magagnoli 2013). This imaginary has contributed not only to the growth of Italy's reputational capital at the international level, but also to the construction of Italian identity and the process of country branding (Marino and Mainolfi 2011). An identity that has held strong communicative power beyond domestic borders, especially in the United States, conferring upon the majority of Italian products a strong competitive advantage with benefits in terms of export (Al-Sulaiti and Baker 1998).

Over the past thirty years, the literature on the subject has largely addressed the phenomenon of Made in Italy, attempting to reconstruct the stages and elements that have contributed to the construction of such a concept, often focusing on product innovation, high quality, design, and advertising communication (Cinotto and Crisanti 2023). Made in Italy products in the agri-food sector evoke, in the eyes of consumers, a broad imaginary attributable to the culinary culture and traditions of a specific territory and population. They enjoy a level of reputational capital that guarantees Made in Italy products a significant competitive advantage in international markets (Canali 2012).

The concept of reputational capital of Made in Italy products falls within the broader notion defined in the literature as *Country of Origin*: the reputation, image, or stereotype that a given consumer associates with a product based on its country of origin.³ The *Country of Origin Effect* therefore refers to the condition whereby a consumer evaluates a product - positively or negatively - solely based on the country in which it was produced: in practice, the set of feelings and perceptual effects generated by the indication of a

product's provenance (Marino, Gallucci, and Mainolfi 2009). The influence exerted by the reputational capital of Made in Italy products on consumers benefits Italian small and medium-sized enterprises, which, although unable to afford large investments in communication and marketing campaigns, are nonetheless able to reach foreign markets and compete with multinational companies in the agri-food sector (Francioni 2017).

The reputational capital reflected by Made in Italy products pertains to the broader concept of country reputation, which considers an extended time span, influenced by both cognitive and affective components. Specifically, the literature defines cognitive beliefs as the set of images and perceptions formed by the level of economic, technological, and industrial development, political stability, historical evolution, culture, traditions, and territory (Allred, Chakraborty, and Miller 2000). Affective beliefs, on the other hand, are understood as the set of emotions and feelings evoked by a certain country in the minds of consumers (Marino and Mainolfi 2013); some scholars argue that these elements have greater influence on consumers compared to cognitive beliefs (Lacoste-Badie, Malek, and Droulers 2013). The concepts of country reputation, country of origin effect, and the reputational capital of Made in Italy products are therefore multidimensional and complex, whose comprehension is strategic for industry professionals, such as marketing managers and governmental bodies. Although consumers' choices and habits have become increasingly independent and less influenced by stereotypical images, they are still sometimes conditioned — especially in the agri-food sector — by evocative images of Italian excellence and tradition. This phenomenon, better known as *Italian sounding*, consists of the marketing of imitation products of Italian food and wine excellence, by means of visual references to Italy on the packaging, such as the colors of the Italian flag, typical Italian landscapes, and evocative names of Italian products (e.g., *Parmesan* or *Makkaroni*) (Magagnoli 2019). The inability to legally curb this phenomenon has favored the exploitation by imitative companies of the positive reputational capital of Italian culinary tradition and culture, which is recalled in the consumer's mind through the use of these references. Italian sounding should not be confused with counterfeiting, which consists in the fraudulent imitation of brands, designs, know-how, and recipes of Made in Italy products protected by copyright and therefore legally punishable.

2 Over the past 40 years, the agri-food sector has gained increasing shares within the vast field of Made in Italy. From a legal standpoint, today Made in Italy is a mark of origin, that is, an indication affixed on the product or on the packaging, which attributes the origin of the good to Italy (Caforio 2016).

3 Several academic studies highlight precisely this country-product link and the impact of country of origin on buyers' perceptions and behavior (Pascucci and Cardinali 2016).

These food and wine excellences generally correspond to what is increasingly identified today by the expression “typical products”. For the F&B sector the Made in Italy success has been shaped by the rise of the “typical products”, in particular starting from the 1980s. We have a long list of Italian products recognized as typical (from the cheeses *Parmigiano-Reggiano*, *Grana Padano*, *Gorgonzola*, etc. to San Daniele or Parma ham, *Mortadella di Bologna*, etc.). Consumers are increasingly searching for something exclusive, original and not produced on a large scale (it is not a matter of taste, but of identity). They are looking for the certainty that they are all individuals who can recognize and appreciate different tastes and express their preferences. The key terms of the “typical product” are therefore territory, taste, traditional: typical products have origin in a specific territory, they have a peculiar and distinctive taste, and they are linked to traditional practices of production. Territory is particularly important from this point of view, because it embodies history, culture and rootedness in a given terroir. Consumers want to believe that a typical product comes from some ancient time and that it is still being produced according to specific skills, methods, and customs that have been passed on according to tradition (Franchi 2013). There is, therefore, the presumption that the typical product has always belonged to a specific place and is thus made with techniques and knowledge rooted in tradition (resulting from practices and secrets passed down from generation to generation). This is the reason of the fundamental importance of the key term ‘traditional’.

The wise management by companies of the intangible components associated with product consumption can be traced back to the business science theory of customer experience (Palmer 2010; Hwang and Seo 2016). This theory emphasizes the broad range of values that can be delivered to customers through various experiences, such as sensory, affective, cognitive, physical, and experiences linked to social identity (i.e. relating to a reference group or culture) (Schmitt 2003, 2009). Similarly, creating an image of the typical product that conveys the intangible components required by consumers fits perfectly into this marketing strategy. Franchi’s (2012) effective explanation of the complex functioning mechanism of taste enables us to understand the role of key elements such as perception, expectation, experience and emotions, and how this fits into the cultural construction process we are describing here (Gallucci 2006, Altilli 2010).

