

*WP T2 – IDENTIFICATION OF BEST PRACTICES
IN THE COLLECTIVE COMMERCIAL VALORISATION
OF ALPINE FOOD INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE*

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Abstract

Coop is one of Switzerland's largest retail and wholesale company, structured in the form of a cooperative society, with approximately 2,476 points of sale, and CHF 28.3 billion of revenues in 2016. Coop's business principles stress giving preference to environment-friendly and socially responsible products, supporting Swiss agriculture, and favouring products made in Switzerland. Slow Food (SF) has been active in Switzerland since 1993. After a few episodic interactions, at the end of 2016 the two organisations established a long-term agreement to promote Swiss food culture and sustainable consumption. Through its Sustainability Fund, Coop financially supports SF and the establishment of SF presidia (21 of the 22 Swiss Presidia were established thanks to Coop's financial and marketing support). In addition, Coop includes in its assortment a selection of 50 SF Presidia products (15 from Switzerland, the rest from other countries), including Traditional Valais rye bread, Farina Bona, raw milk Vacherin cheese, Chur salami, and mountain pasture Sbrinz. Given the limited quantities, seasonal unavailability, and lower profit margins of these products, Coop had to adapt its procurement procedures, and according to the retailer little or no returns are made from the sales of Presidia products. The cooperation has not only benefitted Presidia producers, but also boosted the visibility of SF in Switzerland.

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1. Introduction

In Switzerland, Slow Food – a food activism movement – and Coop – one of the largest have created a unique partnership that not only facilitates the distribution of heritage products, but actively support financially the constitution of Slow Food Presidia – communities of small-scale heritage producers that respect a strict production protocol that results in food that respects the Slow Food principles: good (that is, healthy and tasting good), clean (produced with low environmental impact and with animal welfare in mind), and fair (respecting the work of those who produce, process and distribute it). Given the limited quantities, seasonal unavailability, and lower profit margins of these products, Coop had to adapt its procurement procedures, and according to the retailer little or no returns are made from the sales of Presidia products. The cooperation has not only benefitted Presidia producers, but also boosted the visibility of SF in Switzerland.

2. Methodological procedures

This short case study reports Slow Food's approach to narrative labels. It is reconstructed thanks to the sources reported in the references lists.

3. Slow Food: A critical food activism movement and an alternative commercialisation network

Slow Food is a global, grassroots organization with the goal of preventing the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions. Founded in 1989, it builds on the previous experience of Arci Gola, an association created in Bra (Piedmont, Italy) in 1986. As hinted by its name, Slow Food exists to counteract the rise of fast food culture, the prevalence of processed food, industrial agrobusiness and the rules of the global market. Slow food promotes food that is good (that is, healthy and tasting good), clean (produced with low environmental impact and with animal welfare in mind), and fair (respecting the work of those who produce, process and distribute it). As part of its mission, Slow Food defends biodiversity of cultivated and wild varieties as well as methods of cultivation and production, and promotes a sustainable and environmentally friendly food production and consumption system; spreads taste education and responsible consumption; and connects producers of quality foods with conscious consumers (called 'co-producers') through various events and initiatives.

Since its beginnings in Italy, Slow Food has grown into a global movement involving millions of people in over 160 countries. As an umbrella organization, Slow Food guides and empowers over 1,500 local chapters and 2,400 food communities. An important Slow Food initiative is the Presidia. These projects support quality products at risk of extinction; protect unique regions and ecosystems; recover traditional processing methods; and safeguard native animal breeds and local plant varieties. The project started in 1999; after cataloging a few hundreds products at risk of extinction through the Ark of Taste project (an online listing of products worth safeguarding), Slow Food decided to take an extra step and work directly with communities of small-scale producers, providing them assistance to improve production quality and identify new market outlets, and organizing exchanges with producers internationally through Slow Food trade fairs and events. Each Presidium establishes a production protocol with producers to ensure traceability, artisanal methods and high quality, which is stricter than most Protected Designation of Origin labels. The protocols require producers to eliminate or reduce chemical treatments; use methods that respect animal welfare; defend native breeds and local vegetable varieties; use ecological packaging where possible; and favor the use of renewable energy. At the end of 2016, there were over 514 Presidia in more than 67 countries around the world (405 in Europe; 49 in the Americas; 41 in Africa; 19 in Asia and Oceania). Today, the number has grown to 522, involving more than 13,000 producers. The Presidia are one of the most effective instruments to implement the Slow Food's strategy on agriculture and biodiversity.

