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WHEN DOES A LOCAL FOOD FESTIVAL BECOME A CULTURAL FESTIVAL? Reframing the *Sagra* as Community Device in Contemporary Italy

Abstract

This article interrogates the boundaries of the category “cultural festival” by critically examining the position of *sagre*, Italian local food festivals, within contemporary cultural and policy discourses. Despite their centrality in the Italian public sphere, *sagre* are often excluded from institutional definitions of cultural festivals, largely due to their emphasis on food, popular tradition, and informality. Drawing from anthropological theory and applied fieldwork, the article challenges this exclusion by proposing a more inclusive, relational conception of culture. Through the case study of the “Festa del Ringraziamento” (“Thanksgiving Festival”) of Voghera, a mid-sized town in Northern Italy, the article illustrates how a local food event can become a cultural device: a dynamic configuration of practices, narratives, and relationships that generate meaning, foster belonging, and support local development. The Voghera festival demonstrates how food, rather than a hedonistic distraction, can operate as a medium for storytelling, community-building, and territorial re-signification. It activates affective economies, enables intergenerational exchange, and creates a space of civic aggregation in a context marked by economic decline and social fragmentation. The article concludes by advocating for a redefinition of cultural festivals that recognizes the value of popular, food-based events as legitimate forms of cultural production. While grounded in a single case, the analysis opens broader questions for cultural policy, tourism, and the anthropology of heritage in post-industrial rural Europe.

Keywords

Food Festival; device; affective economy; territorialization; food heritage.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is a warm summer evening. The sun has just set behind the rolling hills of the region, and a soft golden light still lingers over the tents, long tables, and makeshift wooden kiosks that line the town square. Children are running between booths, their hands sticky with fried dough and their cheeks painted from the face-painting corner. On the central stage, a folk band is tuning its instruments, preparing for the evening concert. Just beside them, a local association is distributing brochures about the history of the town and the food traditions of the surrounding countryside. Laughter, the clinking of

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glasses, and the scent of grilled meat mix with the sounds of radio music and church bells in the distance. Meanwhile, a group of elderly women sells handmade ravioli at a stand marked *Antica ricetta della nonna*, the Grandma's old recipe, while nearby, younger volunteers from a local environmental group host a photo exhibit on traditional agricultural practices.

This fictional description represents a landscape that resonates with the experience of most Italians. It describes a scene that can be experienced across the country, where thousands of local food festivals, commonly called *sagre* (pronounced /'sa.gre/), animate rural and urban squares throughout the year. These events celebrate specific dishes, seasonal harvests, or local food products and are typically organised by municipalities, voluntary associations, or parish groups. *Sagre* are vibrant social spaces where food, conviviality, heritage, and community all converge; they attract tourists and residents alike, offering opportunities not only for consumption but for learning, remembering, and gathering¹. Yet despite their richness, *sagre* are rarely recognised within the category of "cultural festivals". Why? Is it because they focus on food rather than the arts? Or perhaps because they are popular, informal, and grounded in local traditions rather than curated by cultural institutions? What, then, would it take for a *sagra* to be considered a cultural festival?

This article addresses these questions, drawing on ethnographic research and applied anthropological experience. It attempts to de- and re-construct the category of "cultural event", bringing to the surface the underlying understanding of culture upon which this term lies and expands in a more inclusive perspective. In so doing, through theoretical reflection and practical case analysis, most notably the "Festa del Ringraziamento" in Voghera, it outlines a framework to interpret *sagre* not only as festive occasions but as dispositive² for cultural innovation and sustainable local development.

The structure of the article is as follows: after this introduction, the first section defines what is meant by "cultural festival" and examines competing conceptions of culture that can underpin the category. The article proceeds by situating *sagre* within the contemporary development of tourism, particularly gastronomic and experiential tourism in Italy. It frames these events as a dispositive that generates cultural and economic value. The fourth section presents a concrete case of a *sagra* reimagined as a cultural festival through applied anthropological work. The final section reflects on the implications of this reconceptualization and offers directions for future action.

2. APPROACHING CULTURE

What is a cultural festival? In contemporary discourse, the label typically refers to events that celebrate the arts and knowledge: theatre, cinema, literature, music, and other expressive forms whose primary aim is not pleasure per se, but reflection, critique, and aesthetic experience³. Tourists and citizens attend these festivals to be stimulated

¹ M.F. Fontefrancesco, *Food Festivals and Local Development in Italy: A Viewpoint from Economic Anthropology*, London: Palgrave, 2020.

² G. Deleuze, "What Is a Dispositif?", in *Michel Foucault, Philosopher: Essays Translated from the French and German*, edited by T.J. Armstrong and Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.

³ Z. Chen, B. King, W. Sunkul, "Festivalscapes and the Visitor Experience: An Application of the Stimulus Organism Response Approach", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 21, 6 (2019): 758-771. DOI: 10.1002/jtr.2302.

intellectually and emotionally, drawn by curiosity, a desire to learn, and a pursuit of meaning, rather than by hedonism or indulgence.

