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Food and Gastronomic Tourism for Developing Rural Areas around the Via Francigena in Tuscany

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports results from an explorative research on the socio-economic opportunity that the presence of pilgrims and tourists along the Tuscan section of the *Via Francigena* can be for local communities. Rural development is a key topic in the territorial government strategy of the Region Tuscany. Landscape is a strong asset of Tuscany and a powerful tourist attraction. Local communities have long traditions in food and wine production, even as a landmark of many major and minor destinations. The aim of the research is to deepen the actual and future opportunities that local food and wine and typical cuisine specialties have for the development of tourism around the *Via Francigena*. The research has been carried out merging different sources of information, including scientific and grey literature, direct observation and personal experience, and performing a dozen of interviews to key-informants. The interviews have been carried out during the last six months, involving farmers, wine producers, restaurant owners, tourism and rural tourism entrepreneurs and local administrative offices. Local communities have understood the strategic importance to sustain their activities with the development of pilgrimage and tourism along the *Via Francigena*. Farmers and winemakers are integrating tourism activities in their current managing activities. The rich variety of local food and wine can satisfy both frugal needs of pilgrims and those of visitors more interested in quality cuisine.

Keywords: Rural Development; Tuscan Via Francigena; Food and Wine; Case study

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Introduction

Everything is mechanical... Everything is electric and any food is shaken... Only caresses and tweaks are today made by hand. If we go ahead this way, the day will come we'll use the automatic caress-machine and the electric tweak-maker.

Leo Codacci, *Toscana*, 1990 (translation of the author).

The Via Francigena is part of the larger system of *peregrinationes maiores* that linked the major Christian places in Europe (Andreotti Giovannini, 1990) and today is considered an engine for enhancing sustainable development (Conti *et al.* 2015; Council of Europe, n.d.; 2010). Crossing Italy from north through it, pilgrims could go towards Jerusalem arriving to Apulia by the Via Appia Traiana; and pilgrims travelling from south could reach France and, passing the Pyrenean mountains, travel to Santiago de Compostela. The whole road system was also a network of routes beaten by merchants that induced changes in the landscape features. The route spread all around the itinerary churches and hospitality accommodations, helping villages to expand and influencing architecture and arts (Morelli, 2007; Stopani, 1984; 1998).

The Via Francigena crosses the whole territory of Tuscany along its less intensive tourist area, that is generally characterized by mountainous and/or hilly conditions, long lasting minor socio-economic development, increasing depopulation and weakening productive capabilities (Regione Toscana, 2014). In other words, it crosses the *rural* Tuscany. Along the historical itinerary, art cities and already internationally known destinations are a few, namely Lucca, Siena and San Gimignano. The possibility to enhance the religious route is actually considered a great opportunity for activating economic and social initiatives (*Ibid.*).

Tuscany is a reputed worldwide tourist destination and every year visitors are millions. Art cities, such as Florence and Pisa, face tourist seasonality and crowding of arrivals and short stays in main venues, while most part of the region is less frequented by tourists, or at least it hosts mainly snob travellers (Corinto, 2016). The region has a very well known brand due to the world resonance of many artistic, landscape and cultural testimonies spread in its whole territory. From 2005, the *Fondazione Sistema Toscana* operates according to the Tuscany Region in order to promote the entire territorial tourist offer by using an integrated communication model (Fondazione Sistema Toscana, n.d.; Lalli, 2011). Actually, in the regional vision, 'integrated' refers to two meanings. One is the integration of all types of communication tools, including the Internet and social media, and the other one being the inclusion of all regional territories in the tourist promotion strategy and program (Regione Toscana, 2016).

In this region, both farm and rural tourism have increased their capability of sustaining revenues of communities in the inner areas, proving countryside and tourism are a positive binomial (Corinto and Musotti, 2014; Pacciani, 2011). Anyway, a robust local

entrepreneurial force and a vital social fabric are necessary for attracting tourists out of the beaten tracks (Corinto and Nicosia, 2015; Gartner; 2005; Gravari-Barbas, 2015). Supporting this idea, the Tuscany Region designs a unique strategic vision for governing and promoting policies of territorial development (Regione Toscana, Giunta Regionale, 2005), thus having two broad territorial visions: (i) the *Tuscan polycentric city*, i.e. the whole region as a city of cities, and the *contemporary rural system*, as a unique representation of the many rural localities (Regione Toscana, n.d.a; Regione Toscana, 2007). Within this vision, the whole tourist territorial offer is made well known, promoted and communicated through the Internet with several dedicated websites and blogs (Lalli, 2011).

