

## **LOCAL AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS IN TOURISM: A. J. STRUTT'S ACCOUNT OF SICILIAN PRICKLY PEARS**

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**Abstract:** In the marketing of tourist locations several strands can be exploited to stress the potentialities of a place: landscape, buildings, quality foods. European regulations connect local food to the place and to history in terms of growing or manufacturing praxis and of local traditions rooted in ways of preparing and of consuming it. In tourism, food products add to the travel experience since they can be employed to define the cultural identity of a location. This paper, while reckoning the role of quality local food products in tourism, wants to call attention to the added value British grand tourists' reports can play in defining the historical roots of quality food items. To this aim, the brief descriptions of Sicilian prickly pears from Arthur John Strutt, a British painter and a traveller, are reported, and discussed for the first time, as a means to better characterize the PDO cactus fruits grown in Sicily.

**Key words:** Sicilian prickly pears, cultural capital, Grand Tour, British travellers, Arthur John Strutt.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In tourism studies, the consumption of food during the holiday is increasingly seen as a strategic element in the marketing of a destination since local quality products add to the travel experience. Local products, in fact, are an important asset to define and to embody the social and gastronomic peculiarities of a place and are considered part of the cultural capital representing the expression of a country, of its society, and of its history (Bessière, 1998; Mak et al., 2012; Tregear et al., 2007).

The expression "*cultural capital*" is an umbrella term covering different strands that shape the identity of a location, namely landscape, i.e. rivers, lakes, mountains; historic buildings, i.e. churches, villas, archaeological sites; local traditions, i.e. customs, folklore, crafts, festivals; and local foods, i.e. ways of preparing and of consuming food items linked to a given territory (Bessière, 1998;

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Garrod et al., 2006). These different layers are at the base of those forms of tourism labelled under the rubrics of rural tourism, heritage tourism and gastronomic tourism (Richards, 2002; Sims, 2009).

The link between local products of agricultural or of animal origin and the peculiar traits of a geographical region is facilitated by the European Community (EC) characterization scheme known under the PDO/PGI/TSG labelling system. This classification of local quality food aims at stressing the products' qualities and the specific production standards connected to local praxis in terms of expertise and of local traditions.

The PDO label (Protected Designation of Origin) describes the specifications of those products that must be produced, processed and prepared within a particular geographical environment and with qualities or characteristics exclusive to that area, natural and human factors included; the PGI label (Protected Geographical Indication) describes those products bearing the name of a particular geographical area where the products' characteristics are attributable to that same area; the TSG label (Traditional Specialty Guaranteed) defines the traditional character of foodstuffs or agricultural products by its composition or by its production method (EEC Regulation No 510/2006).

These characterization schemes can be exploited in tourism to define local foods as iconic products that serve to stress the cultural identity of a place, thus adding up to the cultural experience of the travel (Bowen & De Master, 2011; Mak et al., 2012; Sims, 2010). Along this research line, several local quality products from different European countries are listed in the EC website devoted to foods with PDO, PGI and TSG trademarks (DOOR Website), while some products have been described by an historical point of view. Cases in point of the latter type can be considered the papers on *Culatello di Zibello*, on the *Beacon Fell traditional Lancashire cheese* (Tregear et al., 2007), on *Parmesan Cheese* (de Roest & Menghi, 2000), on French (Bérard & Marchenay, 2006) and Polish cheeses (Bowen & De Master, 2011), on *Mortadella di Bologna* or on *Caciocavallo Cheese* (Cianflone, 2012; 2013).

These descriptions serve to typify local quality food and the cultural, gastronomic and manufacturing traditions of a locality, thus stressing how local praxis is rooted in historic ways of growing or of preserving typical agricultural products or food items of animal origin.

Among these studies, a research line that has received little attention concerns the role the literature written by foreign travellers, describing their errands along the Grand Tour circuit, can play in defining the historical link between local foods and the territory. The scope of this note is, therefore, to report preliminary results from ongoing research to delineate the historical roots of some iconic Sicilian food items found in British travel literature. To this aim, the prickly pear from San Cono, considered a typical Sicilian fruit, is matched to historical evidence found in the description from a nineteenth-century British traveller and painter: Arthur John Strutt.

The note is organized as follows: first the history of the growing of prickly pears in Sicily is sketched, together with reference to the specifications of Sicilian prickly pears; then, Strutt's brief description of Indian figs is reported for the first time; the concluding remarks stress the value of this narrative in tourism to characterize the Sicilian cactus fruits.