The understanding of the typical product as a product of tradition confers a guarantee of authenticity (tradition is perceived as good), it allows the consumer to be protected from globalization, who finds refuge in the “products of memory” (Magagnoli 2018a). The recuperation and the enhancement of traditions are a crucial element of the producers’ strategy but sometimes also the invention of traditions (at least partial). In this way, tradition can be told as storytelling of typicality. The post-modern consumer tends to move away from industrial production: typicality becomes attractive, catalyzing symbolic values and cultural identity.

Therefore, the cultural rapprochement between market and product typicality can be achieved not only by improving quality, but also by working on the cultural marketing front, reworking the historical framework of past events, not least because of the great worldwide success of Italian cuisine in recent decades. The myth of origins can be seen as a representation of the guarantee of quality and authenticity (but often the basic components of product typicality no longer exist in essence). The importance of the agri-food sector has been built up over time thanks to an extraordinary creative capacity, capable of creating a true myth that is recognized internationally.

The myths underlying the economic expansion associated with Made in Italy are part of that imaginary closely linked to the concept of a “low-intensity myth”. These are myths that do not possess “the authority of tradition but the more humble force of habit” (Ortoleva 2019): in other words, they belong to a mythology of the contemporary world; they represent the decisive component of the fabric of values, symbols, and meanings that are still needed in our time, which appears to be devoid of myths yet remains in need of them. For the modern consumer (in the period of economic boom) the typical food product was associated with hardship and misery; on the contrary, the post-modern consumer tends to move away from industrial production and typicality becomes attractive, embedding symbolic values and cultural identity.

As mentioned in the introduction, we believe that the case study methodology (Yin 2018) has heuristic value and that, in relation to the specific topic of resilience, it can be used to test the theoretical framework outlined thus far. For this reason, in the following chapters we compare three emblematic case studies of typical products through which we can test

the specific dynamics of resilience featuring the F&B sector, represented by Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, and Vermouth. We will observe some similarities, as well as some different characteristics.

The *Parmigiano-Reggiano* cheese

Parmigiano Reggiano is a cheese protected by a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), produced exclusively in the provinces of Reggio Emilia, Parma, Modena, Bologna (to the left of the Reno River), and Mantua (to the right of the Po River)⁴. Parmigiano Reggiano is a globally recognized brand and was among the first to obtain the European Protected Designation of Origin status in 1996. The recognition of the PDO status is the result of a long-term historical process, shaped by commercial exchanges and product communication strategies, in which certain dynamics characterizing the Emilian territory during the 20th century played a decisive role (Magagnoli 2017).

One of the earliest historical references to Parmigiano Reggiano appeared for the first time in 1344 in a commercial document, which recorded the purchase of this cheese for the table of the Priors of Florence (De Roest 2000). The first to engage in the art of producing this long-aging cheese were the Benedictine and Cistercian monks, settled in monasteries south of the Po River: previously, the number of livestock in the area south of the Po was not sufficient to ensure even minimal production of Parmigiano. The Benedictine monks reorganized the land through drainage and deforestation projects, expanding livestock farming; the practices for making Parmigiano required technical expertise that could only be developed within the abbey context (Battilani and Bigatti 2002). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the production of Parmigiano expanded and consolidated thanks to the work of small dairies managed by figures belonging to the bourgeoisie and the agrarian nobility. Production increased significantly in the Reggio area, while in the Duchy of Modena, Parmigiano production only arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century (Iotti 1991). The dairy enterprises of the Duchy of Parma were strongly challenged by merchants who marketed

a grana-type cheese produced in the area around Lodi, on the other side of the Po River (Magagnoli 2017).

In the 19th century, with the revolution of transport and infrastructure, the general demand for dairy products grew throughout Italy, stimulating an increase in dairy production and in the number of dairies active in the sector (Ammerman 1994). However, most dairy companies did not possess the scientific knowledge necessary to make Parmigiano production efficient, which led to considerable waste (Besana 2012). In fact, knowledge within this sector was passed down from generation to generation and was mainly based on empirical principles. A significant turning point occurred with the introduction of institutions and social networks composed of agronomists, scientists, and sector technicians (from the School of Zootechnics and Dairy Production established in Reggio Emilia to the Itinerant Chair of Agriculture).

Parma was consolidating at the time as a center into which flowed the production of Parmigiano from neighboring areas, but the need for a distinctive brand to protect the typicality of the product emerged increasingly. In response to the declaration by the Milan Chamber of Commerce, in 1895, to attribute the denomination 'Parmigiano' only to cheeses produced in the area of Milan and Lodi – and not to those produced in the province of Emilia, which were given the denomination of *Formaggio Reggiano Giallo* (De Roest 2000) – the Parma Chamber of Commerce reacted by launching an advertising campaign to promote the authentic Parmesan origins of the cheese and by commissioning the scholar Carlo Rognoni to write a book on the history of Parmigiano. Subsequently, the Chamber of Commerce of Reggio also decided to call the cheese produced in the province of Reggio '*Grana Reggiano*' (Dieci 1980).

After the ruling in 1899 by the Court of Cassation of Turin against the aforementioned decision by the Chamber of Commerce of Milan, the Chamber of Commerce of Reggio Emilia submitted in 1901 the first of various proposals to establish an association dedicated to operators in the dairy sector, whose objective was to ensure the authenticity of products intended for export. In September 1921, in order to support the dairy sector, an interregional committee was formed, composed of various representatives from institutions, local businesses, and technical experts, with the task of finding a naming model to designate the different types of grana cheeses from the different regions of production, based on the example of the

4 «La storia - Parmigiano Reggiano», 2025, <https://www.parmigianoreggiano.com/it/prodotto-storia>. Accessed March 15.

