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## Promoting rural development through gastronomic Heritage: the case of the Cerda Artichoke in northwestern Sicily

Giusi Giamporcaro<sup>a,\*</sup>, Filippo Sgroi<sup>b</sup>, Amparo Baviera-Puig<sup>c</sup>, Federico Modica<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Sciences, University of Palermo, Palermo, 90128, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Department of Economics, Business, and Statistics, University of Palermo, Palermo, 90128, Italy

<sup>c</sup> Department of Economics and Social Sciences, Universitat Politècnica de València, 46022, València, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, gastronomic tourism has emerged as a powerful driver of territorial enhancement, intertwining food, culture, and local development. This study explores the case of the Cerda Artichoke, an emblematic agri-food product of northwestern Sicily, by analyzing its symbolic value, economic role, and promotional strategies through qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with producers, restaurateurs, and institutional representatives. The results highlight that the artichoke, although lacking formal certification, represents a strong element of community cohesion and territorial identity, reinforced by events such as the Artichoke Festival and traditional culinary practices. Nevertheless, structural challenges emerge, including a lack of supply chain organization, the absence of young farmers, and the need for integrated valorization strategies. The study proposes the construction of a relational short food supply chain and the activation of certification and territorial marketing pathways, with the aim of combining biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and social innovation. Thus, the Cerda Artichoke is positioned not only as an agricultural product but as a living cultural heritage, contributing to place identity and enabling experiential rural tourism. This valorization fosters local development and enhances the social and economic resilience of rural communities.

### 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, gastronomic tourism has emerged as one of the most significant and identity-based ways of enjoying rural and urban territories, integrating the food experience with elements of culture, landscape, sustainability and collective memory (Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2024). It is a form of tourism that responds to a growing demand for authenticity, participation and sensory regeneration, capable of combining the needs of tourism demand with those of local development (Sormaz et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2022).

In this context, food becomes a symbolic “cultural object” and a vector of territorial identity. Products tied to traditional agricultural practices reflect not just taste, but also biodiversity, community memory, and landscape heritage (Sorcaru, 2019; Paunić et al., 2024). This view underlies the concept of *gastronomic identity*, which is the set of material and intangible representations associated with food that a community constructs over time (Kalenjuk et al., 2012; Suna and

Alvarez, 2021; Gündüz et al., 2024).

At the same time, the valorization of local products through certification systems, such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG), or collective marks, constitutes a powerful tool for strengthening the product-territory link, improving the competitiveness of supply chains, and encouraging sustainable tourism (Pamukçu et al., 2021; Sgroi and Modica, 2022). Products registered with geographical indications not only improve traceability and consumer confidence, but also contribute to the construction of destination image, acting as ambassadors of the territory (Gazuda et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2024).

The case of the Cerda Artichoke fits fully into this scenario. Although lacking formal certification, it enjoys a strong territorial reputation, fueled by identity-based agricultural practices, an established collective narrative and cultural events such as the Artichoke Festival. The product, cultivated in an area that has been able to maintain strong ties with its traditional agricultural landscape, today represents a virtuous example of local gastronomic heritage (Recuero-Virto et al., 2024). The

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [giusi.giamporcaro@unipa.it](mailto:giusi.giamporcaro@unipa.it) (G. Giamporcaro), [filippo.sgroi@unipa.it](mailto:filippo.sgroi@unipa.it) (F. Sgroi), [ambapui@upv.es](mailto:ambapui@upv.es) (A. Baviera-Puig), [federico.modica@unipa.it](mailto:federico.modica@unipa.it) (F. Modica).

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conjunction of agricultural production, traditional cuisine and tourism promotion is made even more effective by the active participation of local stakeholders and the strong experiential component that characterizes the interaction between visitors and the product (Esau and Senese, 2022). Culinary experiences shape tourist perceptions in educational, sensory, and emotional ways. As experiential tourism literature shows, eating local food becomes an act of “consumption of place” through narratives, symbols and rituals (Esau and Senese, 2022; Pérez et al., 2024). In this sense, the artichoke becomes a means of discovering Cerda, its people, and its landscape.

From a rural development perspective, the promotion of local products such as the Cerda Artichoke can contribute to the creation of virtuous and resilient economic circuits, capable of counteracting phenomena such as depopulation, marginalization, and the erosion of traditional knowledge (Kant and Choudhary, 2025). Gastronomic tourism, if well-planned and integrated with other territorial resources, represents a form of relational economy that connects producers, restaurateurs, institutions, and tourists in a perspective of value co-creation (Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Ali et al., 2024).

Furthermore, growing consumer attention to issues of sustainability, health and food origin suggests the need to build narratives capable of connecting the product to its production context, highlighting its economic, agronomic, historical and symbolic features (Pamukçu et al., 2021; Modica et al., 2023, 2025 Paunić et al., 2024). In an era of food globalization, promoting an identity vegetable such as the Cerda artichoke also means affirming an ethical, slow and conscious alternative.

In light of these theoretical considerations, this paper aims to analyze the Cerda Artichoke as a symbolic territorial product, exploring its modes of valorization, perceptions by local actors, and potential for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism.

The study involves the qualitative analysis of a corpus of semi-structured interviews conducted with local producers, restaurateurs and institutional representatives of the Cerda area, with the aim of bringing out visions, strategies and critical issues related to the production, promotion and tourist positioning of the artichoke. This methodology aims to return a polyphonic narrative of the territory, based on the direct experience of the actors involved, and to capture the real dynamics that affect the product’s valorization path.

