

# Conditions to improve controls for certification of Sardinian PDO cheeses

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**SUMMARY** – The Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2081/92 of 14 July 1992 established the rules on the Protection of Designations of Origin (PDO) and Geographical Indication (PGI) for agricultural products and foodstuff whose quality is related to the production area. The protection of these products is determined not only by commercial needs, but also by social reasons such as retaining the rural population in less-favoured or remote areas improving the incomes of farmers. In the island of Sardinia, three PDO cheeses, Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Sardo and Fiore Sardo are produced from ewes' milk. The dairy factories range from industrial plants of medium size, for Pecorino Romano and Pecorino Sardo production, to small farms where Fiore Sardo cheese is manufactured by the shepherds. The evolution of the specification and the control of productions for these three designations had different history, even if they were produced in the same area and with milk obtained using similar breeding systems. In order to respect art. 10 of Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2081/92 and to reduce the costs of management, the cheese producers have decided to create in Sardinia a new certification structure named "Organismo di Controllo delle Produzioni Animali" (OCPA). The new structure for the certification of PDO cheeses was founded by the Consortium for the protection of Pecorino Romano cheese, by the Consortium for the protection of Pecorino Sardo cheese and by the Consortium for protection of Fiore Sardo cheese, in collaboration with "Istituto Zootecnico e Caseario per la Sardegna" (IZCS) and "Ente Regionale di Sviluppo e Assistenza Tecnica in Agricoltura" (ERSAT). In order to respect the principles of the Standard EN 45011, the OCPA management is completely separated from the certification activity and every action used to reach the certification is documented in written procedures. The first results of the certification activity carried out by the OCPA have been positive; the application of the certification rules contributed to the development of producers and farms working in Sardinia.

**Key words:** Certification, PDO, cheese.

**RESUME** – "Conditions d'amélioration des contrôles pour la certification des fromages sardes". Le Règlement (CEE) n° 2081/92 du Conseil du 14 juillet 1992 a établi les règles pour la protection des appellations d'origine (AOP – Appellation d'Origine Protégée) et des indications géographiques (IGP – Indication Géographique Protégée) des produits agricoles dont la qualité est en rapport avec le terroir où ils sont produits. La protection de ces produits est établie non seulement pour des buts commerciaux, mais aussi pour des raisons sociales, telles que la fixation de la population rurale dans les zones défavorisées ou éloignées. En Sardaigne il y a trois fromages AOP produits avec du lait de brebis : le Pecorino Romano, le Pecorino Sardo et le Fiore Sardo. La production de Pecorino Romano et de Pecorino Sardo est faite dans des fromageries de dimension moyenne, alors que le Fiore Sardo vient d'une production fermière, où le berger transforme le lait lui-même. Les cahiers des charges et les contrôles sur ces dénominations ont eu une évolution différente, malgré que les fromages soient produits dans la même région et que les systèmes d'élevage pour la production du lait soient comparables. Pour réduire les frais de gestion du système de contrôle prévu par le Règlement (CEE) n° 2081/92 les producteurs ont créé en Sardaigne une nouvelle structure pour le contrôle des produits AOP et IGP dénommée "Organismo di Controllo delle Produzioni Animali" (OCPA). Cette structure a été créée par les organisations de producteurs de Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Sardo et Fiore Sardo, en collaboration avec le "Istituto Zootecnico e Caseario per la Sardegna" (IZCS) et le "Ente Regionale di Sviluppo e Assistenza Tecnica in Agricoltura" (ERSAT). Conformément aux directives de la norme EN 45011, la direction de l'OCPA n'intervient pas sur l'activité de certification qui est établie selon des procédures écrites. Les premiers résultats de l'activité de certification sont positifs : l'application des règles pour la certification contribue au développement des producteurs et des usines laitières de Sardaigne.

**Mots-clés :** Certification, AOP, fromage.

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## Introduction

The relevant dairy tradition of Mediterranean countries, especially Italy and France, has always been object of imitation, regarding the type of product and its designation.

In order to protect the product and its origin, different European countries have created, during the last few years, an international protection system by means of the "Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2081/92 of 14 July 1992". This regulation allows the protection of agricultural products and foodstuff (excluding wine) whose quality depends on the production area.

International agreements have been established, since the fifties, for the cheese and they represented the basis for the following community regulations. In fact on June the first 1951 the Stresa Convention fixed the rules by means of which Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Norway, Holland, Sweden and Switzerland apply mutual protection to some of their cheeses.

The Stresa Convention called "appellation d'origine" the cheeses produced or seasoned in the traditional area using authentic and unvarying local method, while the name "denominations" was referred to cheeses submitted to the national regulations, for example the standards for chemical composition were decided.

