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Tolminc Cheese Scuffles behind Closed Doors

Abstract

The article gives a historical overview of cheese production and labelling of Tolminc cheese in the upper Soča valley in the Julian Alps (Slovenia). Three distinct approaches to Tolminc cheese are described: Tolminc cheese with Protected Designation of Origin, Tolminc cheese with a collective trademark, and non-certified and unregistered Tolminc-like cheese.

Keywords: *Cheese; geographical indications; trademarks; labels; food-heritage.*

Introduction

Today, Tolminc cheese is one of the best known cheeses in Slovenia: it is the trademarked and most recognised cheese of the successful Planika Dairy, it is one of the four cheeses certified with a Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), and it is one of several good-value-for-money cheeses that – despite a somewhat higher price – are very popular and widely consumed in Slovenia. The article is based on the long-term ethnography of alpine dairy practices in the Julian Alps, several unstructured interviews with cattle breeders, cheesemakers, employees of Planika Dairy, regional development agencies, Triglav National Park, agricultural cooperatives and government ministries, and is supplemented by interpretations and analysis of primary

sources, such as laws, regulations, decrees, product specifications, statutes, programs and similar technical literature. Above all, it is based on work by Cristina Grasseni to reinvent cheese as a heritage item, i.e. on the "calibration" of cheese within the "heritage arena" (Grasseni 2011, 2017). It gives a brief overview of the history of Tolminc cheese production in the Soča Valley region, it is followed by a variety of recent strategies and qualifying (or quality describing) measures, and it concludes with a presentation of the results and possible prospects.

*Historical overview of cheesemaking in the Soča valley
(Slovenia)*

Tolminc cheese is named after Tolmin, a town situated in the upper Soča valley of the Julian Alps (Slovenia). Legend has it that the locals were taught how to make cheese by the Savage Man. Due to the spread of this legend to the wider Alpine region and to the Apennine Peninsula (Grafenauer 1958: 50–51), and more recent archeological finds and analyses of organic residues on fragments of pottery shards (Carrer et al. 2016), it is likely that those taught about dairying by Savage Man were Indo-European settlers who then passed that knowledge onwards to the newcomers, and it does not recall the encounter of the Slavs who settled the area of the Eastern Alps in the second half of the 6th century, and were also taught dairying by the (Romanised) inhabitants (Novak 1961:123–134; Cevc 2006: 242).

The first written records to mention the processing of moulded cheese in the Tolmin region date back to the 13th century (Kos 1948: 30). As documented in the 1338 land register of the Tolmin region, the Kašina alp under Mount Krn, then owned by

the Patriarchs of Aquileia, was leased in return for duties settled in the form of cheese, *caseus* in Latin (Kos 1948: 33). It is assumed that until the second half of the 19th century, cheese in Tolmin was mainly made from mixed sheep or goat milk and skimmed cow milk. A significant contribution to the quality of Tolminc cheese was made in the second half of the 19th century by Swiss master cheesemaker Thomas Hitz, who, under the auspices of the Agricultural Society in Gorizia, came to the Tolmin area and considerably improved the production of hard cheeses on cooperative principles, and applied to the summer alpine or lowland cheese dairies in the winter. Cheese production in the area improved thanks to the work of Thomas Hitz and his students, (Ledinek Lozej 2013a, 2013b, 2017). A dairy school was founded in Tolmin in 1933, which passed the know-how onto the cheese makers working in 61 local cooperative cheese dairies (Fischione 1998: 25).

Industrial dairying started after the Second World War and nationalization with the founding of the Mlekosir Dairy in Tolmin in 1947. This public company produced dairy products under the Planika brand. After the establishment of a new dairy in Kobarid in 1957, Mlekosir soon merged with Planika Dairy. As a result of business and technical cooperation with Josip Kraš, a large Yugoslav agri-food company based in Zagreb (now Croatia), it became an independent plant of Josip Kraš in 1967 and merged into a single company in 1989, after the transformation of the economic system. Most of the milk was processed into milk powder for renowned Kraš chocolates. After the collapse of Yugoslavia and the bankruptcy of Kraš Planika in 1995, the dairy – once the public property of an agricultural cooperative and privatized during the transition period – was initially leased, and was only taken over in 2010 by the Tolmin

Agricultural Cooperative (Sl. *Kmetijska zadruga Tolmin*), a co-op founded in 1995 and its subsidiary (new) Planika Dairy (Slv. *Mlekarna Planika*) (Ledinek Lozej, in press).

Labelling Tolminc cheese

The name of the cheese, identified by its local adjective, first appears in a description of 'Cheese from Tolmin' (it. *Formaggio di Tolmino*) on an Udine price list of 1756 (Fischione 1998). The internal distinction between the different types of cheese in the Tolmin area (and not only the external distinction between "cheese from Tolmin" and "that from Bovec") is corroborated during the second half of the 19th century, i.e. at the time when advanced cheese production methods were being introduced. According to a report in the local newspaper, the cheese producers in the Razor alpine cheese dairy were differentiating their cheeses in 1874, after Thomas Hitz, a cheese teacher from Switzerland, took over management. In addition to ricotta, three other cheeses are mentioned - Emmental, sheep cheese and Tolminc cheese (Kmetijske 1874: 4).