Therefore, the main research objective is to investigate how the Cerda Artichoke is perceived and promoted as a symbolic product by different local stakeholders, and how it contributes to constructing territorial identity and supporting sustainable rural development through gastronomic tourism.

In many rural areas, the lack of reliable and updated statistical data on key dimensions such as production, tourism, and demographic trends contributes to the growing marginalization of these territories in public debate and policy planning. In this context, the present study aims to fill this informational gap by offering a qualitative and context-sensitive analysis based on the direct voices of key stakeholders. This approach not only provides insight into the symbolic and economic value of the Cerda Artichoke but also highlights the broader dynamics of territorial development through the lens of food heritage.

## 2. The artichoke of Cerda between tradition, health and short supply chain

Cerda is a municipality in the province of Palermo, located in northwestern Sicily (Supplementary Material - Fig. 1), nestled in a hilly landscape that still preserves the distinctive features of traditional agriculture.

This area with a strong rural vocation is characterized by a productive structure based on small family farms specializing in the cultivation of cereals, vegetables and olive trees, however it is the production of artichokes that represents the local identity element, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a symbolic and cultural one.

Cerda covers an area of 43.83 km<sup>2</sup> at an altitude of 274 m above sea

level, and is classified as a sparsely populated rural area, with a population density of approximately 111 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

Demographically, Cerda shows a steady population decline over the last two decades (Table 1). According to recent demographic data, the population has decreased from approximately 5900 inhabitants in 2002 to just over 4900 in 2024 (ISTAT, 2024, Città Metropolitana di Palermo, 2023), reflecting both aging trends and youth outmigration. This demographic pattern is common in many rural areas of Sicily and highlights the importance of enhancing local agricultural and cultural resources to counter rural depopulation.

The local economy is supported by approximately 290 agricultural holdings (Istat, 2024; Regione Siciliana – Servizio Statistica ed Analisi Economica, n.d.) (Table 2), most of which are family-run and operate on small to medium-sized plots. The utilized agricultural area (UAA) amounts to around 2.494 ha, of which over 52 % are arable crops.

Artichoke cultivation represents a key production, especially in terms of territorial identity and added value. The majority of farms are managed solely by the farm holder (76.55 %), confirming the strong presence of family farming systems. Only a minimal share makes use of salaried labor.

From a tourism perspective, Cerda counts 18 active enterprises in the accommodation and food services sector (Città Metropolitana di Palermo, 2023). These actors form part of a short food supply chain that links agricultural production to cultural heritage and tourism services, enhancing the visibility of the Cerda Artichoke as a symbolic and multifunctional product capable of driving rural resilience and place-based development.

The Cerda Artichoke belongs to the species *Cynara cardunculus* L. var. *scolymus* (L.) Fiori and, more precisely, it represents a local ecotype of the “Spinoso di Palermo” population. This population has been historically valued for its earliness, hardiness, and the organoleptic quality of its flower heads.

The “Spinoso di Palermo” is characterized by marked genetic and morphological heterogeneity, resulting in variability in the shape of the flower head, the color of the bracts, and the productive yield (Portis et al., 2005; Pandino et al., 2012).

While this diversity has been a limitation to large-scale commercial dissemination, it has also become a key resource for in situ clonal selection aimed at identifying more uniform genotypes suitable for both marketing and processing (Pandino et al., 2012).

Harvesting, carried out in multiple stages from late November to April, ensures a long seasonality, offering a versatile product for both local markets and the restaurant industry. The wide window of availability, combined with the peculiar morphological and sensory characteristics, contributes to strengthening the territorial identity of the product and enhances its potential for valorization within integrated rural development strategies.

**Table 1**  
Key demographic and economic indicators of Cerda.

Indicator	Value
Surface area (km <sup>2</sup> )	43.83
Altitude (m a.s.l.)	274
Population (January 01, 2024)	4866
Population density (inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup> )	111.02
Urbanization level	Rural/sparsely populated
% young population (0–14 years)	12.70 %
% active population (15–65 years)	64.08 %
% elderly population (over 66 years)	23.22 %
% foreign residents	3.84 %
Average age (years)	46.57
Aging index (elderly per 100 youth)	182.85
Structural dependency ratio*	56.06
Active enterprises in food/accommodation sector	18