In the past decades, social research has explored these events, highlighting their pivotal role as essential space for social cohesion, heritage transmission, and community engagement. These festivals, in effect, embody distinct cultural practices and narratives that reflect and reinforce the collective identity of a community, cultivating a sense of belonging and mutual understanding among diverse cultural groups, facilitating social connections that transcend ethnic and cultural divides⁴. Research has identified various motivations for individuals and families attending cultural festivals, illustrating their significance as both educational tools and communal experiences⁵. The dual role of these festivals as venues for cultural exchange suggests their profound impact in preserving and disseminating cultural knowledge across generations⁶. Moreover, these events play a crucial role in promoting local growth, enhancing community resilience, and contributing to broader development goals⁷. While issues concerning the commodification of cultural production⁸, as well as participation and exclusion⁹ persist, these events can be seen as windows through which to explore the local grievances and aspirations, providing a backdrop for discussions on social change and cultural preservation amid the challenges posed by modernity and globalization¹⁰.

While the potential relevance of these events for the communities is undeniable, questions can be raised about the scope of this term; specifically, the forms of activities it defines. The locution “cultural festival” is used to define public, periodic events that celebrate and showcase specific sets of cultural expression attaining “cultivated” domains. In this specific use of the word “culture”, one can recognize the last instalment of a longer story that can be traced back to a classic distinction within Western thought between what is culture and what is not. Famously, in his seminal work *Culture and Anarchy* (published in 1869), Matthew Arnold¹¹ defined culture as “a study of perfection,” contrasting it with the chaos and individualism of the modern industrial world. Specifically, for Arnold, culture was the domain of the best that has been thought and said; something to be aspired to, associated with elite education, refinement, and moral elevation. Culture, thus, was intended as something distinct from popular customs, daily practices, or corporeal pleasures. In the Italian context, a similar distinction had a deep historical resonance. From Gianbattista Vico¹² to Bene-

⁴ S.L. Oliveira, “The Role of Cultural Festivals in Fostering Social Cohesion in Multicultural Societies in Brazil”, *Enigma in Cultural*, 2, 1 (2024): 90-102. DOI: 10.61996/cultural.v2i1.67.

⁵ A. Hidayah, K.F. Ilmawan, W. Yudhanto, “Contribution of Community-Based Festival to the Development of Sustainable Tourism on Karimunjawa Island”, in *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Economics, Business and Economic Education Science*, ICE-BEES 2022, edited by S. Arief, Y.A. Rahman, D.P. Astuti, Semarang: EAI, 2023, 1-17. DOI: 10.4108/eai.9-8-2022.2338589.

⁶ A. Savinovic, S. Kim, P.E. Long, “Audience Members’ Motivation, Satisfaction, and Intention to Re-Visit an Ethnic Minority Cultural Festival”, *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 29, 7 (2012): 682-694. DOI: 10.1080/10548408.2012.720154.

⁷ D. Adom, “Cultural Festival as a Salient Tool for Strategic, Holistic and Sustainable Rural Development in Africa: The Case of the Opemso Festival of the Asantes of Ghana”, *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 3, 11 (2016): 4-20.

⁸ K.A. McClinchey, “Urban Ethnic Festivals, Neighborhoods, and the Multiple Realities of Marketing Place”, *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 25, 3-4 (2008): 251-264. DOI: 10.1080/10548400802508309.

⁹ R. Finkel, L. Platt, “Cultural Festivals and the City”, *Geography Compass*, 14 (2020): e12498.

¹⁰ C. Lentz, “Local Culture in the National Arena: The Politics of Cultural Festivals in Ghana”, *African Studies Review*, 44, 3 (2001): 47. DOI: 10.2307/525593.

¹¹ M. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Selected Prose* [1869], London: Penguin Classics, 2018.

¹² G. Vico, *The New Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

detto Croce¹³ and Giovanni Gentile¹⁴, the notion of culture has often been associated with refinement, moral elevation, and a form of elite knowledge. However, some alternatives can be deployed to rethink what a cultural festival can be. A contemporary of Arnold, Edward Burnett Tylor¹⁵ suggested culture was “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Tylor’s definition, which is considered the foundation of contemporary anthropological thinking about culture¹⁶, opens a holistic perspective that recognises all human expressions as equally cultural¹⁷. On a different note, even more openly in contrast with an elitist concept of culture, Antonio Gramsci¹⁸ looked at mundane forms of knowledge shared by the lower classes, first of all traditional knowledge and folklore, identifying in these elements distinctive traits of a collective identity that can be used to raise class consciousness and build counter-hegemonies, to empower subaltern classes. Alberto Cirese¹⁹ championed this vision, emphasising that the so-called “popular culture”, including rituals, sayings, festivals, and foodways, was a site of expression, resistance, and creativity for rural and working class communities. Internationally, similar lines were developed by scholars like Raymond Williams²⁰, and by Michel de Certeau²¹ who studied how everyday practices, like cooking or walking in the city, were forms of “tactics” through which ordinary people reclaimed agency in structured environments. These contributions outline the possibility of understanding “cultural festival” in the broader, more plural, and inclusive perspective, including under this umbrella also events that celebrate a larger array of forms of cultural production that do not fall within the perimeter of arts or promote a rational engagement with knowledge.