An important development, linking safeguard of small-scale productions to their commercial valorization and legal protection, took place in 2008, when Slow Food Italy (following producers' requests) established the Slow Food Presidia label to help the promotion of Presidia products. Slow Food Switzerland adopted the same approach in 2012. "Slow Food Presidium" is now a registered brand, with its own logo and guidelines which producers should subscribe to. To obtain the right to use it, Presidium producers must be united in an association (either a cooperative or a consortium) and accept the production protocol. Each Presidium has two reference figures: the presidium coordinator, who is the leader or a member of the Convivium where the Presidium is found, with the role of coordinating and liaising between the producers and the regional and national Slow Food associations; and the producers' coordinator, nominated by producers, who is the guarantor of respect of the rules and protocol of the Presidium, and who liaises between the producers and Slow Food. Each Presidium pays the Slow Food national office an annual fee, established taking into account the economic value of the Presidium production the year before; the year the Presidium was launched; the geographical area; the number of producers involved; the production technique and the type of products. If the Presidium is very recent or is working in particularly difficult or marginal conditions, Slow Food does not ask to pay affiliation fees.

4. The Partnership between Slow Food and Coop in Switzerland

Coop is one of Switzerland's largest retail and wholesale company, structured in the form of a cooperative society with approximately 2.5 million members, a total turnover of Ch.Fr. 28.3 billion (of which 3.9 billion, or 13.78%, from sustainable products), 85,000 employees, and 2476 overall points of sale (including wholesale) [2016 data, source www.coop.ch]. Coop's business principles stress giving preference to products manufactured in especially environmentally-friendly and socially responsible manners; favouring products made in Switzerland, and supporting Swiss agriculture. In 2003, to mark the 10th anniversary of their private label of organic products, Coop established the Naturaplan Fund, with the aim to promote the range of organic products and other own-label sustainability brands. In 2007, the scope of the Naturaplan Fund was broadened to include innovation and sustainable consumption. The Fund financially supports various projects every year, in various areas including sustainable innovation, organic farming, development and sourcing of sustainable products, marketing and promotion of environmental and social brands (as well as the reinforcement of their added value), and the raising public awareness of sustainable consumption.

Special attention is given to the maintenance of a sustainable mountain economy in Switzerland with the *Pro Montagna* label, which includes in Coop's assortment products whose raw materials come from the Swiss mountains, where production also takes place. Part of the revenue from every *Pro Montagna* products goes to the Coop Mountain Areas Sponsorship Programme (established in 1942), which is an independent non-profit organization whose aim is to provide long-term support for mountain farming families and their livelihoods by financing projects such as the renovation of residential buildings, the promotion of local small rural enterprises and investments in supporting infrastructures.

In Switzerland, a Slow Food Association was founded already in 1993. Previously, an informal Slow Food group of food activists already existed in Ticino, due to its geographical and cultural proximity to Italy where the movement had existed since 1986. After Italy and Germany, Switzerland was the third country to host a national-level Slow Food organisation. 2008, the year when the cooperation with Coop started, marks a turning point in the development of Slow Food in Switzerland. Thanks to the financial support of Coop, it was possible to establish a growing number of Presidia in Switzerland. In 2011, another milestone was the creation of a Slow Food Market in Zurich (a

temporary marketplace, with 280 vendors and 11,600 visitors in the November 2016 edition). In Switzerland, Slow Food is organized in 20 Convivia (local chapters). Current membership is 4,000. Beyond Coop, Slow Food's partners in Switzerland include: *Semaine du Gout* (food fair in Lausanne), where Slow Food is the main partner and enriches the programme with several initiatives; *Stuttgart Fair*, which supports the Slow Food Market in Zurich with its experience; the *Swiss Food Heritage Association*, of which Slow Food is member; *Hochstamm Suisse*, an organization which intervenes for the safeguard of farming land, animal and vegetable species, and foods; and *Pro Specie Rara*, a foundation that safeguards biodiversity (to avoid duplication of activities, in Switzerland Slow Food focuses on processed foods).