Half a century later, the records of the dairy instructor, Anton Pevc, in an extensive dairy manual entitled *Sirarstvo* [Dairying] (1925: 200) confirm that Tolminc was not yet a specific or standardised product at the start of the 20th century. In it, he writes that Tolmin cheese does not yet have clearly defined production rules, not even with regards to the type of milk, "because they sometimes mix cow's milk with goat's or sheep's milk". He adds that it is very important "that dairy experts lay down precise technical guidelines as soon as possible in order to achieve a uniform product with a precise appearance of texture and taste, so that the products can be introduced on the world market" (Pevc 1925: 200). This agricultural and food expert saw

the need for stricter regulation and specification of a territorial product, but no need for a geographical indication, as he suggested following the example of Emmental cheese.

Standardized and branded Tolminc cheese has been produced at Kobarid Dairy since its establishment in 1957. However, Kobarid Dairy was not the only factory producing Tolminc in the 1950s; according to oral sources, it was also produced in other smaller cooperative cheese dairies, even outside the municipality of Tolmin (e.g. in the cooperative cheese dairy in nearby Cerknjo). This suggests that Tolminc cheese was no longer just 'cheese from Tolmin' but became a recognizable type of full-fat cheese made from cow's milk.

Attempts to register Tolminc cheese as a trademark and protected designation of origin did not begin until the second half of the 1990s, following the establishment of the new Planika Dairy by Tolmin Agricultural Cooperative and as the newly-born Slovenia approached accession to the European Union (EU), which included negotiations in the field of intellectual property rights and geographical indications. It was the time when the first regulations on geographical indications were adopted by the European Economic Community to harmonise the different protection instruments existing in some member states, and to create a common system of registration and protection of names compatible with the internal market (DeSoucey 2010; Parasecoli 2017). In view of the information on the establishment of the (new) Planika Dairy (and purchase of the Kobarid dairy plant equipment) by the Tolmin Agricultural Cooperative, it is a little surprising that it was actually the nearby Idrija Agricultural and Forestry Cooperative that first applied for registration of "Tolminc" as a trademark at the state Intellectual Property Office in 1993 (SIPO 2020). This

is surprising because the cooperative is not even located in the Tolmin region, but in the neighbouring Idrija region. The individual trademark was registered in 1994, but in 1995, with regard to the newly established Planika Dairy cooperative, the Tolmin Agricultural Cooperative filed an application to register the "Tolminc" collective trademark (CT) at the Intellectual Property Office, which was eventually registered in 2002 (SIPO 2020).

The first attempts to certify the geographical indication of Tolminc cheese began almost at the same time. They were led by the Tolminc Cheesemaking Association (Slv. *Sirarsko društvo Tolminc*), which brought together a few small local cheese dairies. In 1999, Tolminc cheese was registered as a designation of origin at the Slovenian Intellectual Property Office of the Ministry of Economy under the then valid Industrial Property Act (*Zakon o industrijski lastnini* 1992). However, due to harmonisation of national legislation with EU legislation at the time of accession, it was to re-apply for the designation of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) at the Ministry of Agriculture. Tolminc was awarded a PDO at national level in 2003 (*Pravilnik o označbi* 2003); the application for PDO at European level was submitted in 2004, but due to the changes in European legislation on geographical indications in 2006, and the necessary changes in production specifications, the registration procedure was extended until 2012. In 2011 the Tolminc Cheesemaking Association amended the specifications (Perko and Koren 2011) and in 2012 (Commission Implementing Regulation 2012) it was granted a PDO at EU level.

Despite the existence of two regulated categories for Tolminc labelling, there are few producers of PDO or collective

trademark cheese: only two PDO producers (the Tolminc Cheesemaking Association representing two cheese dairies, members of the association and that of the Planika Dairy) and, even more surprisingly, only one registered producer of CT cheese. Planika Dairy is the only producer of Tolminc CT cheese, despite the collective nature of the brand and the possibility for the Agricultural Cooperative Tolmin to also use it. As the specification for the Tolminc PDO is stricter – in terms of cow breed, animal fodder, and size of the cheese form – under the rules for Tolminc CT cheese production, the Planika Dairy produces ten times more Tolminc CT than the Tolminc PDO. Access to the two forms of labelling has enabled the Planika Dairy company to achieve and maintain the leading position in the production and sale of Tolminc cheese. On the other hand, following the successful award of the Tolminc PDO, the activities of the Tolminc Cheesemaking Association ceased due to the lack of a common vision and the special interests of its members. As a result, there is no clear distinction among consumers between two Tolminc categories, namely between the (originally intended) artisanal Tolminc cheese made from raw milk and the industrially produced Tolminc according to Tolminc CT cheese regulations.



fig. 1 - Production of the collective trademark Tolminc cheese in the Planika Dairy, Kobarid (photo by Špela Ledinek Lozej, 2018)