**Note:**\* Ratio between population aged 0–14 and 66+ and population aged 15–65, multiplied by 100.

**Source:** Statistical Office of the Metropolitan City of Palermo (2023)

**Table 2**  
Agricultural structure of the municipality of Cerda.

ITEM	VALUE	PERCENTAGE
<b>Total Agricultural Area (TAA)</b>	2.723 ha	
<b>Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA)</b>	2.494	
<b>UAA by type of Cultivation</b>	UAA (ha)	% of UAA
Arable crops	1.305	52.30
Cereals for grain production	514	20.61
Rotated forage crops	466	18.68
Other arable crops	104	4.17
Fallow land	95	3.81
<b>Vegetables</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>3.21</b>
Dry legumes and protein crops	41	1.64
Industrial crops	3	0.12
Outdoor flowers and ornamental plants	2	0,08
Root crops	1	0.04
Permanent crops (olive trees, vines, fresh and dried fruit, citrus)	514	20.61
Permanent meadows/pastures	735	29.47
Home gardens	2	0.08
<b>Total number of farms</b>	<b>290</b>	
<b>Farm distribution by UAA class</b>	Number of Farms	%
0–2 ha	128	44.14
2–10 ha	117	40.34
10–30 ha	29	10.00
30–50 ha	6	2.07
> 50 ha	10	3.45
<b>Farm distribution by type of labor</b>	Number of Farms	% of total farms <sup>a</sup>
Only farm holder	222	76.55 %
Farm holder + family members (spouse/relatives)	24	8.28 %
With hired external labor	44	15.17 %
<b>Prevalent economic size (farm revenue)</b>	<8.000 € and 8.000–25.000 €	
<b>Prevalent technical-economic orientation</b>	Arable crops, vegetables, olive cultivation	

<sup>a</sup> **Note:** Percentages refer to the total number of farms in the municipality (290).

**Source:** Our elaboration based on data from the 7th General Agricultural Census, Istat (survey 2020, data published in 2024).

Although it lacks official certification, the Cerda artichoke boasts a well-established regional reputation thanks to its deep connection with the territory and its quality perceived by consumers. This reflects what the literature identifies as traditional gastronomic products: food items deeply embedded in local culture and practices, capable of conveying shared values and symbolic meaning (Samaddar and Mondal, 2024).

This gastronomic heritage is at the center of enhancement strategies that have been able to build a rich ecosystem of events and narratives around the product, the centerpiece of which is the Artichoke Festival, held every year in April. The event attracts thousands of visitors by offering tastings, performances, workshops and experiential paths and storytelling about the product that connect agriculture, cuisine and local culture.

In line with recent studies on gastronomic tourism, such events contribute not only to preserving traditions and stimulating economic activity, but also to supporting community well-being and reinforcing the cultural identity of the territory (Samaddar and Mondal, 2024).

In this perspective, the artichoke becomes not only a tourist attraction, but also a vehicle for collective memory and social cohesion, contributing to the development of an authentic and sustainable rural tourism offer.

Gastronomic tourism can be interpreted as an experiential form of short food supply chain (SFSC), where the proximity between producers

and consumers is mediated by cultural, narrative, and sensory values, proving particularly effective in strengthening the socioeconomic resilience of rural areas.

To design effective enhancement strategies, it is essential to understand the structure and dynamics of the entire supply chain, identifying key actors, flows, and bottlenecks, as highlighted in value chain analyses applied to agri-food systems (Baviera-Puig et al., 2017).

The prospect of a quality certification and the activation of territorial networks among producers, institutions, and hospitality operators could be a further step toward the protection of the product and the economic and cultural regeneration of the Cerda area.

The enhancement of the Cerda Artichoke as an identity and functional product is now a strategic key to sustainable rural development, capable of combining biodiversity protection, innovation and community cohesion.

Alongside its cultural and tourism value, the artichoke is increasingly gaining scientific attention for its health-promoting properties.

Numerous studies have highlighted the richness of bioactive compounds not only in the edible part, but also in the leaves and stems, which are usually considered waste products. In particular, caffeic acid derivatives (such as cynarin), flavonoids (luteolin and apigenin), and inulin confer antioxidant, hepatoprotective, prebiotic, anti-inflammatory, cholesterol-lowering, and even potentially anti-cancer activities to the artichoke (Pandino et al., 2013; Gostin and Wai-sundara, 2019; Ferioli and D'Antuono, 2022).

The by-products of processing, such as bracts and stems, are now also reevaluated as functional ingredients in baked goods and dietary supplements, due to their content of fiber, polyphenols, and heat-resistant bioactive compounds (Colombo et al., 2024; Proetto et al., 2024). Interest in incorporating artichoke into the diet is also related to its ability to lower blood glucose levels, improve digestion, and support gut microbiota diversity (Alessandroni et al., 2024).

### 3. Materials and methods - research design

The survey took place in March 2025 by conducting semi-structured interviews with three groups of stakeholders who participate in Cerda Artichoke supply chain operations including agricultural producers and restaurateurs/tourism operators and representatives of local institutions.

The qualitative analysis method was chosen for its ability to thoroughly explore the complexity of the phenomenon, providing a detailed and contextualized view of the perceptions, experiences, and territorial dynamics related to the product under study. This approach has proven effective in the analysis of complex phenomena rooted in the territory, characterized by a strong narrative and identity component that cannot easily be measured quantitatively (Ofim et al., 2023).

Non-probabilistic purposive sampling was used to select participants who directly experienced and actively participated in product production and promotion and governance activities. The purposive selection method enabled researchers to pick participants who offered the most valuable information to the study while prioritizing data quality over statistical representation (Rachão et al., 2019).

However, this methodological choice may introduce some critical issues, including the subjective influence in the coding and interpretation of data by the researcher, as well as the risk of over-representing some views at the expense of others, generating subjective selection bias (Mourre et al., 2024).

Moreover, since these were face-to-face interviews, the presence of social desirability bias cannot be excluded, pushing participants to provide responses perceived as socially acceptable rather than authentic, in order to conform to shared norms or to protect their self-image (Larson, 2019).

To contain the impact of such distortion, particular care was taken during data collection to ensure participant anonymity, avoiding morally charged formulations, and conducting the interviews in a

climate of trust capable of promoting sincere responses. These measures are among the strategies suggested in the literature to reduce social desirability bias (Larson, 2019).