These theoretical contributions challenge the boundaries of the definition of “cultural festivals” by encompassing domains of cultural production that are currently generally excluded, among which food is prominent. Food festivals, in Western contexts, are typically excluded from the category of cultural festivals, plausibly due to a lack of formal recognition of these events’ capacity to generate cultural capital among their participants. Conversely, experience gained in other geographical contexts, as highlighted by Dallen J. Timothy and Miguel Pena²², suggests that food and cuisine can serve as a cultural interface (which is a dynamic space of interaction where learners engage with cultural knowledge and where meaning, identity, and cultural values are actively negotiated²³) capable of creating heritage awareness and conveying knowledge related to the history and culture of a territory. Thus, food

¹³ B. Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression & General Linguistic*, Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 1995.

¹⁴ G. Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, New York: AMS Press, 1982.

¹⁵ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, London: J. Murray, 1871.

¹⁶ R.M. Keesing, “Theories of Culture”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 3 (1974): 73-97.

¹⁷ F. Remotti, *Cultura. Dalla complessità all’impoverimento*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011.

¹⁸ A. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

¹⁹ A.M. Cirese, *Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne: rassegna di studi sul mondo popolare tradizionale*, Palermo: Palumbo, 2001.

²⁰ R. Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1958.

²¹ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life. Vol. 2, Living and Cooking*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

²² D.J. Timothy, M. Pena, “Food Festival and Heritage Awareness”, in *Heritage Cuisines. Traditions, Identities, and Tourism*, edited by D.J. Timothy, London-New York: Routledge, 2015, 148-165.

²³ M. Nakata, “Indigenous Knowledge and the Cultural Interface: Underlying Issues at the Intersection of Knowledge and Information Systems”, *IFLA Journal*, 28, 5-6 (2002): 281-291.

festivals can be something more than a mere hedonistic occasion, representing an educational event that strengthens local cultural capital. This insight appears to have been only partially assimilated in the current debate about food festivals in Italy, where *sagre* continue to be predominantly depicted as recreational moments or, at best, examples of folkloristic²⁴ effervescence.

While the cultural relevance of food is widely debated in anthropology²⁵, the following pages suggest when a *sagra* can be fully considered a cultural festival, at least when its format stops focusing solely on serving food but uses food as a medium for storytelling, community-building, and envisioning futures.

3. THE DEVICE

As a first step to understand the cultural possibilities of *sagre* in contemporary Italy, it is crucial to frame this festive phenomenon in the broader transformation of the tourist sector. Over the past thirty years, tourism, both globally and nationally, has undergone significant shifts. Once focused predominantly on art cities and seaside resorts, tourism has gradually embraced more diversified experiences. In this context, food, once a marginal element in tourism packages, has become a central asset in the tourist experience and this led to the rise of gastronomic tourism²⁶. Internationally, food festivals have become one of the most widespread and participatory forms of gastronomic attraction²⁷. In Italy, with over 32,000 events held annually across the country and a turnover of around 900 million euros²⁸, *sagre* represent the local confirmation of this phenomenon. Behind this phenomenon, however, lies a diverse historical path that often conflates centuries-old festivals, typically linked to the celebration of a significant local religious anniversary, with more recent events established in the last fifty years with a more pronounced tourist-driven purpose²⁹. A common feature of these events is a temporary food service system aimed at promoting local (or more exotic) dishes and products with the overall goal of attracting tourists to the territory. While the success of these events in the twentieth century was linked to the low cost of food, today the association of “sagra equals cheap food” is no longer certain, given a marked increase in service costs that often reach or exceed those of a low-to-mid-range restaurant. Nevertheless, their success continues today, driven by the desire to discover territories and their unique qualities, in line with the broader trend of food tourism³⁰.

Considering their relevance, however, they cannot be considered only folklor-

²⁴ D. Parbuono, “Folclorico sta a folklore come folcloristico sta a folclorismo”, in *Per un museo del costume folcloristico*, edited by L. Barbini, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Halley, 2009, 29-45.

²⁵ S. Parrish, “Anthropology of Food: History, Topics, and Trajectories to Understand a Discipline”, *Encyclopedia*, 5, 1 (2025): 22. DOI: 10.3390/encyclopedia5010022.