The first interactions between Coop and Slow Food date back to 1999, when Coop sponsored the first edition of the Slow Food fair "Beef" in the Pfannenstiel area (near Zurich). Following various contacts, in 2004 Rafael Pérez (current President Slow Food Switzerland) was invited to give a speech at the Annual Coop Members Meeting in Berne following which, at the end of 2006, Coop and Slow Food established a long-term agreement to promote the Swiss food culture and sustainable consumption. Through its Sustainability Fund, Coop financially supports Slow Food (financial details are not publicly available) and the establishment of Slow Food Presidia (21 of the 22 Swiss Presidia were established thanks to Coop's financial and marketing support). In addition, Coop includes in its assortment a selection of 50 Slow Food Presidia products (15 from Switzerland, the rest from other countries).

Current Slow Food Presidia are the following.

- Traditional Valais rye bread, Canton Valais (from 2007)
- Müstair Valley rye bread, Grisons (from 2007)
- Shortbread biscuits, Val Bedretto, Ticino (from 2007)
- *Farina Bona* (corn flour;), Ticino (from 2008)
- Swiss *Brenzerkirsch* (cherry liqueur), North-western and Central Switzerland (from 2008)
- Tafeljura Plum Orchards, Canton Basel (various products: Posamanter plum cake; dried plums; Plum d'Or chutney; from 2008)
- Swiss black bee of German Switzerland (honey; from 2008)
- Swiss dried green beans, Berne, Basel, Zurich, Solothurn, Schwyz and St Gallen Cantons (from 2008)
- Emmentaler Cheese, Emme Valley, Canton Bern (from 2009)
- Raw Milk Vacherin Fribourgeois, Canton Fribourg,
- Toggenburg goat, St. Gallen (goat cheese; from 2009)
- Chur Salami, Grisons (from 2010)
- Alpziger cheese (Fribourg, Bern and Obwalden Alps)
- Bregaglia Valley Mascarplin cheese, Grisons
- *Furmagin da Cion* (lit. 'pig cheese', a pork meat pie), Poschiavo, Grisons
- Mountain Pasture Sbrinz, Canton Obwalden, Canton Nidwalden (from 2010)
- Locarno Valleys *Cicitt* (goat sausage), Ticino
- Muggio Valley Zincarlin cheese, Ticino
- Pays d'Enhaut Chantzet (boudin/blood sausage made from pork and cabbage), Canton Vaud
- Raw Milk Butter, Zürcher Oberland Canton
- Walnut oil, Vaud, Bern, Solothurn, Aargau and Zurich cantons
- Zurich quince paste, Zurich Canton.

The number of producers involved for each Presidia varies. For example, the Müstair Valley rye bread Presidium involves a network of three cereal growers, one mill, and one baker; the raw milk butter Presidium only two producers; Emmentaler cheese involves a network of eleven milk producer, a cheese maker, and a refiner.

5. Results

Data about Coop's financial results from the cooperation are not available; in the available documentation, Coop hints at the fact that Presidia producers are paid fair prices and that "in the short and medium term, Coop will have no economic returns at all from the sales of Slow Food Presidia products" (Slow Food Fact Dossier, 2010). From the perspective of Coop, results from the cooperation seem to regard predominantly its brand image (Coop as a responsible producer). Significantly, financial resources for the establishment of Coop-supported Slow Food Presidia come from the Coop Sustainability Funds – and not from marketing budgets. This situates the initiative in the domain of corporate social responsibility (and not marketing).