Putting all things together it is possible to consider the present rurality of Tuscany as an integrated element of the tourist offer. And thus, it is arguable the Via Francigena, crossing mainly the Tuscan rural areas, could be a *unique* tourist product capable of integrating the diverse inner areas. The opportunity has been clearly envisaged by the promoting regional agency that makes the description of the entire Tuscan section of the Via Francigena as a tourist product easily accessible online both at the regional institutional website (Regione Toscana, 2014) and at the specialized tourism website (Turismo in Toscana, n. d.).

Scholar Claude Raffestin (1984) defined since years the tourist route an experience of discovery and knowledge of the identity of places, local way of life and landscapes. Material resources and local cultural traditions such as crafts, food and wine, religious and civil festivals, are functions of a tourist attraction that can be considered both typical and place distinctive. Also religious routes have become important tourism products worldwide, as well as a tourism promotional tool (Ramírez, 2011; Zabbini, 2012) and powerful devices for fertilizing long-term relationships with customers. And religious tourism is one of the today most widely practiced type of cultural tourism, not only for the spiritual urges and the historical, artistic and architectural values of the visited places, but also for the desire of cultural and experiential enrichment which characterizes modern tourists (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003; Trono and Oliva, 2013). Tourist routes are suitable tools for enhancing tourism competitiveness of territories and regional development and the religious routes play an important and specific role (Lourens, 2007; Mariotti, 2012).

In recent times, more research attention has been paid also to the essential role of food and wine in tourism, as they are an integral part of the tourist experience (Hall *et al.* 2004; Hall *et al.*, 2009; Timothy and Ron, A.S. (2013)). Furthermore, according to Richards (2003) local culture of food and wine is useful for attracting and amusing tourists: '[...] not only because food is central to the tourist experience, but also because gastronomy has become a significant source of identity formation in postmodern societies.' (Richards, 2003, p. 3).

The paper focuses on the foodscape around the Tuscan section of the Via Francigena, posing the research question if food and wine could be positive assets to the further development of the Tuscan Via Francigena, and consequently sustaining the communities resident in the surrounding rural areas.

For this purpose, the rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 exposes the method and collected data, and section 3 deals with relations between farming, landscape, and cuisine in Tuscany. Then, section 4 tells more about rural landscape and

foodscape along the Via Francigena in Tuscany, and section 5 exposes and discusses results of the field survey. Section 6 reports some concluding remarks.

1. Method and Data

The research has been carried out with an explorative intention and the paper aims at describing and analyzing the development opportunity of rural tourism around the Via Francigena fostering the food and wine offer. For this purpose, data have been gathered from diverse sources as suggested by the *grounded theory* (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and directly observing the local reality by using personal experience and knowledge (Anderson *et al.* 2003). Data have been collected also from grey literature (McAuley *et al.*, 2009), analyzing thematic publications, online institutional documents, such as official websites, including blogs and dedicated online forums (see Annex 1). Further information from a dozen of direct interviews has been retrieved following suggestions of scholar Steiner Kvale, namely considering interviews as conversations with a purpose, during which the interviewer seeks understanding and the respondent is a means for the interviewer's knowledge interest (Kvale, 2006). For selecting the informants, the purposing sampling technique (Gerrish and Lacey, 2010) has been chosen, thus individuating informants within people located along the Tuscan section of the route being clearly interested in the Via Francigena functioning. According to Tongco (2007), the selected sampling method can give feasible and valid information for answering such a research question as that posed in the introduction, even if the list of interviewees is limited, and obtained from a non-probability sampling. The list of interviewed persons is exposed in table 1.