²⁶ A. Ellis, E. Park, S. Kim, I. Yeoman, “What is Food Tourism?”, *Tourism Management*, 68 (2018): 250-263. DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2018.03.025.

²⁷ G. Di Francesco, “Sagre and Quality of Life. The Italian Heritage of Popular Gastronomy”, in *Italian Studies on Food and Quality of Life*, edited by C. Facioni, G. Di Francesco, P. Corvo, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022, 21-37.

²⁸ M.F. Fontefrancesco, “Sagre, ovvero il futuro del cibo di territorio”, in *Il cibo nel futuro*, edited by P. Corvo and M.F. Fontefrancesco, Roma: Carocci, 2021, 119-132.

²⁹ Fontefrancesco, *Food Festivals and Local Development in Italy*.

³⁰ R. Testa, A. Galati, G. Schifani, A.M. Di Trapani, G. Migliore, “Culinary Tourism Experiences in Agri-Tourism Destinations and Sustainable Consumption: Understanding Italian Tourists’ Motivations”, *Sustainability*, 11, 17 (2019): 4588.

istic moments of celebration but, above all, strategic tools for local promotion and development³¹. Typically rooted in rural areas and organized by local associations and municipalities (seldom by religious authorities), *sagre* celebrate specific dishes or ingredients, from ravioli to couscous, from polenta to asparagus³². Yet their scope often extends beyond food, including concerts, art exhibitions, farmers' markets, etc. Despite this and their success, *sagre* have generally been excluded from the "cultural festivals" category and are not recognized for their complex role in the communities. However, they represent a crucial resource for the communities; a reality that Giles Deleuze³³ would call a "device": a dynamic arrangement of practices, institutions, discourses, and materialities that collectively generate meaning and regulate social life. In effect, *sagre* are not merely events; they are socio-cultural arrangements that organise time, space, and community around the celebration of food. In so doing, I have suggested elsewhere³⁴, *sagre* fulfil four core functions in terms of anti-marginalization, socialization, reterritorialization, and economic development. In effect, ethnographic research has shown how *sagre*:

- Are capable of making marginal spaces visible and valuable for tourism,
- Create opportunities for socialization among residents of small towns suffering from fragmentation and aging population;
- Reclaim and redefine the relationship between people and place by foregrounding local produce; and
- Represent incubators of the rural economy, linking gastronomy to production, marketing, and regional branding.

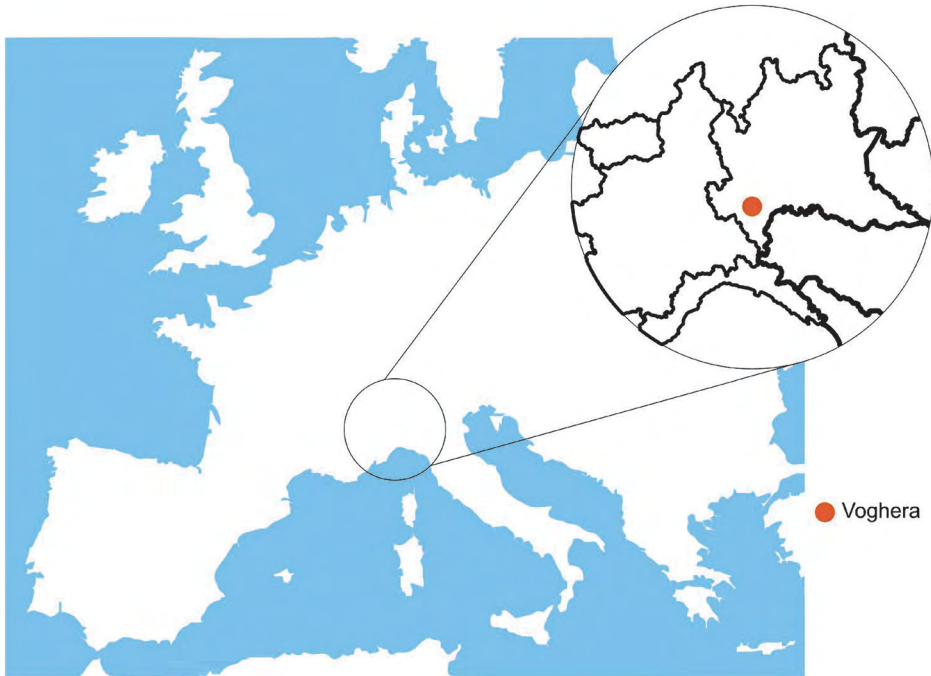
In light of this, these functions seem to match with the fundamental objective that the revised conception of culture proposed in the previous paragraph imposes for a festival to be considered fully "cultural" since they are vehicles of affect, memory, labour, and aspiration, able to mobilize historical narratives and contemporary desires, and bind together different stakeholders: municipalities, local associations, families, producers, and tourists. However, there is a clear need to define a structured pathway through which the offered activities go beyond merely providing an aesthetic experience. Instead, they should become moments of deeper cognitive engagement through gastronomic experience. This pathway inevitably requires a rethinking and functional redefinition of food, from being a mere commodity to serving as a cultural interface through which concepts and meanings can be conveyed. In this respect, the applied anthropology experience conducted in Voghera (PV) provides a valuable reference point for exploring such possibilities.

