Sardinian Shepherds Spill Milk to Make Their Point

Judith Harris (February 20, 2019)



Sardinia, population 1.6 million, and host to 12,000 sheep farms and nearly three million sheep, is famed for its pecorino cheese. But the shepherds' income from sheeps' milk has fallen so low that by way of protest farmers have dumped thousands of gallons of precious milk into the street. In the background: regional elections Feb. 23.

ROME -- Ever consider writing a letter to philanthropist Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft? Two years ago Sardinian shepherd Fortunato Ladu, from the town of Desulo near Nuoro, did just that. "Dear Bill," he began, "This island of 24,000 square kilometers is home to 3 million sheep, 700,000 goats and 200,000 cows. Would you be willing to sponsor our battle to help keep this millenary economic system surviving?"

While I do not know if Mr. Gates was able to respond, today the island's shepherds are still fighting

for survival. In Sardinia, sheep's milk is used to produce a number of cheeses, beginning with the prized Pecorino Sardo DOP. At present Sardinia hosts 12,000 sheep farms and 2.7 million sheep. In the words of the on-line Sardinian network Terraévita (The Land is Life), "This economic situation, unless it is handled quickly, risks degenerating, with unforeseeable social risks and turbulence." The turbulence is already visible, the result of the shepherds' loss of income. This month the price the shepherds received fell to E62 cents per liter, even as production costs rose to over E70 cents per liter.

After protests from Sardinian farming associations, the Government, represented by Agricultural Policies Minister Gian Marco Centinaio, offered to pay the farmers E72 cents a liter. This means that the shepherds would earn almost nothing at all, for their twelve hour day and 7-day work week. This offer was the spark that triggered even more protests, and more precious spilt milk. It is easy to understand why. For a shepherd, the day begins at dawn, when sheep must be fed and watered, then set out to graze and later be milked by machines that require careful cleaning.

In fairness, a problem pointed out by Gavino Ledda, 80-year-old retired shepherd from Sardinia, is that the government has been subsidizing the farmers with EU funds providing E20 for every sheep in the flock. Implicitly, this EU subsidy "encouraged the shepherds to accumulate the animals" that require so much care, he said.

"For the past three months we have been explaining that, with payments like that, we'd have to shut down the sheepfolds," said Luca Saba, director of the Coldiretti Sardegna farmers association. Because the government's offer would barely cover costs, Sardinian shepherds protested by dumping whole rivers of their sheep's milk right into the street. A few rejected this and instead made donations of their milk, but the photos and videos of the milk being thrown away shocked the whole country.

The shepherds' anger has turned the sheepfolds into "dynamite," in the words of Coldiretti president Battista Cualbu Feb. 11. "Tensions are running high, and it's out of control, as what's happening demonstrates. We are convinced that with mediation it can be resolved, but it's up to the industrialists to take action" -- industrialists the shepherds blame for keeping milk prices low.

At the moment, that mediation is due to begin. At Tramatza 1,000 shepherds assembled to approve a position paper to be presented to Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte on Feb. 21, just three days before regional elections are to take place in Sardinia. Although Coldiretti says that the correct price would be at least E90 cents per liter, at present the shepherds' associations plan to ask that the price be boosted immediately to E80 cents a liter and, later, to E1 plus the VAT tax.

And if Sardinia is today's most dramatic instance, the same is reflected elsewhere in Italian agriculture. In May 2018 Italy's official statistics-gathering agency ISTAT reported that throughout the nation income from agriculture fell in just a year by over 8%, while the gross value added within the sector was down by 5.4% (2016 over 2015). in just one year farming production was down by over 3% in both Sicily as well as Sardinia.

It remains a knotty problem: can local agriculture -- that is, small farms -- help a world of robots and declining industrial production to survive? An encouraging factor is that Italian exports of foodstuffs, including cheeses, continue to grow. But, oddly enough, pecorino is an exception: during the first 11

months of 2018 its exports fell by over 30%, more than any other cheese (for full cheese export statistics see >> [2])

Source URL: http://ftp.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/sardinian-shepherds-spill-milk-make-their-point

Links
[1] http://ftp.iitaly.org/files/lattebuttatojpg
[2] https://www.clal.it/en/?section=export_formaggi_italia