The interviews, although differentiated for each group, were constructed around three common macro-themes.

### 1. Identity and connection with the territory

This dimension draws on the literature regarding food as a cultural object and vehicle of territorial identity (Gündüz et al., 2024; Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Kalenjuk et al., 2012; Paunić et al., 2024; Sorcaru, 2019; Suna and Alvarez, 2021). It includes questions aimed at exploring the symbolic value of the Cerda Artichoke, its emotional resonance, and its role in local memory and community narratives.

### 2. Critical issues, techniques, and current practices

Grounded in the literature on sustainable agri-food production, certification systems, and product valorization (Gazuda et al., 2024; Pamukçu et al., 2021; Sgroi and Modica, 2022; Ali et al., 2024), this section focuses on current production practices, technical challenges, and promotional tools used to enhance the visibility and competitiveness of the artichoke.

### 3. Future prospects and connection with local communities to create value

Inspired by works on experiential tourism, rural development, and value co-creation (Esau and Senese, 2022; Kant and Choudhary, 2025; Pérez et al., 2024), this thematic block investigates possible development trajectories, strategic collaborations among stakeholders, and the role of the Cerda Artichoke in building resilient and participatory local economies.

While the interviews were adapted in tone and terminology to match the profile of each group (producers, restaurateurs, and institutional representatives), the questions consistently adhered to these three overarching thematic areas.

The operationalization of these three macro-themes varies slightly depending on the interviewee category (producers, restaurateurs, institutions), as detailed in Appendix A.

These macro-themes, derived from the conceptual framework, ensured that the interview design remained consistent with the study's theoretical premises, while capturing the perspectives of different actors involved in the production, promotion, and strategic positioning of the Cerda Artichoke.

In the case of producers, the interviews explored topics such as generational continuity, the agronomic techniques adopted, and discussed the challenges related to the production context such as the variability of weather conditions, the impact of the market, and labor. The role of events and certifications in product promotion was also analyzed.

Restaurateurs and tourism managers were interviewed regarding the use of the artichoke in culinary proposals and the gastronomic experiences offered to tourists. Collaborations with local producers and promotional strategies to be implemented were discussed.

Institutions and local entities expressed their opinions on the governance of the supply chain and on the development of territorial policies that have been implemented or are currently planned, as well as on the growth prospects related to the enhancement of the product.

In parallel, a small set of informal interviews was also conducted with local women recognized as custodians of traditional culinary knowledge. These interviews, framed as "cooking tales," aimed to capture the embodied practices and affective memories surrounding the preparation of the Cerda Artichoke, enriching the narrative dimension of the study.

The interviews were conducted in person, recorded with informed

consent, and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis. Content analysis was conducted using an inductive approach based on the principles of thematic reconstruction guided by the data to allow the spontaneous emergence of analytical categories and their categorization according to recurring themes.

The coding process was carried out manually through repeated readings and annotation of the transcripts, without the use of qualitative data analysis software. Thematic categories were built through an inductive and iterative coding process. After several rounds of transcript reading and annotation, recurring ideas and patterns were grouped into preliminary categories, which were then refined and structured into broader themes. To enhance credibility, the coding scheme was discussed and reviewed within the research team to ensure coherence and consistency in interpretation. After the 14th interview, the data began to show a recurring pattern of ideas, and no significant new concepts appeared in the final interviews. The selection of producers was guided by their direct involvement in the cultivation of the Cerda Artichoke, which represents their main crop. Given the small size of the territory (Cerda counts fewer than 5000 inhabitants) and the high proportion of actors interviewed (8 restaurateurs out of 18 active businesses, 6 producers, and 3 institutional representatives) the sample is not only diverse but also highly representative of the local stakeholder landscape. Therefore, the number of interviews was deemed sufficient to ensure the depth and completeness of the thematic exploration, in line with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the study.

Although the research design is qualitative and did not involve the triangulation of multiple data collection methods (e.g., observation, surveys), efforts were made to ensure the internal triangulation of perspectives by involving three distinct categories of stakeholders: agricultural producers, restaurateurs/tourism operators, and local institutions.

This diversity of viewpoints contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and allowed for cross-verification of recurring themes across different actor groups.

Most interviews were conducted through a single meeting, typically lasting between 45 and 60 min. The total number of contacts made was 22, of which 17 resulted in full interviews. The selection of participants was guided by specific inclusion criteria. For producers, the key requirement was that the Cerda Artichoke constituted their main crop. Restaurateurs were selected with the aim of covering the majority of the few local businesses involved in food and hospitality, approaching near saturation. Institutional representatives were included based on their direct involvement or availability within local governance structures. Given the small size of the community, the number and type of eligible actors were inherently limited.

These methodological choices supported a rich and context-sensitive exploration of the phenomenon. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder categories (producers, restaurateurs, and local institutions) enabled the triangulation of perspectives, enhancing the internal validity of the results. The semi-structured format allowed for a multifaceted understanding of the topic, with key concepts emerging directly from the voices of those involved, rather than being imposed by a predefined theoretical framework.

### 3.1. Participant profile

Before presenting the results, we provide a summary of the sample characteristics. The 17 interviewees were grouped into three main stakeholder categories: producers, restaurateurs, and institutional representatives.