³¹ Fontefrancesco, *Food Festivals and Local Development in Italy*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Deleuze, "What Is a Dispositif?"

³⁴ Fontefrancesco, *Food Festivals and Local Development in Italy*.

Figure 1 - *Localization of Voghera*

4. THE “THANKSGIVING FESTIVAL” OF VOGHERA

It is inappropriate to idealize all the *sagre*, as not all the events that make up the Italian festival calendar fully fulfil these functions, whose outcomes often remain only potential. On the other hand, recognizing the potential of the festive device that underpins a *sagra* can serve as a guiding principle in the development, revitalization, or invention of new gastronomic events, opening the way to an applied approach to community development. This is the case of the work conducted in Voghera (PV) between 2021 and 2023.

Voghera is a town in southwestern Lombardy with a population of about 40,000. Once a prosperous agricultural and industrial centre, the town has seen decades of de-industrialization and demographic stagnation. Nonetheless, it remains embedded in the richly productive landscape of the Oltrepò Pavese. Historically situated along the ancient Roman road Via Postumia, Voghera carries centuries of rural and mercantile tradition.

Facing the difficulties the town met in terms of touristic attractiveness and characterization, in 2021, a network of local stakeholders, led by the association Voghera Solidale GRUP, together with the agricultural high school Istituto Gallini, envisioned the idea of using a *sagra* as a device for civic celebration and territorial revitalization. The festival was the “Festa del Ringraziamento” (“Thanksgiving Festival”), a Catholic celebration established in the second half of the 20th century as a moment of prayer and gratitude for the year’s harvest. The “Festa del Ringraziamento” was initially promoted

by Coldiretti, the largest Italian farmers' organization³⁵, as a national initiative that led farmers across the country to have a moment of public visibility through the public celebration of a mass dedicated to the agricultural work³⁶. This practice has faded in public visibility in the past fifty years, mainly becoming a private or closed moment for farmers, marked by a religious service followed by a convivial lunch, during which association leaders or political representatives might be invited, thus creating an informal arena for dialogue on the challenges and prospects of agricultural activity. The organizers intended to revitalize this practice in Voghera.

The first edition of the new “Festa del Ringraziamento” combined religious, educational, and convivial elements. The city's main square hosted a blessing of tractors and a public Mass, followed by a scholarly conference on local agriculture which involved the student and teachers of the local agricultural high school, and a communal meal based on traditional dishes like *Varzi cow stewed meat ravioli* and *schita* (pronounced [ˈski.ta]), traditional fried flatbread made from a simple batter of water, flour, and salt quickly pan-fried in lard or oil to create a crisp and thin pancake (Fig. 2). This combination of knowledge exchange, ritual, and taste built a multisensory and multivocal experience.

Figure 2 - *The official program for the first edition of the “Festa del Ringraziamento” held in Voghera on Thursday, November 11, 2021.*
(Credits: Luca Carlo Benicchi, 2021)

FESTA DEL RINGRAZIAMENTO
di San Martino a Voghera

Agricoltura Familiare, Sociale e Contadina tra Scuola e Lavoro. Il futuro dell'Ortopè Pavese: nel solco della Tradizione Contadina

IL CONVEGNO
Corso Rosselli, 22 - Istituto Tecnico Agrario C. Collini di Voghera
organizzato dall'Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Piacenza con l'Università di Pavia

ore 9.30 Benvenuto:
Silvana Bassi, Preside dell'Istituto Tecnico Agrario C. Collini
Paola Garlaschelli, Sindaco di Voghera

ore 10 Convegno:
"Cibo e territorio: il ruolo delle filiere agricole corte nello sviluppo locale"
Convegno organizzato nell'ambito del progetto "Atlante delle Filiere" dell'Università degli Studi di Scienze Gastronomiche con il contributo di Fondazione Carigo
Moderatore: **Mauro Biaggini**, Voghera Solidale CRUP con Michele F. Fontefrancesco, Responsabile scientifico del progetto "Atlante delle Filiere", Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Piacenza
Drauso M. Zocchi, Responsabile scientifico del progetto "Arca del Gusto", Università di Scienze Gastronomiche di Piacenza
Cinzia Rossi, Direttore del Dipartimento di Scienze della Terra e dell'Ambiente dell'Università di Pavia
Hefas Cena, Prorotore dell'Università di Pavia per la Terra Mission