Table 1. List of Informants, role, place, date and means of interview¹

No Inf.	Role	Place (Province)	Date	Means
1	Artist	Pontremoli (Massa)	12/05/2015	Phone
2	Cultural Activist	Montignoso (Lucca)	12/12/2015	Direct
3	Restaurant Owner	Pietrasanta (Lucca)	05/03/2016	Direct
4	Hotel owner	Lucca (Lucca)	05/03/2016	Phone
5	Cultural Activist	Altopascio (Lucca)	12/03/2016	Direct
6	Farmer	Gambassi Terme (Firenze)	19/03/2016	Direct
8	B&B owner	Siena (Siena)	09/04/2016	Direct
9	Farmer	Monteroni d'Arbia (Siena)	16/04/2016	Phone
10	Winemaker	San Quirico d'Orcia (Siena)	16/04/2016	Phone
11	Pilgrim	Chiusi (Siena)	15/05/2016	Direct
12	Pilgrim	Radicofani (Siena)	22/05/2016	Direct

2. Farming, Landscapes, and Cuisine in Tuscany

Farming systems and landscapes are strictly intertwined and they both refer to a particular organization of the agricultural habitat. Italian scholars have long time stressed the functional relations between housing and farming, settlement and the countryside, cultivated fields and food and wine produce (Gambi and Barbieri 1970). In Tuscany, the features of rural landscape have been historically characterized by the prevailing farming system of *mezzadria*, namely sharecropping or metayage, made up by singular units of small family farms and a bigger farmhouse where the landowner usually lives permanently (Anselmi, 1990; Azzari and Rombai, 1991; Cherubini, 1979). This system was both a form of land tenure and a social organization, which survived until the 1960s (Polidori, 2013). In Tuscany, exceptions to this model are detectable in the province of Pisa, where extensive farms with waged workers are still specialized in wheat cropping. Some other areas show different types of land tenure, such as the province of Grosseto whose territory has been interested by large land reclamations, during the fading of the XVII century (De Silva *et al.* 2013). Here, the land was mainly devoted to extensive farming and animal breeding. Yet, this area is outside the itinerary of the Via Francigena.

In a summarizing sketch, the Tuscan farming was mainly based on poly-culture, combining field crops and trees, i.e. vines, olive trees and fruit trees. All the components of the rural family were involved in farming, cattle breeding, and in managing private vegetable gardens and domestic agricultural industries. The resulting type of landscape is the representation of a settling, producing and social system, which left as a worthy legacy the typical Tuscan 'agrarian landscape' (Sereni, 1961) as also recently stressed by Ferretti (2015).

For discussing about food/land-tenure/landscape relations, it is still helpful starting from some past findings of eminent scholars. Fifty years ago, food and eating have been studied as practices and collective representations (Douglas 1966; Lévi-Strauss 1968). In the 1980s, French sociologist Claude Fishler enlightened the strong relations between food and sense of identity (Fishler, 1988). Food, eating and cuisine are crucial for determining group diversity, hierarchy and organization, and even oneness and otherness. Food gives identity both to individuals and social groups and then to places, in a very complex way (Dare, 1999). Otherwise, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) analyzed the social norms governing eating and worked on showing that *tastes* can be understood as socially constructed and differentiated normative sets of practices.

In more recent times, scholars have stressed the role of food as being expressive of a regional culture and consequently as a means for establishing regional identity in the tourism marketplace and in regional branding for facing global competition (Hall *et al.*, 2004). It could be difficult to neatly separate foodscapes from broader concerns surrounding agricultural areas, 'which, by their very nature, are landscapes of food production.' (*Ibid.*, p. 10). Nevertheless, the farming system is a form of cultural landscape linked to food production and *thus* to local eating habits. In this line, investigating behaviors in Tuscan ex-rural families, American sociologist Carole

Couniham, stated food as voice of family and gender, revealing relations between men's and women's roles, who are separated in 'production' of food and 'reproduction' of sons (Couniham 2004).

The history of rural families in Tuscany is actually the history of *mezzadria* as a farming system and a family and social organization (Cherubini, 1979; Goretti, 2011) that left such a worthy legacy as a sturdy cooking style (Badii, 2010). Even though the Tuscan cuisine is a heritage of both poor and rich classes, with no doubts the today regional landmark cooking style is a descendant of habits and tradition of rural families, yet in a new creative way (Civitello, 2011; Montanari, 2003, 2006; Richards and Wilson, 2007).

The Tuscan section of the Via Francigena is actually a religious itinerary for pilgrims and a spiritual or leisure experience for laical people (Bambi and Barbari, 2015), but it should be also a form of experiential tourism related to cuisine, food and wine and sense of place (Regione Toscana, 2014).

3. Rural Landscape and Foodscape Along the Via Francigena in Tuscany

This section of the paper describes the foodscape around the Tuscan itinerary of the Via Francigena as retrievable combining information from two official documents of the Tuscany Region. One is the territorial strategic plan that draws 38 homogeneous landscape regional areas considering also local patterns of agriculture (Regione Toscana, 2016). The second one is the official website of the Tuscan Via Francigena which reports consistent descriptions of typical food and culinary recipes to be found along each stage of the religious route (Regione Toscana, 2014).