### **PRICKLY PEARS IN SICILY**

Prickly pears, also called Indian figs, belong to the *Cactaceae* family, an ecotype widely distributed in the Americas and now in other parts of the world, such as the Mediterranean basin and Australia. The fruit is a fleshy berry, varying in shape, size,

and colour (red, white and yellow); the pulp has a consistent number of hard seeds (Piga, 2004). The fruit is rich in water. Water amounts vary since, depending on the cultivar and on the harvesting season, it may account up to 90% of the total fruit content; it is also rich in lipids, proteins, minerals, fibers and volatile components that affect the flavour (Piga, 2004).

The Spanish imported prickly pears in Europe from the American colonies at the end of 15<sup>th</sup> century (Russell & Felker, 1987). They were first cultivated in the Canary Islands, where plants were grown to extract a red dye from a cochineal insect hosted by the plant (Barbera et al., 1992). From these islands, specimens were exported as a botanical curiosity to other Mediterranean locations where they found favourable growing conditions (Barbera et al., 1992). In Sicily plants soon became naturalized because of the climate, and were grown in several parts of the island. As time went by cacti had a consistent share in the local agriculture of subsistence typical of the Mediterranean island, and were defined by local historians "*the blessing of Sicily*" (Barbera et al., 1992).

Since the fruit is rich in nutrients, Sicilian prickly pears were used not only for human consumption but were also used as forage, being the cladodes rich in water (Barbera et al., 1992). Apart from the edible use, prickly pears were important to exploit some marginal areas characterized by infertile, steep and rocky soils, where little else could be planted.

Since cacti need little water, when planted in open fields, they were intercropped with other botanical specimens like almonds, carobs and pistachio trees to face the typically Sicilian limited water availability (Barbera et al., 1992). Along the centuries, the peculiar features of this plant, and the benefit peasants gained from its cultivation, shaped the Sicilian landscape to the point that the presence of cacti was considered a typical agricultural trait of the Mediterranean island.



**Figure 1.** Fico d'India di San Cono logo  
(Source: DOOR Website)



**Figure 2.** Fico d'India dell'Etna logo  
(Source: DOOR Website)

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to agricultural and industrial improvements (e.g. the use of hydraulic pumps, the importance of steam navigation) saw a resurgence of cacti plantations (Barbera et al., 1992) to the point that by 1850's cacti ranked third, after olives and grapes, among the Sicilian crops (Barbera et al., 1992).

The commercial success was favoured by many factors: new plantations established in the areas around the cities of Palermo and Catania; the introduction of a multiple-row system; the use of a late flowering which allowed the fruits' production in the months of October and November, when fresh fruits were generally lacking on the Sicilian tables.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the commercial importance of prickly pears declined in favour of citrus fruits. Recently this plant has witnessed a renewed agricultural interest, with attention paid to cacti growing and to the definition of strict product specifications. To this aim two geographically restricted growing areas in Sicily were awarded the PDO trademark and cactus fruits, labelled "*Fico d'India di San Cono*" and "*Fico d'India dell'Etna*", were given a specific logo and strict growing practices to be followed were delineated by Italian and European regulations.

The *San Cono* prickly pears are grown within a defined geographic area comprised within the provinces of Catania, Caltanissetta and Enna, or to be more precise in the municipalities of San Cono, San Michele di Ganzaria, Piazza Armerina and Mazzarino. This growing area is characterized by hills (ca. 200-600 meters high) and valleys with a specific micro-climate that confers fruits their organoleptic features and characteristics. These peculiar traits can be summarized as follows: big shape, especially when compared to other Sicilian cactus fruits; rind with stout colours, sweet aroma and sweet taste.

The *Fichi d'India dell'Etna*, on the other hand, are grown in the province of Catania, or to be more precise within the municipalities of Bronte, Adrano, Biancavilla, Santa Maria di Licodia, Ragalna, Camporotondo, Belpasso and Paternò, that is an area in and around mount Etna.

Cacti are gathered late in August and, after a second flowering, in December. The former are defined as quality A, while the latter, usually called "*bastardoni*" in the Sicilian dialect, are defined quality B. Both types are sold either in wooden, cardboard or plastic boxes containing fruits of three colours, namely yellow, white and red. Each box must bear the collecting date and the typical PDO badge. The *San Cono* logo is characterized, as shown in Figure 1, by three light blue cactus fruits, each one bearing a white crown; beneath the fruits five blue stars and an picture of Sicily can be spotted. The trademark, *Fico d'India di San Cono* and the PDO trademark is depicted in green. The *Fico d'India dell'Etna* logo is characterized, as shown in Figure 1, by the image of mount Etna connected to the image of cactus cladodes sketched in light blue.

Indian figs are commonly consumed by Sicilians as fresh fruit; local recipes make use of cactus fruits in different ways. They are sun-dried to be eaten during the late winter months; they are boiled to make a syrup used in sweets and to produce a liqueur; they are employed to make jam (Barbera et al., 1992).