French AOC system used for wines (Magagnoli 2017). Another important step occurred in 1928 with the establishment of the 'Voluntary Consortium for the Protection of Grana Reggiano': a commercial initiative whose function was to guarantee the attainment of minimum standards in the production processes in terms of maturation, fat percentage, and origin of raw materials. In 1934, the consortium was expanded to include producers from Parma, Modena, and Mantua, and was renamed the 'Interprovincial Voluntary Consortium'.⁵ The consortium introduced the name of the Parmigiano Reggiano brand, which has remained unchanged as we know it today. After an interruption caused by the Second World War, the consortium was reorganized in 1954, adopting its current name: the Parmigiano Reggiano Cheese Consortium. Throughout the 20th century, enormous changes occurred in the conditions of Parmigiano Reggiano production, such that it became technically different from its original form. First and foremost, the environment and agricultural processing methods in that territory changed: particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, manufacturing development and innovations in agricultural organization brought about profound transformations in the agricultural landscape of the region, modifying the terroir of Parmigiano Reggiano, which geographically corresponds to the Po Valley.

A second vector of change is represented by the selection and crossbreeding of animal species and crops. Parmigiano Reggiano was traditionally produced with milk from Red Cows (*Vacche rosse*), a local breed that had populated the Po Valley since the Middle Ages. After the Second World War, the Red Cow was almost completely replaced by the Friesian breed, which produces a milk (and thus a cheese) of different quality, but allows for higher profits. Recently, the Red Cow has begun to be reintroduced, and today Parmigiano Reggiano made from Red Cow milk is positioned in the highest price segment of the market. Lastly, cheese production techniques were also modernized, with very positive effects on the product's health standards and quality: one of the first innovations, in the early 1900s, was the use of whey starters (*sieroinnesti*), which made ageing and conservation of the product easier. This process of renewal led to a gradual standardization of the product, making it increasingly able to reach ever more distant markets.

⁵ In 1937 it was again expanded to include representatives from the part of the province of Bologna to the right of the Reno River.

But these are the tangible components of the product: we have also to consider intangible features, linked mostly to the history of the product, traditional practices, customs and methods of production, symbolic values (cultural and social marketing). In order for a product made essentially of milk to become a product made of charm, immaterial components are needed (including storytelling elements). Until 1960, Parmigiano was not yet of excellent quality and little control was exercised. Then there was a turning point, also thanks to strategies of diversification from the productive tradition of Grana Padano of which it is a part, implemented through effective commercial practices. These strategies constitute the turning point of the 1960s.

FIGURE 1 - METAL PLATE, PARMIGIANO REGGIANO PELAGATTI (1930)



Source: <https://parmigianoreggiano.museidelcibo.it/catalogo-museale/targa-pubblicitaria-ditta-pelagatti-2/>. Accessed August 7, 2025.

Producers conceived the marketing strategy as a package of tangible and intangible elements (intangible features linked to its history – know-how, tradition, customs and methods). Several keywords were emerging in the commercial campaigns adopted through mass media: uniqueness, naturalness, seven centuries of tradition, social distinction, high quality. And the consumer could get all these benefits (additional to that one of the taste) for a premium price.

FIGURE 2 - NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT BY CONSORTIUM PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO (1968)