Among producers, all confirmed that the artichoke represents their primary crop, both economically and symbolically. Its extended harvesting period, from November to April, ensures a central role in local agricultural calendars.

During the off-season, most farms either adopt summer vegetable rotations or leave the land fallow, reflecting typical agronomic practices

in the area.

Table 3 presents an overview of their socio-demographic and professional profiles.

Among producers, while artichoke cultivation remains the main activity, some participants also reported additional occupations, reflecting the diverse livelihood strategies adopted in rural contexts. These aspects are further discussed in the following sections.

## 4. Results and discussion

The analysis of the 17 semi-structured interviews revealed recurring themes involving the different categories of actors within the Cerda Artichoke supply chain. The results are organized around five main thematic axes: territorial identity, cultivation techniques and critical issues, networks and collaboration, promotion and festival, future prospects.

### 4.1. The artichoke as a territorial symbol

Among producers and institutional representatives, the perception of the artichoke as an identity element rooted in local history and culture is widespread. One producer explicitly stated, “*This artichoke is our trademark*”, underscoring its symbolic role beyond the agricultural sphere. Another interviewee recalled, “*My father and grandfather used to grow it ... it's a tradition*”. The artichoke represents not only an agricultural crop but also a symbol of generational continuity and social cohesion. This aspect appears less central among restaurateurs, who mainly focus on the gastronomic and commercial dimension.

### 4.2. Cultivation techniques and critical issues

Farmers show a deep awareness of the difficulties related to cultivation, particularly concerning climate, access to labor, and price volatility.

As one respondent pointed out, “*If it doesn't rain at certain times, the artichoke doesn't grow*”, confirming the dependency of production on climatic variability. Reflections also emerge on traditional cultivation techniques, which are partly maintained, and on the difficulty of innovating in the absence of support.

**Table 3**  
Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants by stakeholder category.

Stakeholder Type	ID Code	Gender	Age Range	Role/Profession	Years of Experience
Producers	P1	Male	56	Farmer	30
	P2	Male	48	Farmer/Self-employed	15
	P3	Male	52	Farmer by passion/employee	18
	P4	Male	55	Farmer by passion/employee	10
	P5	Male	60	Farmer	40
	P6	Male	40	Farmer	20
Restaurateurs	R1	Male	40	Restaurateur	15
	R2	Female	55	Restaurateur	30
	R3	Female	45	Restaurateur	20
	R4	Female	60	Restaurateur	25
	R5	Male	47	Restaurateur	10
	R6	Male	30	Restaurateur	5
	R7	Male	45	Restaurateur	10
	R8	Male	49	Restaurateur	16
Institutions	I1	Female	55	Teacher	20
	I2	Male	45	Administrator	10
	I3	Male	50	Administrator	15

Source: our elaboration based on interviews collected in Cerda in March 2025

### 4.3. Local networks and collaboration

The three groups agree on the need to strengthen cooperation networks, but with different perspectives. Producers called for stronger coordination and institutional support: one interviewee remarked, “*We need to unite to have a stronger voice*”, revealing a perceived lack of representation and fragmentation among local actors.

Restaurateurs, instead, emphasized the value of personal, long-term relationships with farmers: “*I have a direct relationship with some producers, I've known them for years*”, indicating a trust-based collaboration model. Institutional representatives, on their part, claim to already promote various forms of cooperation, especially through festivals and branding initiatives.

### 4.4. The artichoke Festival and promotion

The Artichoke Festival is perceived very positively by restaurateurs and institutions, who consider it a key tool for tourist attraction. One chef noted, “*The festival is an opportunity to showcase local dishes*”, confirming the role of the event in enhancing the gastronomic visibility of the product. However among producers there are also doubts about its real economic impact. As one farmer explained, “*Yes, the festival is important, but it's not enough to sell the product*”, suggesting that promotion efforts should not be limited to seasonal events.

Furthermore, the link between artichoke production and tourism emerged in some cases. One producer recalled, “*In recent years, some tour operators have asked me to bring foreign tourists to visit my artichoke fields during the Easter period*”, indicating a potential for experiential tourism as a form of product valorization.

Many restaurateurs emphasize the value of the artichoke in seasonal menus, appreciated by customers.

### 4.5. Visions and future prospects

According to all interviewed stakeholder groups, there is a shared recognition of the need to strengthen the positioning of the artichoke. Suggested strategies include quality certifications, training, youth engagement, and the development of experiential tourism. These views indicate a general awareness of the importance of structured valorization pathways.

This is consistent with previous studies on local agri-food systems, where certification and experience-based tourism have proven effective in reinforcing both visibility and territorial resilience (e.g., Baviera-Puig et al., 2017; Esau and Senese, 2022).

The following table (Table 4) summarizes the relationships between the three main categories of actors interviewed (producers, restaurateurs, and institutional representatives) and the recurring themes that emerged in the process of enhancing the Cerda Artichoke. Representative examples taken from the interviews are also reported, useful for understanding the different perspectives that emerged.

To provide a clearer overview of how the main themes were distributed across the interviews, we summarized the frequency of each recurring theme by stakeholder category.