ore 11 Presentazione nuovi modelli economici per il futuro del territorio:
CO.CO.BIO, Impresa Sociale Agricola Contadina e Cooperativa Sociale Auris
Luca C. Benicchi presenta *Dante Quistopace e Pietro Bigarola*
Progetto di comunicazione e promozione territoriale: La Schita dell'Ortopè Pavese
Cinzia Montagna, giornalista, scrittrice
VAL.HO.D.E.C.A. Rete di vendita Organizzata Agricola e Sociale area Nivella 1
Fabio Tonalini presenta Roberto Vaniglia
Comunità Slow Food "Ortopè Pavese"
Teresio Nardi presenta *Comunità per la salvaguardia della biodiversità in Ortopè Pavese*

ore 11.45 Conclusioni:
Paolo Massabro, giornalista, autore de *Il Galozzo* e patron di Colosaria
Stefano Cappel, Presidente di Coldiretti Pavia
Enrico Minni, Presidente di Copagri Pavia
Davide Calvi, Presidente CIA Pavia
Giuseppe Cavagna di Guadano, Presidente Confagricoltura Pavia
Gian Marco Centinaio, Senatore e Sottosegretario di Stato nel governo Draghi al Ministero delle Politiche Agricole Alimentari e Forestali

ore 12.18 Le Filiere dell'Ortopè Pavese:
Teresio Nardi, Fiduciario Slow Food Ortopè Pavese presenta *Le Filiere dell'Ortopè Pavese*.
Grani Antichi: Col.Na.P., San Pastore, Grani Antichi dell'Ortopè Pavese
Associazioni Tutela VOI (Vorzese Ottonese Tortonesi), Club del Buttafucoco Storico
Arca del Gusto: La Schita dell'Ortopè Pavese, Pomella Canovese e Peperone di Voghera, Zucca Benetina di Lungavilla, Maiz ottonese Sivone, Maiz Marano, Miconne di Stradella, Niso, Ciambella di Staghiglione, Cipolla dorata di Voghera, Fagiolo Aquila dell'Ortopè
Progetti internazionali: *Be My Job o @ My Job*, Campaliche con riconoscimento Welcome - UNESCO, BioA - Associazione di Bioagricoltura Sociale AIAB

ore 12.45 Degustazione:
con Schita dell'Ortopè pavese in accostamento a vino Novella, vini e prodotti tipici del territorio

Giovedì 11 novembre 2021
dalle 9.30 alle 13.30

HUB VOGHERA | Evento si svolgerà nel pieno rispetto delle normative anti-covid

³⁵ E. Bernardi, *La Coldiretti e la storia d'Italia: rappresentanza e partecipazione dal dopoguerra agli anni Ottanta*, Roma: Donzelli, 2020.

³⁶ N. Primavera, *La gente dei campi e il sogno di Bonomi. La Coldiretti dalla fondazione alla Riforma agraria*, Milano: Laurana, 2018.

In the 2022 and 2023 editions, the event expanded and evolved. The conference was replaced with cooking shows, storytelling, and the creation of new symbolic dishes, while the entire celebration was concentrated in the town's main square, Piazza Duomo. Here, in the first edition, the religious function had already taken place inside the Collegiata di San Lorenzo Martire, followed by the blessing of tractors on the churchyard. From the second edition, the square then became the central stage of the celebration, turning the civic heart of the town into a space where agricultural identity and culinary tradition: on the west side, in front of the church, the tractors were displayed, while on the north side a farmers' market showcased local producers. Along the southern edge of the square, gastronomic stands were arranged, with gazebos lined up beside the church's right façade. Within these structures, the festival's food was prepared and presented. In 2022, the *schita* was staffed with local products and distributed among the participants (Fig. 3).

Figure 3 - On the left is Giovanni Palli, the President of the Province of Pavia, and on the right is Pierluigi Ambrosioni, the President of the Consortium of Salame di Varzi. Standing proudly in the center is a student from the ENAIP culinary school of Voghera, wearing a chef's uniform and presenting a platter of the local specialty. They are all enjoying "schita", a traditional pancake made from a simple batter of flour and water, fried in oil or lard.

It is being served with a slice of the famous Salame di Varzi D.O.P., a protected designation of origin product from the region. Both presidents are wearing aprons bearing the consortium's logo as they sample the dish.

(Credits: Luca Carlo Benicchi 2022)



In 2023, it was the *Oltrepizza*, locally designed pizzas in four variants, each representing a symbolic element of the local foodscape: Varzi salami, Voghera bellpepper, the meat of Varzese cows, Breme Onion, *Berrettina* pumpkin (Fig. 4). Public figures, artisans, and farmers collaborated in their preparation, transforming cooking into a performative, symbolic gesture.