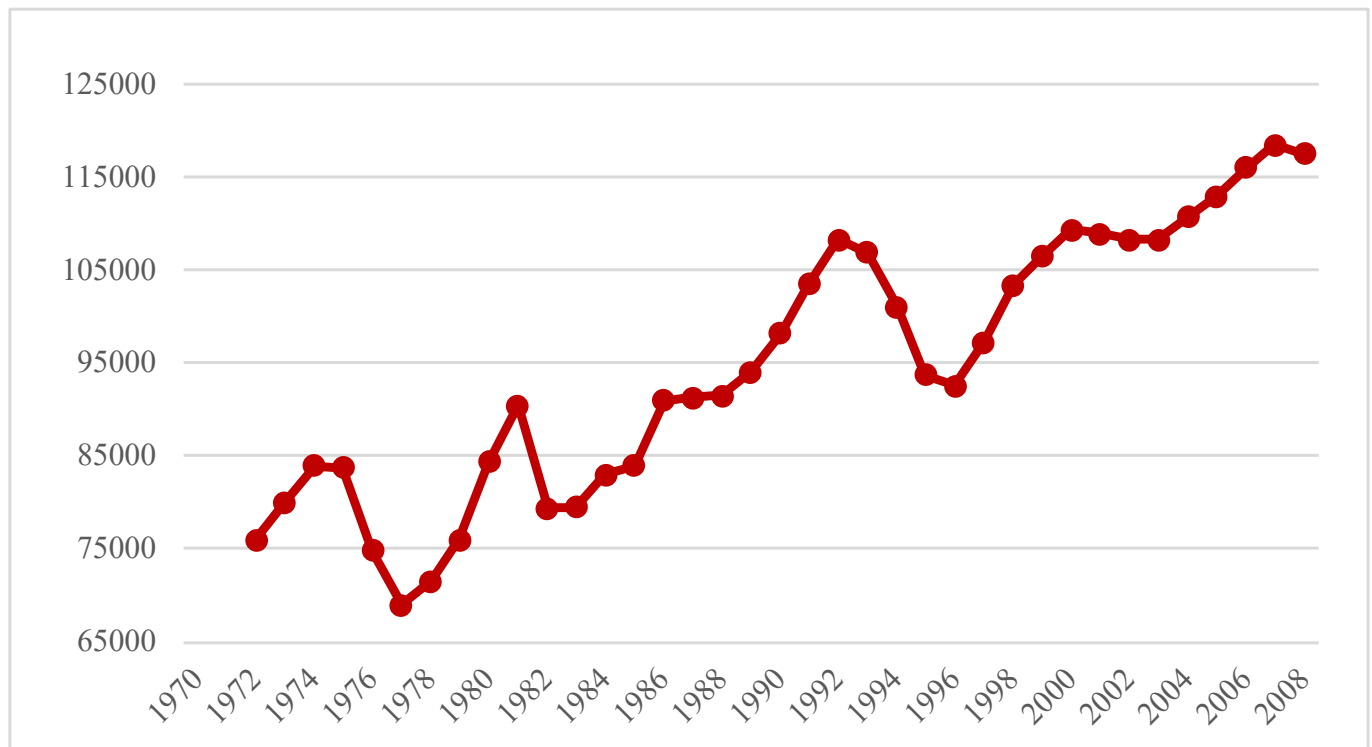


Source: <https://parmigianoreggiano.museidelcibo.it/persaperne-di-piu/focus-su/parmigiano-reggiano-marketing/>
Accessed August 7, 2025.

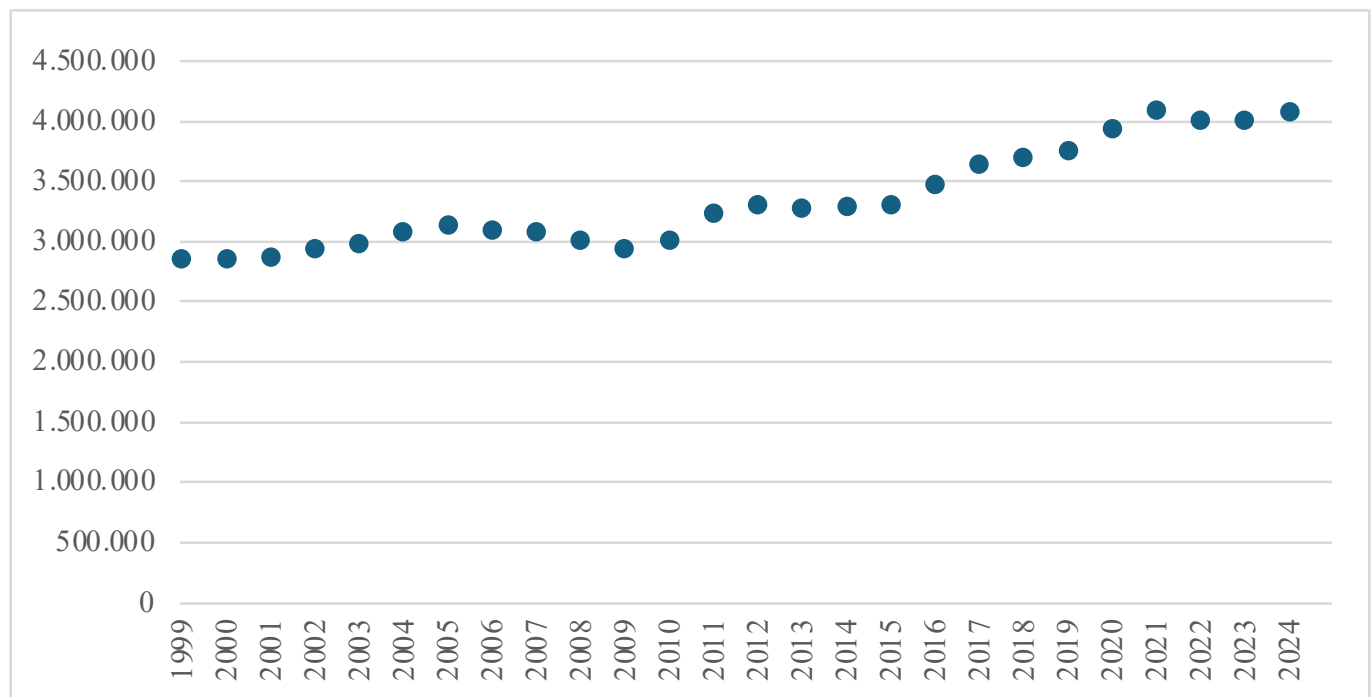
In the following years advertising was increasingly focused on the social status embedded in the purchase and consumption of the product. In the 1980s, the rediscovery of traditional food and the interest in the Italian lifestyle emphasized these aspects and overlapped with the expansion processes of typical products. Parmigiano Reggiano thus became a model of mythmaking. It became a product as well capable of resisting crisis. An analysis conducted in 2007 on the Parmigiano Reggiano market showed that there had been until then a consistently positive trend in the growth of marketable production, starting from 1972, when this indicator was slightly above 75,000 tons, up to the two-year period 2006–2007, in which it consistently stood above 115,000 tons. In this long period, the product faced only a few phases of recession, the most serious of which occurred in the 1975–76 biennium, followed by that of 1982–83 and by that of the early 1990s (Grandi 2007).

In another article, issues related to market instability were highlighted, with prices tending downward until the beginning of the new millennium: such market instability was attributed to the difficulties that ag-

FIGURE 3 – MARKETABLE PRODUCTION OF PARMIGIANO REGGIANO (TONN.), 1972-2008



Source: Grandi (2003).