As shown in Table 5, certain themes such as *Territorial identity and Networks and collaboration* emerged across all categories, although with different intensity. For instance, all producers and institutional representatives referred to *Territorial identity*, while only a minority of restaurateurs (2 out of 8) explicitly mentioned it. Conversely, *Festival and promotion* was consistently discussed by almost all participants, especially restaurateurs and institutional actors. The theme *Cultivation techniques and critical issues* was exclusive to producers, highlighting their direct engagement with the challenges of production.

The results emerging from the interviews confirm the central role of the Cerda Artichoke as a symbolic and identity-linked product, in line with what has been stated in the literature on the concept of “gastronomic identity” (Kalenjuk et al., 2012; Suna and Alvarez, 2021; Paunici

**Table 4**  
Thematic summary with representative quotes.

Actors	Recurring Themes	Representative Quotes
Producers	Territorial identity, Cultivation techniques and critical issues, Networks and collaboration, Festival and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “This artichoke is our trademark”</li> <li>• My father and grandfather used to grow it ... it's a tradition”</li> <li>• “If it doesn't rain at certain times, the artichoke doesn't grow”</li> <li>• “We need to unite to have a stronger voice”</li> <li>• “In recent years, some tour operators have asked me to bring foreign tourists to visit my artichoke fields during the Easter period”</li> <li>• “Yes, the festival is important, but it's not enough to sell the product”</li> </ul>
Restaurateurs	Networks and collaboration, Festival and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I have a direct relationship with some producers, I've known them for years”</li> <li>• “The festival is an opportunity to showcase local dishes”</li> <li>• “We often work with local producers.”</li> </ul>
Institutions	Territorial identity, Networks and collaboration, Festival and promotion, Future prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It is a strategic product to promote Cerda”</li> <li>• “We want to create a quality label and a stronger network.”</li> <li>• “We are working on launching a territorial brand linked to quality.”</li> </ul>

**Source:** our elaboration based on interviews collected in Cerda in March 2025

**Table 5**  
Theme Distribution by stakeholder category.

Theme	Producers (n = 6)	Restaurateurs (n = 8)	Institutions (n = 3)
Territorial identity	6/6	2/8	3/3
Cultivation techniques and critical issues	6/6	-	-
Networks and collaboration	5/6	7/8	3/3
Festival and promotion	4/6	8/8	3/3
Future prospects	3/6	2/8	3/3

**Source:** our elaboration based on interviews collected in Cerda in March 2025

et al., 2024).

For producers and local institutions, the artichoke symbolizes a distinctive element of the material and immaterial culture of the territory, capable of evoking a sense of community belonging, generational continuity, and connection with the traditional agricultural landscape.

However, this dimension appears less emphasized in the discourse of restaurateurs, who focus more on the gastronomic and promotional aspect, confirming a functional differentiation in the meanings attributed to the product.

The critical issues raised by producers regarding the challenges related to climate change, the lack of labor, and the shortage of stable organizational structures highlight the fragility of the local agricultural supply chain and the need for more effective support measures. Similar dynamics have been observed in other agri-food value chains, where low integration and weak coordination mechanisms have limited both competitiveness and sustainability (Baviera-Puig et al., 2017).

Another important aspect that emerged from the interviews is that many producers combine farming with off-farm occupations (Table 3). Artichoke cultivation it is often not sufficient to ensure a stable

livelihood. Rather than suggesting marginal involvement in agriculture, this condition reflects the broader rural reality of economic fragility and the gradual erosion of farming viability. In most cases, producers inherited their land and continue cultivating it not solely for economic gain, but to maintain a connection with family heritage and local tradition.

Maintaining agricultural activity despite these structural difficulties, and combining it with off-farm employment, can be interpreted as a form of rural resistance, expressing both resilience and attachment to the land in the face of systemic vulnerability. As shown by Chmieliński et al. (2023), small farms are often structurally dependent on diversified income sources, and such diversification is more frequently driven by necessity than by entrepreneurial intent. Similarly, Bubela (2016) describes how off-farm income has become a critical risk management strategy for many households, particularly for those with fewer resources. In line with these findings, El Benni and Schmid (2022) highlight that in less productive areas, off-farm employment has become an indispensable element of farm household strategies.

This socio-economic precariousness also contributes to the lack of generational turnover in agriculture, as younger people tend to migrate in search of more stable and rewarding opportunities.

In this sense, the scarcity of young people involved in production recalls broader debates on emigration, rural depopulation, and the loss of traditional knowledge, phenomena widely documented in studies on territorial development (Kant and Choudhary, 2025). Encouraging the creation of generational replacement programmes, producer associations or specific economic incentives could contribute to solving these problems.

The Artichoke Festival presents itself as a narrative and promotional opportunity strongly appreciated and shared, especially by restaurateurs and institutions, serving as a cultural and tourist showcase. However, the collected data clearly show that its impact should be strengthened through a broader integrated territorial marketing strategy. The promotion of the product cannot be limited to the annual event but requires continuous and coordinated actions involving and networking actors from production, catering, and hospitality sectors.

Within this framework, the concept of short food supply chain (SFSC) represents a strategic opportunity for the territory. The interviews reveal a widespread desire for greater coordination among local actors, which can be interpreted as the need to structure a relational short supply chain, based not only on geographical proximity but also on social and narrative proximity. Gastronomic tourism, in particular, plays a fundamental role in uniting production, consumption, and storytelling of the territory, with positive effects on economic and cultural resilience (SgROI and Modica, 2024; Esau and Senese, 2022).