Two contemporary actions related to the use of the "Tolminc" label have led to long-term intersectoral coordination between the Intellectual Property Office of the Ministry of Economy, which represented the interests of the Tolmin Agricultural Cooperative and Planika Dairy and that of the Ministry of Agriculture, which is responsible for EU and national quality schemes. This led to the regulated coexistence of both labels. Procedures between the ministries took place behind closed doors, so that at national level the overall performance and reputation of the actors involved was unaffected. There was no open conflict which would have contributed to the differentiation of two products, as was the case in Italian Bitto cheese. During the notorious "Bitto Wars", caused by the expansion of the production area, changes in the production process (i.e. production of an original alpine cheese by a lowland dairy) and lack of recognised differences, the small group of producers of alpine Bitto cheese from the original production area, i.e. Bitto Valleys, left the PDO Consortium and created a Slow Food Praesidium with product specifications that better reflected traditional production methods. As they were

forbidden to call their cheese "Bitto" by the PDO Consortium, even though they were located in the Bitto valleys, they renamed their cheese "Historical Rebel" (It. *Storico Ribelle*). In particular, the open and highly public open conflict helped to highlight the differences between the PDO Bitto cheese and Slow Food Historical Rebel (Grasseni 2017, Rinaldo and Pitardi 2019). This was not the case for Tolminc cheese, as there is no clear distinction between the PDO Tolminc and CT Tolminc, not to mention the formal distinction of the industrially produced Tolminc PDO from thermised milk in the Planika Dairy and the artisanal form made from raw milk. A distinction has been made, for example, between cheeses produced in the lowlands and in the highlands and alpine dairies in the case of Montasio cheese produced in the Italian part of the Julian Alps, and in the plains of the Friuli Venezia Giulia and the Veneto region, since there are several variants of the PDO Montasio (e.g. organic production, long-term matured (over 100 days) using only milk of the Italian Simmental breed, and the mountain product (Bovolenta and Romanzin 2014). Due to the small number of producers and the small quantities involved, internal differentiation of Tolminc PDO has not been the case.



fig. 2 - Cheesemaker Aljoša Bončina and maturing Tolminc cheese with Protected Designation of Origin, Čadrg (photo by Špela Ledinek Lozej, 2018)

The differentiation of production methods occurred at another level and not as a formal distinction between products with CT and with PDO, or within PDO products. Some small cheese dairies, in particular those in the alpine dairies, produce cheese that largely follows the PDO specifications or collective trademark regulations, but they simply do not opt for certification/registration, either because they have no financial resources and no time for a financially and bureaucratically demanding certification process (in the case of PDO), or because they are unaware of the collective nature of the Tolminc trademark and/or are not members of the Tolmin Agricultural Cooperative. In any case, they see no advantage in certification or registration, since they consume and/or sell all the stocks of their alpine or artisan cheese at the same price or even higher. Therefore, in addition to the Tolminc PDO and the Tolminc CT cheese, there is a third type of Tolminc cheese – the non-

certified and non-registered, a Tolminc-like cheese. Even though it cannot be officially sold under the "Tolminc cheese" name, unofficially among local producers and consumers, it is still perceived, treated and even called "Tolminc". And interestingly, it is the non-certified and unregistered version of Tolminc that has actually been included in the Slow Food Arc of Taste (Gomišček 2020).



fig. 3 - Tolminc-like cheese, Leskovca alp (photo by Špela Ledinek Lozej, 2017)

Conclusions

Historical review and contemporary ethnography have shown that, since the second half of the 19th century, Tolminc cheese experienced a process of gradual commercialisation and that, since the second half of the 20th century, it has undergone certification and labelling processes which have led to three approaches to Tolminc cheese:

- Tolminc cheese with Protected Designation of Origin, produced by three certified producers, which is bought (mainly,

but not exclusively) by (foreign) tourists or non-resident consumers looking for clearly distinguishable products with the internationally recognisable and reliable mark of the EU quality scheme;

- Tolminc cheese with a collective trademark, produced by the Planika Dairy for the Slovenian market, where it is bought as a "high-quality" and good-value-for-money product predominantly by consumers who support the national agri-food industry;

- and (non-certified and non-registered) Tolminc-like cheeses produced in alpine and smaller dairies and sold directly from alpine pastures or distributed locally, through non-market networks (and to a lesser extent at some Slow Food events) (Ledinek Lozej, in press).

They are all permitted to coexist due to contested perspectives, appropriations and visions of the Tolminc brand that have been negotiated horizontally at national level (between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of the Economy) and vertically between local and national levels (i.e. negotiations between the Tolminc Cheesemaking Association and the Ministry of Agriculture on the specifications of the PDO or a bureaucratic dispute between the Planika Dairy and the Ministry of Agriculture) or between state and European levels (the procedure of registering the PDO for more than a decade at the European Commission). The milk producers and processors in the upper Soča valley have adopted some (externally enforced) qualification instruments, but at the same time have remained open to alternative visions of Tolminc cheese. In this way, they have managed, at least informally, to overcome the total institutionalization of Tolminc and to preserve it as commons, and not just the collective property of individual certified

producers or consortia. In doing so they have helped to maintain agriculture and dairy farming as a viable sector in the Soča valley, the only one that can withstand and sustain the growing tourism industry.

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