FIGURE 4 – PRODUCTION OF PARMIGIANO REGGIANO (NO. WHEELS), 1999-2024

Source: our elaboration from https://www.clal.it/?section=confronto_grana_parmigiano. Accessed August 7, 2025.

gricultural enterprises encountered when they had to adapt to changing market conditions (Grandi 2003).

From the historical series related to the production of Parmigiano Reggiano from 1999 to the present, one can observe a substantially constant increase in production,⁶ in contrast to a less regular trend in prices, in which phases of price decline are evident, but which in any case does not seem to have followed the medium-term negative economic dynamics marked by the 2008 crisis: the general trend in prices over the past 25 years is one of growth, with a sharp increase in the last year that falls within a generalized inflationary tendency.

Recent research by De Canio et al. (2021) on the use of virtual tours to stimulate consumer purchases in the case of Parmigiano Reggiano, for example, has highlighted that more consumers (particularly younger people) were willing to visit the Parmigiano Reggiano dairy and purchase the cheese after experiencing the virtual tour. Thus, Parmigiano Reggiano is emblematic of the concept of typicality, demonstrating how the theoretical references cited in the framework can be

applied to this case study (Gallucci 2006, Altilli 2010, Ortoleva 2019).

The Balsamic Vinegar of Modena

Balsamic Vinegar of Modena is widely recognized as one of the Made in Italy food products with the deepest historical roots. Producing cooked must was a peasant common practice, not only for those of the Po River Valley. The lower-quality varieties (non-aged cooked must vinegar, or a blend of cooked must and wine vinegar) were in fact food condiments that each family produced for self-consumption, while the more sophisticated ones (aged cooked must balsamic vinegars) were found in the vinegar cellars of noble and bourgeois families, reserved for important guests or intended to represent one of the most prestigious dowry elements. As also demonstrated by the lack of commercial quotations, vinegar was a product devoid of markets. In the first case, because it was a 'poor' product, which each peasant family produced by itself; in the second, because it represented not so much a food preparation as a symbol of the household prestige or family social status, a condition that prevented its monetary quantification. Thus, traditionally, balsamic

⁶ Data published on https://www.clal.it/?section=confronto_grana_parmigiano Accessed August 7, 2025

vinegar has always been devoid of commercial value. It is only during the Napoleonic era that it assumes for the first time a market value: the occupying troops, in fact, in order to face military and civil administration expenses, decided to auction some highly valuable goods, such as the artistic heritage of the Estense Gallery, the furniture of the Ducal Palace, and precisely the thirty-six barrels of balsamic vinegar kept in the ducal vinegar cellar (Magagnoli 2018b).

In the areas of the Duchy of Modena, especially from the mid-19th century, the use of a blend of cooked must and wine vinegar became quite common – even among urban aristocratic and bourgeois classes – as a condiment for many dishes. The formula of this blend varies from cellar to cellar, and, in this phase, it is a product not made for the market but intended only as a gift. These are products available to the Dukes of Modena, as well as to the leading figures of the ducal court, sent as gifts to relatives and friends in European courts. By the mid-1800s, moreover, the fashion of aging vinegars was also spreading. Over time, balsamic vinegars of Modena came to acquire a very high reputation. After the Napoleonic parenthesis – up until the post-World War II – the product once again became a symbolic seal of family distinction, devoid of monetary equivalent. The ‘rediscovery’ of balsamic vinegar, after the Universal Exhibitions, which marked an important watershed in the construction of the market, occurred during the years of the economic boom, when the generalized income growth, more pronounced in Modena than elsewhere (Zamagni 1997), produced significant effects on its demand: the conditions for the construction of a market for balsamic vinegars were being created.

In this historical phase, however, the difficulty of differentiating the various types of product fueled uncertainty in consumer choices. Uncertainty about the organoleptic classification of the product and the definition of the production procedures, and thus about the market positioning. In the years when balsamic vinegar was being rediscovered, there was therefore considerable confusion about which types of product corresponded to this definition, about what the methods of traditional processing were, and about what did or did not constitute – ultimately – a ‘balsamic vinegar’. Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the Modena area, there spread the desire to ‘recover’ a product (traditional balsamic vinegar) considered by then lost, threatened by the industrial development of the province, which had severely tested the agrar-

ian landscape, consumed the terroir and irreversibly changed the relationship between city and countryside. Probably, the desire to preserve local identities and traditions, threatened by the changes brought by the economic boom, played a decisive role in pushing in this direction. It was an important turning point, both for balsamic vinegar and for the lifestyles of the Emilian countryside. On one side, the *Consorteria* of Traditional Balsamic Vinegar placed balsamic vinegar at the center of a possible economic scenario. A *Consorteria* that had never existed before, but which, in 1967, was founded along the lines of medieval guilds, becoming an important component in the invention of the balsamic tradition. By resorting to documents that gradually trace back to the supposed medieval roots of the product, the genealogy of the product was constructed (Magagnoli 2021).

From that time the traditional balsamic vinegar acquired a precise status evocative of an ancient ‘purity’, crystallized in the official regulations. The ‘traditional balsamic’ regulations partially reinvented a very rigid and costly practice of ageing the product (necessary because of the technological progress and the evolution of consumers’ tastes). In the 1980s first we have the spread of the product at the international level: it was present, for instance, in the luxury delicatessens of NY already in 1980. This success was possible also thanks to cultural marketing, through an effective system of signs and symbols capable of transferring to international markets the epic image of the territory of origin of balsamic vinegar, with its layout of medieval castles, peasants and feudal lords. The myths of typicality, tradition and authenticity were no longer just links to the past but have become labels that increase sales: they are no longer just signs of researching links to the past (or finding roots in the past).