Local institutions declare themselves willing to support valorization pathways through quality certifications, training, and tourism development projects. However, for these initiatives to be effective, it is necessary to activate participatory processes that stably involve producers and recognize their experience as a key resource.

#### 4.6. The memory of taste: culinary declinations of the Cerda artichoke

Alongside the local festivity of the Artichoke Festival, the rich local gastronomic tradition contributes to consolidating the cultural and identity value of the Cerda Artichoke. Every year, local restaurateurs offer a wide selection of dishes that enhance the freshness and versatility of this exquisite product. Among the best-known specialties are grilled artichokes (typically seasoned with fresh garlic and parsley on a bed of breadcrumbs), artichoke fritters, stuffed artichokes in Tomato sauce “alla Cerdese” (Supplementary Material - Fig. 2), and risotto with fresh artichokes, which delight the palates of visitors.

The tradition is also enriched by sweet-and-sour artichokes (Supplementary Material - Fig. 3) and artichokes preserved in oil, a testament to the ability of peasant cuisine to preserve seasonal products with taste and simplicity (Supplementary Material - Fig. 4). In

restaurants, particular attention is paid to the seasonality of products, with menus changing from November to April to maximize freshness and flavor.

These dishes do not only represent a local culinary tradition but are also gastronomic stories that enrich the tourist experience, transforming the taste of the artichoke into an engaging sensorial and cultural ritual.

The artichoke also becomes a tool for enhancing the entire supply chain through a dialogue among producers, chefs, and tourists, contributing to the creation of an offer based on the principles of sustainability and authenticity.

In parallel with the interviews conducted with producers, restaurateurs, and institutional representatives, it was also decided to explore the cultural and emotional dimension of the local gastronomic tradition through the listening of some women who are custodians of traditional knowledge (Table 6).

The objective was to bring out the “memory of taste” through authentic stories of recipes and practices that would highlight the cultural significance of the artichoke in local material heritage.

The interviews clearly highlight the generational continuity of knowledge related to the artichoke, its symbolic value as an emblem of local identity, and the transition from peasant cooking to more modern forms, while still respecting tradition. The shared recipes testify to the importance of family memory and doing things together, highlighting the artichoke as an element of cultural and community cohesion.

These testimonies complement the study by offering a more intimate and emotionally charged understanding of the artichoke’s cultural significance. Through their stories, a deeply rooted knowledge emerges, linked not only to cooking techniques, but also to intergenerational transmission, everyday memory, and the identity of place. By including these voices, the study embraces a more inclusive and human-centered approach to territorial valorization, reinforcing the narrative-driven framework adopted. This integration contributes to current debates on food heritage, cultural gastronomy, and experiential tourism.

Taken together, these insights underline the originality of this study, which brings together the cultural value of gastronomic heritage, the dynamics of rural development, and the emerging role of tourism within a single local context. This integrated perspective not only deepens the

understanding of the Cerda Artichoke’s symbolic and practical roles, but also frames it as a strategic lever for territorial resilience, sustainability, and innovation.

## 5. Conclusions

The conducted survey highlighted how the Cerda Artichoke represents an element of strong symbolic, agricultural, and cultural value for the territory, while also revealing a series of structural issues that limit its full potential. Its role as an identity-linked product is clearly recognized by producers and institutions. Restaurateurs, instead, tend to focus more on the commercial and gastronomic dimension, with an eye towards experiential tourism.

The study highlighted the need for greater coordination among actors in the supply chain, a demand that can be addressed through the construction of a relational short supply chain, based not only on physical proximity but also on social capital, cooperation, and product storytelling. In this perspective, gastronomic tourism emerges as a privileged channel for product valorization, as it is capable of intertwining culture, economy, and sustainability.

From an economic perspective, a virtuous cycle has developed the Cerda Artichoke. It involves all stakeholders in the area and generating sustainable value creation for both producers and restaurateurs. This virtuous process not only strengthens the local economy but also contributes to preserving agricultural traditions, artisanal know-how, and the region’s biodiversity.

The health advantages of artichoke (*Cynara scolymus* L.) make it an attractive choice for functional food applications. The polyphenols cynarin, chlorogenic acid and luteolin in artichoke provide antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and lipid-lowering effects. These help prevent chronic diseases, including cardiovascular, metabolic and neurodegenerative disorders (Porro et al., 2024; Ayuso et al., 2024). The high inulin content of artichoke benefits gut health (Ayuso et al., 2024) which supports its position in Mediterranean diet and health-oriented food tourism routes.

In a broader context of integrated territorial development, the Cerda artichoke stands out as an identity symbol capable of fostering synergies among agriculture, tourism, food and wine, and culture. For this reason, it is essential to adopt innovative strategies—such as experiential marketing—not merely to promote the product, but to engage consumers in an authentic, multi-sensory experience.

Through guided tours, tastings, cultural events, and storytelling about the land and its people, the intangible value behind each artichoke can be revealed. These include the farmers’ hard work, the ancestral knowledge, the uniqueness of the local climate and soil. These practices help turn a simple act of consumption into an act of awareness, strengthening the bond between product and territory.

In particular, the Cerda artichoke is not just an agricultural resource, but a powerful tool for economic, social, and cultural enhancement. Investing in this product means embracing a sustainable development model that generates widespread and long-lasting benefits for the entire local community, while also boosting tourism and territorial cohesion.