With the Stresa Convention two Sardinian cheeses were registered: the "Pecorino Romano" was called "appellation d'origine" (list A) and the "Fiore Sardo" was included among the "denominations" (list B). In 1954 the Italian law No. 125 put the basis for the acknowledge of the designations of origin and the geographical indications for national cheeses and to entrust their protection to the voluntary producers' cooperative. The decree of 1955 "Acknowledgement of designation, as for the manufacturing techniques, chemical composition and production areas of cheeses", defined the characteristics of the designation of origin "Pecorino Romano" and the "typical designation" Fiore Sardo.

These two levels of protection were different: for the designations of origin the method and the area of production are defined, while the products with "typical designations" could be produced in all the national territory, with a specific method.

Given this definition, the Fiore Sardo cheese could be produced also out of Sardinia, but in 1972 the "Istituto Zootecnico e Caseario per la Sardegna" (IZCS) prevents this possibility, thanks to the acknowledgment of the designation of origin.

In 1980 the Pecorino Romano, a traditional Sardinian cheese, was registered as designation of origin, thanks to the producers' cooperative, the IZCS and the Regional Authority agricultural department.

In 1995 the Council Regulation (EEC) No. 2081/1992 entered into force and Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Sardo, Fiore Sardo were registered as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO).

In Italy, before the come in force of the Council Regulation No. 2081/92, the control of the cheese productions was delegated to the Consortia of producers. These organisms were representative of the cheese factories, but not of the others subjects, like farmers, involved in the production chain. Therefore, the problem was to entrust the controls to organisms that could guarantee the respect of the Council Regulation No. 2081/92, above all in the part that requires that the control, if it is not carried out directly from public organisms, must be entrusted to private bodies fulfilling the requirements as in standard EN 45011 of 26 June 1989.

In this paper we show the procedure followed for the three PDO cheeses manufactured in Sardinia envisaged in order to build a new system of controls respectful of the 2081 Council Regulation 2081/92 but at the same time taking into consideration the peculiarities of the Sardinian productive system.

## **Principles of the Council Regulation No. 2081/92**

The Regulation No. 2081/92 lays down rules on the protection of designations of origin and geographical indication of agricultural products and foodstuff (excluding wine products and spirit drinks, protected by another regulation). These are, as specified in the regulation, "agricultural products and foodstuffs for which a link between the products or food characteristics and the geographical origin exists".

With respect to the previous regulations, the protection of these products is determined not only by commercial needs, but also by social reasons. The producers' and consumers' protection from forgery promotes a fiduciary relation between producers and consumers themselves. At the same time, besides the legal acknowledgment and the promotion of quality production, the need to enhance the value of

productions strongly bound to the territory is expressed. This leads to favour the retaining of the rural population in less-favoured or remote areas improving the incomes of farmers.

The terms PDO and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) define the links with the territory by means of three elements:

- (i) The name historically referred to the geographical area.
- (ii) The characteristics depending on the territory.
- (iii) The total or partial processing of the product in the same territory.

So, there is a common definition for which both the terms are referred to "the name of a region, a specific place or, in exceptional cases, a country, used to describe an agricultural product or foodstuff originating in that region, specific place or country", while they are differentiated by two kinds of links with the territory.

This link is very strong for the PDO: this name is in fact used to describe a product whose "quality or characteristics are essentially or exclusively due to a particular geographical environment with its inherent natural and human factors and the production, processing and preparation of which take place in the defined geographical area".

The PGI is less specific because it is referred to a product "of which a specific quality, reputation or other characteristics can be attributable to the geographical origin, and the production, processing and/or preparation of which take place in the defined geographical area".

In order to define the characteristics of products under protection, the article 4 of the regulation states that the PDO and PGI products must comply with a specification. The specification must describe both the characteristics defining unambiguously a product and the indications about the production area, the raw materials, the production methods, the elements which prove the link with the territory and "the mark".

The existence of a specification and the need to verifying whether or not it is (complied) request the inspection of the productions, in order to give permission in using the designation.

Concerning this subject, the article 10 of the Regulation No. 2081 declares that the EEC Member States have to designate and authorise the inspection bodies and that "the inspection structure may comprise one or more designate inspection authorities and/or private bodies approved for that purpose by the Member State".

Absolutely innovative for Italy is that "private bodies must fulfil the requirements laid down in standard EN 45011 of June 1989".

While on the past the costs of some analytical measurements were charged to the public structure, the article 10 asserts that "the costs of inspections provided for under this regulation shall be borne by the producers using the protected name".

## **The inspection system of Sardinian PDO cheeses**

As the Regulation No. 2081/92 entered into force, it was necessary to have an inspection body also for the Sardinian PDO cheeses. The dairy factories range from industrial plants of medium size, for Pecorino Romano and Pecorino Sardo production, to small farms where Fiore Sardo cheese is manufactured by the shepherds. The evolution of the specification and the control of productions for the three designations have different stories, even if they were born in the same territory and are produced using raw materials obtained using similar breeding systems.