Its viscosity is also an invention, the result of creativity and storytelling. Only in the 1990s, we observe the spread of consumption in Italy (the domestic market is built after the internationalization of the product). The reasons for the success of balsamic vinegar in the United States market – by definition more inclined to appreciate aspects of originality of products rather than the exaltation of their ties with the past – are extremely significant. Between the late 1970s and early 1980s, on the one hand, we witness the great international success of Italian fashion, which, combining class, elegance, and lower costs, manages to penetrate the consumer imaginaries of upper classes around the world. In those years, being recognized as an Italian

product gives that 'extra edge' that allows entry into new markets. The reputation of balsamic vinegar, at the beginning of the 1980s, is still predominantly local, even though its nature as a vinegar, at the same time acid and sweet, starts to attract interest and curiosity. Some New York intermediaries in luxury Italian food and beverage have the idea to begin importing the 'vinegar of Modena', which is starting to be rumored as a product of luxury and quality, also supported, however, by the reputational aura that the city of Modena has acquired through the Formula 1 successes of Ferrari and the triumph of Luciano Pavarotti at Madison Square Garden. In this case, we are talking about the type of vinegars that would later become Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), in a relatively affordable price segment. But in the early years, what matters is novelty, and the vinegar from Modena is young, modern, and above all extremely expensive on the American market. It thus becomes a status good, which some social classes absolutely cannot renounce.

In the 2000s the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) was applied to the 'traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena', produced by artisanal methods, while the PGI is applied to the 'balsamic vinegar of Modena', produced mostly by industrial methods. It is in the years straddling the 20th and 21st centuries that a true Copernican transformation takes place. The sudden surge in demand for balsamic vinegar becomes the driving force behind the creation of a new designation of origin – the PGI – which, in turn, would become an effective multiplier of demand, also thanks to the increased presence of balsamic vinegar in chefs' recipes as well as those published in widely circulated magazines such as *La Cucina Italiana*. The crisis of 2008 did not affect the product: it had become an unsinkable product, immune to the major market fluctuations, due to a long process of social and economic construction.⁷ The statistics from those years also show growing production (Adua 2010). Therefore, one could argue that it was destined to be resilient to economic crises, in a sort of preventive resilience (perhaps akin to the concept of ecological resilience discussed in the literature), thanks to a long-term process of market social construction. The myths of 'typical', 'tradition', and 'authenticity' have become labels that boost sales; they are no longer merely symbols of a quest for historical continuity. In

2008, a 7% increase was recorded compared to the previous year, but more generally, there was a growth from a few thousand liters to 100 million liters. Today, the balsamic vinegar industry is one of the most important in the agri-food sector, with a high and constantly expanding turnover, reaching around one billion euros in consumer value at the beginning of 2020. It has also achieved a record export share for Italian food products, standing at approximately 92% of total production, and a foreign market that now extends to 120 countries. From the report of 2011 of the *Istituto di Servizi per il Mercato Agricolo Alimentare* (ISMEA), we gather summary data on certified PDO and PGI production between 2008 and 2010. Vinegars other than wine vinegars (in this case, balsamic vinegar) registered a slight increase from 2008 to 2009 (from around 11,000 tons to about 12,500), while from 2009 to 2010 the increase was 450% (over 68,600 tons): the production of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, in the early years of the crisis, had "more than quintupled its certified quantities" (Rapporto ISMEA 2011). Therefore, the case of balsamic vinegar also shows how the theoretical references cited within the framework have been put into practice effectively and can provide useful food for thought when it comes to understanding the mechanisms of creative resilience that are activated over time (Gallucci 2006, Altili 2010, Franchi 2012, Ortoleva 2019).

Italian Vermouth facing threats and challenges: strategies of resilience

Vermouth is one of the most important aromatized wines and in recent years has gained an increasing share of the world market. Defined as a «fortified, herb-flavored wine, available in many different types and qualities» (Robinson 2006, 732), it is made from a base of white or red wine with a perfect aroma and flavor, to which plant-based aromatic substances are added (Bassi and Becchetti 1985). Used mainly as a medicinal drink since Roman times, aromatized wines developed significantly in the Middle Ages thanks to the herbal techniques practiced in monasteries. The origins of the name can be traced back to late Fifteenth-century Germany: *Wermut* in German refers to its main aromatic component, wormwood or absinthe (*Artemisia absinthium*). '*Wermut wein*' travelled from Bavaria to the French court – where the spelling changed to vermouth – and Central Europe, before

⁷ Today it is affected, like other products, by an increase in the cost of raw materials, particularly concerning the construction of the final product's packaging, namely glass.

arriving in Piedmont and Tuscany in the Eighteenth century, thanks to the relations between the two ruling houses and the Viennese court (Mainardi and Berta 2018).

Over the 18th and 19th century, vermouth became more widespread not as a medicine, but as an 'aristocratic' drink thanks to the tradition of the '*vermouth d'onore*' ('vermouth of honour'), served at grand ceremonies and institutional events (Strucchi 1909). Despite its aristocratic characterization, however, it soon became a standardized product thanks to entrepreneur Antonio Benedetto Carpano, who introduced fortification of muscat wine at the end of the 18th century (Villani 1957). His area, Piedmont, was rich in artemisia and muscat grapes, which were the basic components of early vermouths (Piccinino 2015). The province of Turin in fact rapidly became the home of most vermouth producers, including Carpano, Cora, Martini & Rossi, Cinzano and Gancia.