Figure 4 - Students from the ENAIP culinary school of Voghera are in the foreground, serving Oltrepizze – special pizzas made with local ingredients. Prominently displayed is the pizza topped with Voghera bell peppers. Behind it, you can see the pizza with Varzi salami, and further back, the pizza with Berrettina pumpkin. A student in uniform is captured in the act of serving a customer, cutting a slice from the tray. (Credits: Luca Carlo Benicchi, 2023)



Overall, the “Festa del Ringraziamento” of Voghera emerged as more than just a celebratory occasion: it became a structured and meaningful space through which local identities, collective memories, and aspirations could be expressed, performed, and negotiated. By activating the urban centre as a kind of civic agora, the event created an arena where diverse realms, religion, agriculture, education, and entertainment interacted, revealing the plural nature of local culture and its capacity for renewal.

Its growing success was measured not only by the rising number of attendees but also by the increasing involvement of institutional actors, from the municipal administration to regional trade associations, and the deepening engagement of the local community. The festival became a device, both symbolic and practical, capable of aggregating different social actors around a common project of cultural valorization.

Significantly, the event gave concrete form to the four dimensions previously theorized as constitutive of the *sagra*. It played a counter-marginalizing role, recuperating a fading tradition and bringing visibility to lesser-known or undervalued food products. At the same time, it became a decisive moment of socialization, drawing together schools, families, civic groups, and institutions into a collective ritual emphasizing participation and intergenerational exchange.

Regarding reterritorialization, the festival reasserted the link between food and place, assigning renewed symbolic relevance to local ingredients and culinary practices as expressions of territorial identity. Finally, the initiative also had a developmental

function, contributing to the opening of new market spaces for local producers while involving the food service sector in strategies of promotion, innovation, and cultural anchoring.

4. MAKING CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Is the “Festa del Ringraziamento” of Voghera a cultural festival? If a cultural festival is an event that places at its centre a form of cultural production and aims at improving the cultural capital of a community: yes, it is. It is evident how this event develops through its own formats, dissimilar from more traditional cultural festivals. On the other hand, it shares certain resonances with more recent festivals that prioritize active citizen engagement³⁷. From its very first edition, the “Festa” aimed to animate the local urban fabric, creating a bridge between the city’s central and peripheral zones. It achieved this by decentralizing events and fostering encounters between the diverse actors of these territories, purposefully connecting the city with its surrounding countryside and its citizens with local farmers. From the second edition onward, this foundational goal of social and spatial connection was increasingly complemented by an emphasis on the spectacularization of food, blending community-building with gastronomic appeal. This may place the “Festa” into a different domain from what one might expect from a cultural festival. The first aspect that emerges is a hedonistic one, driven by curiosity and nostalgia, the appeal of a food remembered as special and enjoyable. However, when we look closer at the model offered by the event, we can observe that the festival actually performs a double function. First, it acts as a space of community aggregation: through the active involvement of local institutions and associations, the community comes together to organize and participate in the event. The organization of the three editions followed a common aggregative process initiated by Grup Voghera, which mobilized the public and private actors involved. This collaboration unfolded through a series of preparatory meetings where each stakeholder contributed a specific activity to the overall program. In particular, the gastronomic component exemplified this cooperative logic, relying on shared resources such as raw materials provided by local farmers and producers, labor supplied by vocational schools and restaurateurs, and facilities and spaces made available by the municipality and territorial associations. To this organizational process was then added the public moment of the festival, which directly engaged the local population and, in this way, transformed the event into a broader occasion of community participation and collective celebration. In so doing, the festival becomes an occasion to meet in the town square, counteracting the social fragmentation and isolation that characterize much of contemporary life. Second, the festival contributes to a process of territorialization through food. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari³⁸, territorialization here refers to the process by which something, such as a dish or ingredient, is situated and recognized as an expression of a specific territory. This process contributes to the symbolic and social construction of space, turning it into a meaningful place. In this case, food lies at the heart of the process: the festival creates a deep link between food and territory, and simultaneously between food and community. The dish served during the event gives a gastronomic face to the region (the Oltrepò), making the terri-

³⁷ G. Alonzo, “Micro-festival: il rilancio territoriale a partire dalla cultura”, in *Il valore sociale della cultura*, edited by R. Paltrinieri, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2022, 105-116.

³⁸ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Athlone, 1987.

tory something that can be tasted and experienced. At the same time, the food becomes part of the community's shared experience and memory, turning into a building block of its identity narrative. This double movement, of social bonding and symbolic localization, reinforces the connection between community and place. It also supports the transmission and strengthening of local gastronomic knowledge and the broader understanding of agriculture and food production in the Oltrepò region.