Pecorino Romano, the most important for quantity of production had, since the fifties, a very operative association of producers which has proposed and obtained amendments of the specification, as for the natural evolution of this cheese and the inspection of production. The dairy structures for Pecorino Romano are technologically in the vanguard and they guarantee high hygienic-sanitary levels, complying the manufacturing traditional method reported on the specification.

Pecorino Sardo cheese is produced in industrial plants of small or medium dimensions. Its specification, even if approved on 1992, describes the old technology of "Pecorino semicotto", cheese of craftsmen origin, largely produced in Sardinia.

Fiore Sardo cheese is still traditionally produced by the shepherd at the fold. The technology of Fiore Sardo has been passed from father to son, and this guarantees an absolute compliance with the Fiore Sardo specification, even if it was necessary to adapt the manufacturing plants to higher sanitary conditions.

In this particular situation all the producers had to decide whether to entrust an inspection body already operating in the certification field or to create a new one. The last decision was taken and all the producers agreed on setting up a new structure, closer to the socio-economic situation of Sardinia, in order to reduce the costs for the producers.

For these reasons the producers' associations "Consorzio per la tutela del formaggio Pecorino Romano", "Consorzio per la tutela del formaggio Pecorino Sardo" and "Consorzio per la tutela del formaggio Fiore Sardo", in collaboration with the public boards IZCS and "Ente Regionale di Sviluppo e Assistenza Tecnica in Agricoltura" (ERSAT), have founded the associate inspection body "Organismo di Controllo delle Produzioni Animali" (OCPA), now authorized for the controls of Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Sardo and Fiore Sardo cheeses.

The standard EN 45011 indicates the rules for the setting up and the management of the inspection bodies whose principles must be transparency, independence and professionalism. In order to respect these principles, in the activity of OCPA the management of the organism is completely separated from the process of certification of farms. In addition, every action used to reach the certification is documented in written procedures.

The certification is based on the independence of the certification committee (one for each designation) from the organizations that have founded the organism.

There are three committees (one for each PDO) and they comprise, in order to avoid the predominance of an interested party, a delegate for each group or category interested in the production of a particular PDO.

These categories are: (i) milk producers; (ii) private industries of manufacturing; (iii) cooperative of cheese producers; (iv) "Consorzio di tutela" for the PDO on which the committee is active; (v) consumer associations; (vi) a research institute working on dairy field.

In addition, only for Pecorino Romano cheese, there is a delegate for the producers of Latium.

The Committee components should have a provable experience and professionalism on dairy field and they avoid that the interest of a group prevails in that of another one.

The activity for control and certification takes into account the manufacturing techniques and the cheese composition expressed by the specification, in order to prepare the control plane for each PDO. This is an important document for the product control and it is used to obtain and maintain the certification. In fact, it describes, in an analytical form, the cheese properties (weigh, dimensions, physics, chemical and sensory characteristics), how to check, to report and to codify the results.

This document represents a guide to plan and to carry out the inspection activity that is developed by means of the examination of the farm documentation, of periodic visits at the manufacturing structures, and of analytical measures.

The requirements object of the certification activities are various and depend on the peculiar principles of the certification and on the obligations described on the specification.

The fundamental principles on that the certification is based are: (i) the delimitation of the geographical area; (ii) the traceability of raw materials and products; (iii) the elements that prove the link with the geographical environment; (iv) the peculiar properties of cheese (chemical-physical, microbiological, metric and sensorial); (v) the elements referred to the marking and the labelling; (vi) the systems for controls applied by the producers herself.

The kind of the elements object of certification shows that the conformity certification guarantees that a product is produced complying the specification.

In this way the certification represents a guarantee of quality for the consumer, but it leaves aside the hygienic-sanitary requirements, that have to be anyway assured before certification.

It is possible to draw a first analysis of the certification activity carried out by the OCPA in order not only to verify the number of farms that have obtained the certification but how the farms have accepted the new regulations. This analysis has been positive on the complex because the application of the conformity of certification helped the growing up of the smaller farms. In fact the first fears due to the obligation of the regulations have been gradually overcome. This process was not so difficult because these farms were already used to facing the market rules. Nevertheless all the certification system has the fault of overloading the producers with the costs of controls, and this fact can penalize the niche market and the farms working on less-favoured areas.

The control system existing before the come in force of the Council Regulation No. 2081/92, where the inspections were made directly by the consortia of producers, was able to guarantee an elevated qualitative standard for the protected products. However the new rules and the new control system could ensure further advantages.

Noteworthy, with respect to the past years where each subject (farmers, cheesemakers, traders and so on) acted for their own, today the controls are carried out by an organism by which, following the French model of the "interprofessionel", everybody is involved and contributes to the process of guarantee.

Finally, the interaction between public authority, responsible of the correct application of the Council Regulation No. 2081/92, and the private body that actually makes the controls and guarantees that the PDO products meet the required specifications, has given a further innovation of the Italian system.