However, some systemic weaknesses emerge, in particular the absence of consolidated organizational structures, the scarcity of young people involved in production, and the difficulty in activating collective certification and promotion pathways. To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt integrated development strategies that actively involve the various actors in the supply chain in a process of territorial planning.

In this perspective, the Cerda Artichoke should not simply be “valorized” as an agricultural product but recognized as a cultural and social asset, capable of generating connections, a sense of belonging, and new forms of local economy. Its promotion as a functional and identity-linked food product, integrated into circuits of responsible tourism, today represents a strategic lever for combining innovation, sustainability, and community cohesion.

**Table 6**

Cooking tales: The voice of the women of Cerda.

Question	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 1
<b>How did you learn to cook these recipes?</b>	<i>I learned from an early age, within the family. Cooking was linked to seasonality and self-production. Artichokes were a poor but very nutritious food.</i>	<i>My mother taught me the recipes, and she in turn had learned them from her mother. I grew up with these preparations.</i>
<b>What does the Cerda artichoke represent for you?</b>	<i>It is a family and territorial symbol. My grandfather, my father, and today my son cultivate them. In the past, they supported the household economy; today it is more difficult.</i>	<i>For me, it is a symbolic food, tied to tradition and the seasons. When the artichoke arrives, it feels like a celebration.</i>
<b>How has artichoke cooking changed over the years?</b>	<i>In the past, only “peasant” dishes were made. Today there are more modern variations, like cream or rolls. The artichoke was central in the diet, now it is an added value.</i>	<i>In the past, cooking was done with few ingredients and in a simple way. Today, more elaborate dishes are prepared, even in restaurants. However, the tradition remains.</i>
<b>Shared recipe</b>	<i>“Carciofi intuppati”: cleaned and stuffed with breadcrumbs, garlic, parsley, and cheese. Breaded with egg and fried upside down, then cooked in tomato sauce.</i>	<i>“Carciofi a viddanedda”: with onion, parsley, breadcrumbs, pecorino cheese, cooked in water. A simple, traditional, everyday dish.</i>

Source: our elaboration based on interviews collected in Cerda in March 2025

## 6. Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study provides an in-depth understanding of the Cerda Artichoke's role in local development, some limitations should be acknowledged. The highly localized nature of the case study may limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

Nevertheless, although Cerda represents a unique territorial context, the results may still offer valuable insights for other rural areas where food heritage plays a central role in identity and development.

Another limitation concerns the absence of official statistical data on rural and tourism development at the municipal level. This prevented the integration of quantitative indicators into the analysis. Future research could address this gap by promoting collaborations with local institutions to collect and systematize relevant data, or by adopting a mixed-method approach to explore the socio-economic impacts of local agri-food valorization.

More broadly, the lack of reliable statistical data remains a critical issue in many rural areas, often contributing to their invisibility in institutional planning and public policy agendas. In this regard, the present study offers not only an interpretative contribution but also an informational one, helping to shed light on local dynamics that are frequently overlooked. Qualitative, field-based research can thus play a key role in supporting the recognition of marginal territories and in laying the groundwork for more inclusive and evidence-informed development strategies.

Finally, while the number of interviews might appear limited in absolute terms, it reflects the actual scale of the territory and stakeholder base. The sample includes a high proportion of the actors directly involved in the production, promotion, and governance of the Cerda Artichoke and is therefore considered highly representative of the local context.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Giusi Giamporcaro:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization, Data curation. **Filippo Sgroi:** Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Data curation, Writing – review & editing. **Amparo Baviera-Puig:** Visualization, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Federico Modica:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Data curation, Visualization.

### Implications for gastronomy and food science

This study provides important implications for the gastronomy sector with special relevance to those who work with local identity-linked functional food products. The Cerda Artichoke proves how traditional vegetables can become powerful drivers of culinary innovation, community engagement, and sustainable tourism.

The culinary richness and seasonality of the Cerda Artichoke proves its potential to become a vital component of gastronomic events. Local restaurants and chefs can create immersive tasting menus that reflect seasonal availability and traditional preparations, transforming the act of eating into a multisensory, narrative-driven experience. These culinary storytelling practices can be leveraged to strengthen the emotional and cultural connection between consumers and the territory.

The artichoke's functional characteristics such as antioxidant effects prebiotic properties and cholesterol reduction can be used to develop gastronomic products that focus on health benefits. The rising interest in wellness and preventive nutrition among consumers allows chefs and food service providers to emphasize artichoke dishes' health advantages thus attracting health-conscious tourists and customers.

Short food supply chains (SFSCs) create opportunities for direct business relationships between producers and restaurateurs through their relational characteristics. Restaurants function as local identity carriers through direct farm-to-table purchasing which allows them to

offer farm visit and cooking demonstration packages for rural tourism itineraries. Both sectors benefit from this approach through increased value creation and enhanced product visibility that builds trust.

The research indicates that gastronomic valorization should maintain its presence throughout the entire year through strategic planning instead of focusing solely on flagship events like festivals. Culinary professionals have an active role to play in territorial marketing, co-creating value with institutions and local actors to promote products as expressions of place, memory, and biodiversity.

The gastronomy sector can create sustainable development models through authenticity and innovation while fostering community cohesion by recognizing the Cerda Artichoke as both ingredient and cultural icon.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2025.101246>.

### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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