### **ARTHUR JOHN STRUTT (1819- 1888)**

Arthur John Strutt was the son of the painter Jacob George (Ouditt, 2013). The father was his mentor and under his supervision he specialized as a landscape painter. They both travelled in France and Switzerland and settled in Rome, where the former died. In 1838-39 Arthur started with a friend, William Jackson, his pedestrian tour of southern Italy. From this travel experience resulted several landscape etchings, that are now lost, and a book, *A pedestrian Tour in Calabria and Sicily*, published in 1842 (Di Matteo, 2008).

The idea of a tour in southern Italy on foot was very uncommon for the travelling standards of the time since a walking journey required physical strength and a fit body, which both travellers did not seem to be deficient in (Di Matteo, 2008). Although pedestrian tours were not common at that time, this type of journey met Strutt's interest in landscape and in the depiction of local peasants (Ouditt, 2013).

Walking, in fact, allowed the painter to get acquainted with the southern scenery and with the life-styles of southern Italians, as some prints available on the market show.

Once in Sicily, the two travellers had planned to visit the whole island. The goal was not reached in full since they run short of money and were forced to come back to Rome (Di Matteo, 2008).

The book reporting the Sicilian sojourn is in the form of letters sent to his family, with a few etchings of Sicilian characters. These sketches conform to the taste of the time: human figures are depicted as part of the landscape. An interesting detail in the drawing published in the 1842 edition is that some cacti in a vase can be found on the left corner of the folio, where two peasants are represented in the typical Sicilian costume of the time.

### **STRUTT'S DESCRIPTION OF PRICKLY PEARS**

Strutt and his travelling companion, the poet William Jackson, undertook a pedestrian tour from Rome to Sicily. This travel experience was reported in his travel book published several years later, in 1842, where the traveller's impression of the places, of buildings and local customs were recorded, together with reference to eating habits of southern Italy. Among these descriptions, the few sentences devoted to Indian figs can be of interest to add to the history of a plant that has given the Sicilian landscape a specific imprint.

Cacti seem to have attracted Strutt's attention as a painter and as a travel writer. Evidence is found in the drawings attached to his travel book, where, as discussed above, a vase with a little cactus plant is depicted. The painter's interest in this plant is not only limited to the pictorial representation of the same. In his travel report, in fact, some sentences are devoted to the description of cacti, and also, reference to his not liking these cactus fruits.

As concerns the description of the plant, he highlights the consistent presence within the Sicilian landscape:

*... Instead of aloes, so much in vogue on the other side of the straits, the Indian fig forms here an impenetrable hedge to the vineyards, and the luxuriance of the vegetation.*

(A pedestrian Tour, 252-3)

*The plantation of cactus [...] present[s] a curious appearance: small footpaths traverse them in various directions, but to turn to the right or left is rendered quite impossible, by the formidable prickly briar these solid vegetable masses present.*

(A pedestrian Tour, 339)

As concerns the fruit, the painter does not seem to be very fond of Indian figs, as the following sentence confirms:

*I am learning to eat this entirely Sicilian fruit called the cactus, or Indian*

*fig; but cannot, as yet, comprehend the enthusiastic love of it, which enabled our friend C--- to eat seventy-four for his breakfast.*

(A pedestrian Tour, 339)

These descriptions of a plant that was known to the British audience as a decorative specimen, sometimes seen in hot-houses, is important for the history of cacti in Sicily.

The sentences quoted above, in fact, offer one of the earliest complete reference from a Briton to the *Opuntis Ficus Indica* under the Sicilian climate. It serves to corroborate what is already known of the agricultural praxis of cacti in nineteenth century Sicily. This reference can serve local food historians to stress the presence of Indian figs in the *San Cono* area and on mount Etna in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century.

### CONCLUSION

Local foods play an important role in shaping the travel experience since regional quality products are being considered a means to define the cultural identity of a location. This recognition at the EC level has led to several initiatives aimed at fostering heritage and territory-based linkages (Bowen & De Master, 2011; Tregear et al., 2007). At the local level, gastronomic products play the main role in local events such as gastronomic fairs and food-and-wine routes.

These initiatives serve to stress the link between the territory and the culinary habits and are used as a marketing strategy to promote a tourist location. An additional input to valorize local food specialties can be offered by direct evidence taken from travel books (Cianflone, 2012).

As shown in the case object of this paper, Sicilian cacti and the nineteenth century description by Strutt can be used in tourism to highlight the collective memory of a society (Bessière, 1998) in which evidence from British travellers may have a share. The historical proof discussed in this note for the first time, is important to define the roots of a product of agricultural origin, known and appreciated in the past as it is today.

### Aknowlegments

Although both authors conceived and approved the final draft, E: Cianflone is responsible for the following sections: 1, 2, 4, 5; while G. Cardile is responsible for section 3.

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