In the second half of the nineteenth century sales of vermouth rose and from being simply a local product, it gradually won increasing market share. The geographical connotation of Turinese vermouth remained for a long time in the perception of the consumers, even abroad (Mainardi 2022), where vermouth developed a strong reputation as a 'special wine', initially among the Italian immigrant communities in particular. After the strong international expansion, which reached an extraordinary peak in the years preceding WWI thanks to the robust export to the American continent (U.S., Argentina, and Brazil), the Italian vermouth sector began to experience the first real market challenges. The first challenge, in early 20th century, is represented by the practice of imitation and counterfeiting of the product. Italian producers attempted during those years to face such a threat by maintaining high product quality and emphasizing reputation. International expansion was followed by consolidation of the market for 'special wine' in the first half of the Twentieth century (Piccinino 2018).

The crisis of WWI posed serious difficulties in the market, in terms of falling demand and shortage of glass, the raw material used for packaging, since the vast majority of exports were shipped in bottles, especially to Argentina and the U.S. The strategy adopted by vermouth companies was the conversion of packaging from bottles to demijohns. In the inter-war period, the protectionist policy adopted by some countries, including Argentina and the U.S., resulted in the loss of these two key markets, pushing Italian

companies to focus more on European markets. In addition, there was Prohibition in the U.S., while imitation practices spread further in Europe. One of the responses adopted by major companies in the face of these problems was the delocalization of activities abroad (Cinzano in particular), while other producers tried to make the most of their sales networks and the synergies arising from various product lines (as Gancia did to produce sparkling wine and vermouth). Not least, the increasingly frequent adoption of technological innovations already existing but still little widespread in the vermouth sector (the rise of modern manufacturing methods improving the quality of the product, from pasteurization via cooling to purification and filtration).

In the 1950s and 1960s it became an iconic consumer good around the globe, thanks to Martini and other big companies which internationalized the trade (Mazzotti, Maffi and Magagnoli 2025).

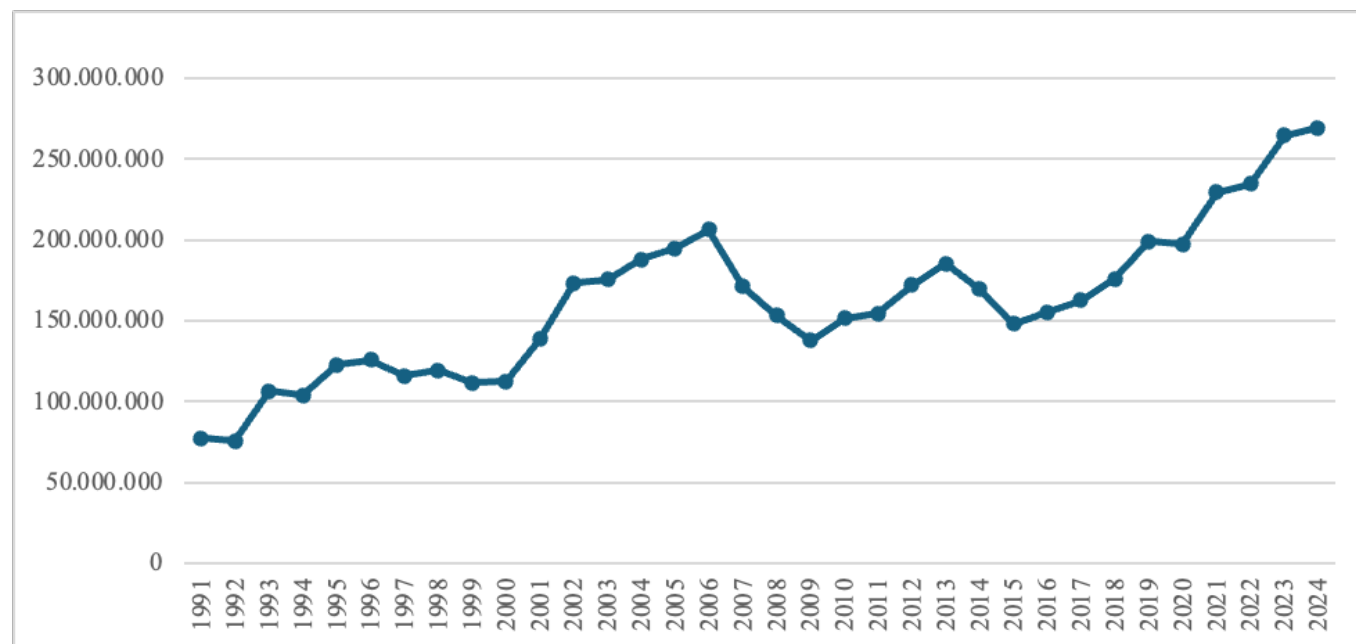
During the 1960s, a period of profound socio-cultural change driven by industrialization and social modernization, companies abandoned the theme of tradition in their marketing strategies and brand management activities in favor of narratives connected to symbols of modernity. In the case of vermouth producers, these narratives were linked to the growing popularity of aperitifs.

The intangible aspects emerge mostly in those years and in the 2010s. In the 1950s marketing strategies (advertising in mass media) of vermouth producers were emphasizing the social distinction characteristics of the product (vermouth symbol of elegance, taste and culture), recalling the royal origin (or at least aristocratic) of the product, encouraging emulative consumption behavior and favoring a parallel progressive 'democratization' process of the product.