Figure 1: The Via Francigena and its Tuscan section

Source: Processing of the author from Via Francigena (n.d.)

The regional itinerary is long 380 kilometers divided in 15 stages, following the NE-SW direction and touching localities in 38 Municipalities within the provinces of Massa-Carrara, Lucca, Pisa, Florence and Siena. Fig.1 shows the whole itinerary from Canterbury to Rome, namely the Sigerico route, and connection from Germany and to Santiago de Compostela. In this picture, the green-black line designates the Tuscan section. Picture 2 reports the map of the stages within the Tuscany region.

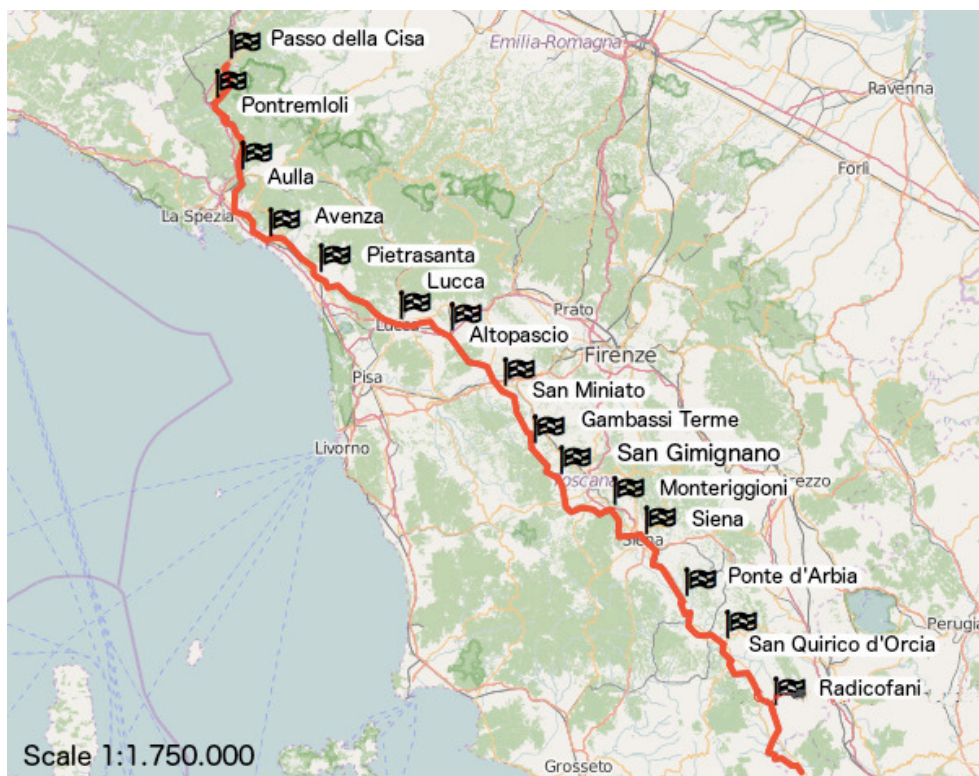


Figure 2: Map of 15 stages of the Via Francigena in Tuscany

Source: Processing of the author from Regione Toscana (n.d.b).

The first three stages do cross two very different areas, the mainly mountainous Lunigiana and the urbanized area of the cities of Massa and Carrara. The first area shows a low population density, due to long term rural and agricultural abandonment, ageing of retired residents, unemployment and some recent re-population with foreign migrants. The mountain landscape is characterized by the chestnut tree forest, and historical terrace cultivations that intertwine rural housing, and pastures for sheep breeding. In the basin of the Magra River, there are olive tree cultivations and residual fruit tree orchards. While degrading to the sea, and close to the cities of Massa and Carrara, urbanization fuzzes the agrarian tenure and rural landscape. Quarries of Carrara marble and infrastructure pertinences sign deeply the landscape.

Traditional Lunigiana cuisine is both poor and nourishing, deriving from the hard conditions of past rural life. Typical ingredients are spelt, namely *farro*, the ancestor of wheat, chestnut flour, porcini mushrooms, cheese and pork sausages. Largely spread and well known are the wild herbs pies (*torte di erbi*) even for health and magical botanical values, descending from past popular beliefs (Pieroni, 2001). The sweets are

made with chestnut flour and are named *Necci* and *Castagnaccio*. The latter containing pine nuts and raisins.