From the perspective of Slow Food, results include not only financial resources and an important partnership, but also an increase in the organization's brand awareness in Switzerland. According to the organization's management, "before the cooperation with Coop, Slow Food was mostly known within intellectual circles" (Slow Food Fact Dossier, 2010). Thanks to the visibility obtain through Coop's points of sales, the organization's brand awareness and membership has skyrocketed. Moreover, Slow Food is now known by more varied public segments respect to its early years.

Results for Presidia producers include the safeguarding of their productive know how and cultural heritage, which was at risk at being lost; access to the market, thanks to the Coop's extensive retail network; and the possibility to stabilize production and increase revenues.

More detailed information about results is available for three Presidia (2010 data).

Traditional Valais rye bread, Canton of Valais. Before the establishment of the Presidium, the Arnold bakery in Simplon-Dorf (a village of approximately 330 inhabitants) had fluctuating sales due to tourism seasonality. With the Presidium, quantities have become stable all year long, and quantities sold have increased – not only through Coop, but also through the bakery's e-commerce site and point of sales. According to the owner, some tourists now visit the village just to visit the bakery and buy its rye bread. The bakery's brand name is now known across Switzerland. The bakery has also been able to hire a baker, a part-time shop assistant and an apprentice, and the owner's son took over the management of the family business.

Müstair Valley rye bread, Canton of the Grisons. The sales of the Meier AG bakery of Santa Maria had doubled in 2010, three years after the establishment of the Slow Food Presidium. With just 1,600 inhabitants, the Valley was too small to guarantee the survival of the bakery. The stability in sales ensured by the cooperation with Coop permits to keep employees all year round; previously, during the peak tourism season, seasonal workers needed to be hired, which was not ideal to keep quality standards high. The Presidium also provided incentives to traditional mountain rye cultivation in the Valley. As a result, the Presidium bread is baked with locally-produced rye flour. The Presidium also permitted the restoring of a mill, which had remained unused since 1940; rye can now be locally ground.

Tafeljura Plum Orchards. The traditional plum trees in Tafeljura, despite contributing to the area's characteristic landscape, are of difficult cultivation and limited profitability for their smaller size that

makes them unsuitable for industrial processing. Increasingly, local farmers have abandoned the old varieties in favour of plums that are easy to cultivate, larger in size, and with more market appeal. An association, *Erlebnisraum Tafeljura*, was founded in 2005 to contrast this trend. The establishment of the Presidium, in 2008, has contributed to making traditional plums more profitable, since Coop guarantees a fair price for the production and manual pitting of plums. The Presidium counts approximately 20 farmers and 11 producers of artisanal products sold under the brand name “Posamenter”: dried plums, plum cakes, and a plum chutney (used to accompany cheese and meats). Thanks to the Presidium, the production of plums and sales of plum products has skyrocketed; in 2008 the demand was so high that it was not possible to satisfy it. Given the economic incentives, new plum trees have now been planted in the area, contributing to safeguard the area’s traditional landscape.

6. Critical evaluation and concluding remarks

The cooperation between Slow Food and Coop in Switzerland is noteworthy from many points of view. First, it is more than 10 years old. Second, it is not just about the inclusion of ICH-consistent products in the retailer’s assortment; it is a corporate social responsibility initiative that results also in the financing of Slow Food and the establishment of new Presidia. Third, it is an exceptional case, as in no other Alpine countries has Slow Food been able to establish a partnership of this level with national-level retailers.

Small-size producers are ill-equipped to deal with the large-scale retail trade. When the cooperation started, and despite its good intentions, dealing with small producers was ‘uncharted territory’. Coop had to re-adapt its procurement and inventory procedures and deal with limited quantities, seasonal availability, stock ruptures, relational difficulties, and different profitability objectives respect to ‘standard’ products. Despite the economic incentives, also small producers had to deal with some difficulties, including organising to guarantee the production of sufficient quantities and quality requirements.

The ecological awareness of Swiss consumers and their attention to local products; the fact that Coop already had, in the period before the partnership, already shown attention to sustainability, environmental issues, and mountain areas. Ultimately, Slow Food acted as a cultural intermediary and network assembler, providing not only economic incentive to small producers but also returns in terms of brand image to Coop.

References

www.coop.ch
www.slowfood.ch

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