The strong growth of vermouth exports, supported by the performance of the major Italian companies (Martini above all), continued throughout the 1970s, then stabilized with phases of fluctuation until the new century (Fig. 5).

Once again, typicality turns out to be the key to growth after a phase of difficulty represented by the years of crisis in the second decade of the 2000s.⁸ A new emergence of brands that evoke tradition and product authenticity, putting together in the labels the symbol of late 19th century industrialization (factory)

8 ISTAT, 2024. Monetary values recorded in lire and converted to euro for the period 1991-1998 are referred to as "eurolires". <https://www.coeweb.istat.it/default2.htm>. Accessed August 7, 2025.

FIGURE 5 – ITALIAN VERMOUTH EXPORT (EURO), 1991-2024

Source: our elaboration from *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), Historical series, Overseas trade, 1991-2024*.

and the symbol of aristocratic tradition (heraldic coat of arms).

In line with what had occurred for the other two products under examination, in 2019 a consortium for the protection of vermouth was also established, bringing together a multitude of local producers. Specifically, it aims to protect the typicality of its origin linked to the Piedmontese terroir: the companies established during the 19th century were mostly located in the provinces of Turin and Asti.

From this perspective, companies joined forces to reject the commercialization of traditional symbols and narratives of authenticity and distinctiveness, which are becoming increasingly important for entrepreneurial success in the Italian food and beverage industry. The vermouth sector therefore represents not only the models indicated in the theoretical framework relating to the country of origin effect and Italian sounding, but also the resilience mechanisms employed over a long period of the sector's evolution between the 19th and 21st centuries (Al-Sulaiti and Baker 1998, Gallucci 2006, Altilli 2010, Marino and Mainolfi 2011, 2013, Franchi 2012, Magagnoli 2018a, 2019).

Some concluding remarks

In this article, we analyze the resilience of the Italian agrifood sector in a broad, multi-layered sense.

We discuss some fundamental topics closely linked to this sector, such as the country-of-origin effect, Italian sounding, typicality, myth creation, storytelling, the invention of tradition and customer experience management, to highlight the need to apply the concept of creative resilience. In our opinion, this is a more suitable approach than the various forms of economic resilience generally adopted in the literature.

In particular, it is useful to highlight the distinction between forms of adaptive resilience, which indicate the capacity to maintain balance in the face of external shocks, and a more suitable concept of creative resilience, which instead describes the way of evolving structurally, reworking material and symbolic resources in an innovative way. We finally used the case study methodology to test its applicability to the Italian agrifood sector (Yin 2018), through the comparative analysis of three products – Parmigiano Reggiano, Balsamic vinegar of Modena, and Vermouth.

In the case of Parmigiano Reggiano, resilience has taken shape through a wise balance between continuity and renewal. While maintaining an image strongly linked to monastic tradition and Emilian rurality, the product has been the subject of a valorization and standardization process that has been able to combine organoleptic quality, strong control of the supply chain, and territorial narration. Its strength lies not so much

in resisting the transformations of the global market, but rather in the capacity to rework the identity of the product, projecting it into a refined, international, and health-conscious consumption horizon. The identity of Parmigiano Reggiano, therefore, is the result of a dynamic cultural construction, which has consolidated over time through discursive, visual, and institutional operations (such as the DOP certification), capable of giving symbolic coherence to an intrinsically complex product.

A trajectory that shares some similarities, though characterized by unique features, is that of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena. Born as a domestic practice, Balsamic vinegar has undergone a long process of codification and valorization that has led over years to its patrimonialization. In this case, resilience has been expressed in terms of identity reappropriation, with a strong mythopoetic component: the narration of the long waiting, of generational transmission, and of the secrecy of procedures has built an almost ritual aura around the product. The resilience of Balsamic vinegar of Modena thus lies in the capacity to build a strong cultural imaginary, capable of mobilizing values such as patience, authenticity, and genealogical continuity, which oppose the horizontality and homogenization of contemporary consumption.

The case of Vermouth, finally, offers an emblematic example of creative resilience. Vermouth originates from the outset as a cultural and commercial hybrid, the result of the combination between pharmaceutical practices, aristocratic tastes, and logics of industrial production. Its history is marked by a continuous reworking of its image and social function: from medicinal elixir to salon beverage, from symbol of Turin modernity to object of global consumption. The resilience of Vermouth manifests itself in the capacity to redefine its semantic positioning within markets and cultures of taste: at each crisis – economic, political, or symbolic – the product has been able to respond with new strategies of communication, design, packaging, valorization of aromatic herbs, and territorial rootedness. More than preserving itself identical, Vermouth has been able to reinvent itself, maintaining a narrative coherence founded on its historicity and its compositional plurality.

In summary, the three case studies demonstrate that the resilience of Italian agri-food products is not exhausted in the capacity to 'survive' shocks but is rather founded on an articulated set of narrative strategies, institutional devices, cultural practices, and

regulatory tools that allow tradition to be reinvented and value to be constructed. Resilience thus becomes an active process of cultural production, which implies memory, selection, reinterpretation, and staging of identity elements. In this sense, Italian typical products are configured as cultural goods in the full sense: not simply objects of consumption, but symbolic nodes through which relationships, belongings, and distinctions are structured. The contribution of institutions – consortia, certification bodies, European policies, and territorial narratives – appears fundamental in making this resilience possible and visible. Resilience, therefore, is configured as a form of organized cultural resistance, capable of producing economic, social, and symbolic value in contexts of strong transformation.

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