Approaching the city of Lucca, the traditional chestnut forest still remains an element of the landscape, yet in a fast transformation from fruit forest into coppice woods. In the hilly zones agriculture and sheep farming did historically integrate. Arable crops are few and the terraces host vines and olive trees. In the plain, the wheat cultivation prevails.

Also through the fourth to the sixth stages the route crosses two very different areas, both in the province of Lucca, the Versilia, with its typical features of populous and heavily tourist zone and the Lucca area that combines urban and manufacturing features. The Versilia is a worldwide tourist resort and Lucca is rather a typical area of residence. In the very mountainous area there are conifer forests and in its hilly zones olive oil orchards are largely diffused in a surviving historical rural landscape, with terraces and dry stonewalls. Along the coast, it is still evident the land texture descending from past land reclamation. In the plain is well diffused the wheat cultivation mixed with a dense fabric of industrial plants. Passing fast from the high Apuan Alps to the sea front, the cuisine of Versilia encompasses both land and marine food. So typical dishes are the worldwide famous Colonnata lard and stuffed squids. The typical Lucca cuisine is today also poor and nourishing, and it is very renown for the use of high quality extra virgin olive oil and for wines, such as the AOC Montecarlo white wine. Many restaurants serve a typical recipe with leeks and cod.

The seventh and eighth stages of route touch territories in the provinces of Pisa and Florence, avoiding the capital cities, firstly from Altopascio to San Miniato, in the province of Pisa, and then to Gambassi Terme in the province of Florence. Initially the route crosses a typical residential and productive place while the following territories of the Val d'Elsa, entering the province of Florence, show more rural conditions even with a clear vocation in farm hospitality and wine tourism. Altopascio is the location of a typical no salt bread.

These stages encompass very famous wine production and bovine breeding areas. The cuisine is very varied and rich, including vegetable and leguminous soups, fine meats and famous T-bone steaks, cheese, ragout pasta, pork cold cuts and white truffles. The area is famous for innumerable types of AOC and IGP fine wines.

Remaining stages lay within the province of Siena, which contains the longest length of the Tuscan section of the Via Francigena. The whole area is hilly and shows great landscape values, and a significant tourist vocation. Near the city of Siena, the area combines the attractiveness of tourism and some proper urban life features showing incomes higher than the regional average. On the contrary, the area of the Val d'Orcia combines a very strong tourist specialization and low population density, the ageing of residents, weaker productive structure and a large diffusion of holiday homes.

Even if briefly depicted, it is clear many areas show poor food as landmark recipes to be linked to past farming tenure and landscape. Typical cuisine is shaped on traditional and rural domestic habits, including steaks, chicken giblets, beef offal and wild game meat. Very poor and typical dishes are the *Panzanella*, a simple mix of wet bread with tomato, onion, basil, extra virgin olive oil, vinegar and salt, and the *Ribollita*, i.e. bread and vegetable double cooked soup.

4. Results and Discussion

The research question was if food and wine could be positive assets to the further development of the Tuscan Via Francigena, and consequently capable of sustaining resident communities. Analysis of collected data from various sources and evidences from interviews give some findings helpful for answering. Official documents and websites of the Tuscany Region clearly stress the potentiality of the Via Francigena as a motor of socioeconomic enhancement along its entire itinerary, which is mainly laid in rural areas and touches minor tourist destinations. Food and wine are considered as ancillary assets capable of furnishing an integrated hospitality offer, and the promoting website of the Tuscany Region links any stages of the route to typical products and local culinary recipes, that are achievable in restaurants, tavern and bars located nearby.

Interviewees have a positive perception of the ongoing opportunity coming from the tourist attractiveness of the Via Francigena.

‘The tourist relevance of the Via Francigena showed an increasing fashion during last years. It is important that the success has a slow and positive trend, after its official opening on June 21st 2014. The “invasion” of pilgrims is not an immediate target, but the constant increasing of walking people is highly welcomed.’ (Inf. n. 5)

The route has the intrinsic nature of a religious route crossing mainly the rural areas of Tuscany, and reaching medieval villages and hamlets. Nevertheless today many of the places along the itinerary are frequented also by any kind of tourist, including motorized travellers, visiting destinations located along the itinerary and more or less distant from it. The tourist presence in less beaten destinations is perceived as testimony of the search for authenticity of places and people. This is in line with findings of surveys regarding the religious route Camino de Santiago (Carbone *et al.* 2016).