Moreover, the Voghera festival represents a node within a broader assemblage of affective relationships that connect the local community to its rural environment, history, and future aspirations. The act of cooking and sharing dishes such as the *schita* or the *Oltrepizza* is a performative gesture, through which local identity is felt, narrated, and reimagined. These dishes become affective objects: carriers of memory, sense of territorial and social belonging that “stick,” in Sara Ahmed’s³⁹ terms, to bodies and spaces, triggering emotions, facilitating interaction, and creating atmospheres of recognition and care. Thus, the festival operates as a generator of “correspondences”⁴⁰, where people, ingredients, sounds, and places respond to one another in an evolving relational field. In effect, the affective atmosphere of the event, marked by joy, nostalgia, and community spirit, does not merely emerge spontaneously; it is produced through the immersive interaction of participants and their environment. This process both reflects and reshapes the dwelling practices of the community, reinforcing attachments to place while fostering collective imagination about the future⁴¹. At the same time, the festival mobilizes tangible and intangible resources, from traditional recipes to collective memory, to regenerate social ties, assert local distinctiveness, and build a sense of shared purpose in the face of marginalization. In a context like Voghera, where industrial decline and demographic stagnation have weakened the social fabric, the festival becomes a tangible response to an “apocalyptic atmosphere”⁴², offering a space for hopeful reconfiguration of what community can mean and become.

All these elements combined provide an answer to the question that opens the paragraph. Although it does not promote cultivated topics and develop through initiatives echoing mass-mediated formats, such as the one of the show cooking, the festival does much more than entertain: it creates culture and builds community. Thus, the “Festa del Ringraziamento” in Voghera, while not promoting the refined artistic expressions typically associated with “high culture,” nevertheless produces a process of collective awareness-building and social renewal. In doing so, it fulfils a role that mirrors the transformative potential often attributed to the arts within traditional humanistic thought; the very understanding that underpins the current classification of “cultural festivals”: the ability to provoke reflection, stimulate civic imagination, and contribute to the moral and aesthetic development of society. Though rooted in popular practices rather than elite intellectual production, the festival acts as a device of cultural agency, capable of re-signifying everyday life and reinvigorating local identity. In this sense, it demonstrates that cultural value does not reside exclusively in the domain of the cultivated, but can emerge from convivial, affect-laden contexts that foster social cohesion, memory, and future-oriented engagement.

³⁹ S. Ahmed, “Affective Economies”, *Social Text*, 22, 2 (2004): 117-139. DOI: 10.1215/01642472-22-79-117.

⁴⁰ T. Ingold, *Correspondences*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021.

⁴¹ T. Ingold, “Building, Dwelling, Living”, in *Shifting Contexts*, edited by M. Strathern, London-New York: Routledge, 1995, 57-80.

⁴² M.F. Fontefrancesco, *Rural Affective Economies. An Ethnographic Approach to Local Development in Rural Italy*, London: Palgrave, 2025.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the ethnographic lesson of the “Festa del Ringraziamento” is possible to return to the questions posed in the introduction. why are *sagre* so rarely recognised as cultural festivals? Is it because they centre on food rather than the arts, or because they arise from popular, informal traditions rather than institutional curation? And what would it take for a *sagra* to be fully acknowledged within the category of cultural festival? This article suggests the answer lies not in the nature of these events, but in the cultural framework through which we choose to interpret them.

The case of Voghera shows how a local *sagra*, rooted in religious ritual and agricultural tradition, can become a community device. Far from being merely a site of hedonism or nostalgia, the festival mobilised affect, activated community networks, and reterritorialized the urban centre through the symbolic and sensorial power of food. In doing so, it performed many of the same functions typically attributed to “high” culture: it provoked reflection, stimulated collective imagination, and contributed to the moral and symbolic regeneration of local life.

The analysis developed here demonstrates how cultural value can emerge from popular, affect-laden contexts just as much as from curated spaces. In effect, a festival like Voghera’s, though not promoting refined artistic production, nevertheless produces culture in the most profound anthropological sense: it binds people to place, shapes collective narratives, and opens up spaces of possibility.

While rich in ethnographic detail, this research remains based on a single case study. As such, it does not offer a comprehensive account of the diverse forms and trajectories of *sagre* across Italy. Some may be more commercialised, fragmented, or less socially generative. Context matters. Future research should explore this diversity through comparative and longitudinal approaches. Nevertheless, the Voghera case speaks directly to several key themes of this journal issue. In particular, it offers a concrete example of how cultural festivals foster community development and cohesion, not through spectacular programming or high cultural content, but through mobilizing local knowledge, intergenerational collaboration, and place-based food heritage. The festival became a device for inclusive participation, where residents, regardless of age, background, or profession, shared responsibilities and symbolic resources in reimagining their town’s identity. From this perspective, the “Festa del Ringraziamento” demonstrates how cultural festivals can operate as catalysts for social wellbeing, vehicles of intangible heritage transmission, and engines of inclusive development. It answers the call to envision festivals not just as celebratory moments, but as critical infrastructures of cultural life, where equity, sustainability, and local agency are enacted through everyday cultural practices.

Indeed, if we accept that culture lives not only in the concert hall but also around the communal table, then there is still much work to do, analytically and politically, before the feast is truly over.