‘Walkers are mainly pilgrims, but also laical trekkers searching less frequented paths crossing reputed landscapes. Eyes enjoy looking around. Food? Cuisine? They eat only a sandwich with bologna for lunch, and they drink water. In the evening, many of them have dinner in religious hostels and inns, for making group and socializing. After all, bread and water were the main food of pilgrims of the past.’ (Inf. n. 1)

‘When walking we use to have very frugal meals bought from supermarkets or grocery stores located near our path, such as bread and ham, few olives, water and a bottle of Chianti wine. At dinner, we like to prepare and share meals in religious hostels.’ (Inf. n. 11 and 12)

'Areas crossed by the route show beautiful landscapes and have lots of pieces of arts. They are not less beautiful and worthy than those of major destinations, such as Florence and Siena. Regional and local authorities are stressing and communicating the religious route. And this attracts even "normal people", I mean "normal tourists", coming rather by car and searching our specialties. Anything politicians do for promoting of our territory is good.' (Inf. n. 10)

'Efforts of the Tuscany Region are very interesting. I'm thinking to rent a closed hostel and revitalize it hosting pilgrims and trekkers. It could work.' (Inf. n. 2)

Perception of interviewees shows that route is becoming a landmark for less beaten tourist areas, also because it is well and continuously communicated by the promotion agency of the Tuscany Region. Communication is sustained even by users themselves as many pilgrims and travellers use forums and blogs while walking for releasing opinions and reviews, including web tools such as Tripadvisor (see Annex 1). Local administrators are willing to improve the route as leverage for enhancing the notoriety and reputation of places and their hospitality.

'The tourist demand has two main facets. One is typically religious oriented. The second has more features of leisure tourism, even often melded with the spiritual motivations of travelling. Both of the two kinds of tourists are surely in search of some form of authenticity also in food and wine and cuisine. We do our best to offer them something like that.' (Inf. n. 8)

Findings from the research are certainly case-specific, and need comparison with other studies regarding different geographic areas and tourism destinations along the Via Francigena. Anyway, they are to be considered for giving a substantially positive answer to the posed research question. Namely, it is possible to consider the contribution of the Via Francigena effective in sustaining the economy of the crossed areas, because residents are understanding the opportunity. Moreover, findings do even confirm the high attitude and validity of the strategic orientation of the Tuscany Region in promoting the entire territory as an integrated system of possible tourism products and destinations. This is in line with previous findings (Corinto, 2016; Lalli, 2011) and official statements (Fondazione Sistema Toscana, n. d.). All the interviewees have freely participated in the survey, showing a great degree of commitment with the research topic. All of them confirmed their increasing personal interest about the Via Francigena, surely considered as an important asset to be exploited. They also stressed the role of poor cuisine in signaling and marking the traditional Tuscan way of eating, and especially the importance of bread.

Concluding Remarks

The choice of the paper topic was based on the willingness to investigate the possibility to characterize the experience of travelling along the Tuscan Via Francigena also with food and wine and local cuisine.

Since decades the Tuscany Region designed a centrally controlled land policy and strong coordination of integrated sectorial interventions, including the promotion of tourism. The *Fondazione Sistema Toscana* is the dedicated regional agency running the promotion of the entire regional territory, considered as a unity. Regarding specifically the Via Francigena, the Tuscany Region designed a funded program for sustaining the tourist aspects of the route properly because it crosses the less beaten areas of the region. All those areas are rural, and less frequented destinations that do maintain a vital and multifunctional agriculture, including rural tourism.

Success of the Via Francigena has been relevant in Tuscany, and giving sound economic occasions to local communities. Within both private enterprises and public bodies there was strong interest in promoting local typical products for characterizing the travelling experience along the Tuscan Via Francigena. The whole territory is capable of offering an eating experience with an evidently Tuscan aroma with many local place-specific variations. Both pilgrims and laical trekkers can find food and wine for their own diverse necessities and taste.

Future initiatives, both in the research and operative realms, can be oriented in identifying a proper pilgrim's food and drinking set. The survey has enlightened that a possible iconic food for pilgrimage, at least in Tuscany, could be the bread, better if traditionally hand made.

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¹ All material related to the interviews are accessible at the author's archive.