

AGRO-FOOD TOURISM IN APPLE-GROWING AREAS IN SOUTH BRAZIL

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Brazil emerges as the second largest area of apples cultivation in the Americas and occupies the ninth world position in production volume. The temperate climate fruit farming is spread across 11 Brazilian states, and the three southern states - Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul - account for over 70% of domestic production. In these areas, in terms of public and private investments applied in recent years, tourism has increased. Nevertheless, apples producers have not used the current economic situation of the country for the organization of products and services tourism, such properties have not considered using the fruit for activities that can diversify the income in the small family unit and add value to the production.

In this context, the aim of this study is to present and discuss the current situation of tourism in areas of growing apples in Southern Brazil, the leading national producer of the fruit. To do so, the research aims to assess the current experiences of regional tourism and point out the possibilities for designing an agro-food tourism proposal based on highlighting tourism products and services in apple culture. In this investigation, it is considered agrotourism the kind of tourism that emphasizes Located Agro-food Systems (LAS), in other words, production and service organization networks associated with a particular territory because of its features and its functioning.

The organization assumptions of the Localized Agro-food Systems and the conception of pluriactivity as income diversification strategy on small family farms are used to analyze the current joint and future prospects of regional agro-food tourism. The pluriactivity as a feature of this rural organization refers to situations in which individuals from rural household families devote to activities not necessarily related to agriculture, such as tourism. Tourism is presented as a potential to be implemented in small apple growing farms and contribute to the local territorial development policies. The concept of territorial development used here is one that involves the ability of every territory of taking advantage of their strengths and external opportunities.

For this plan to succeed, the linkage between agricultural and industrial economy must be contemplated in order to include them in business and visitation programs. In this context, tourism is a way of adding another type of value to the activities so far articulated only in terms of food production, a rating that aims to create jobs and income by receiving people interested in getting to know and enjoying the place, a certain product and the community involved in its production.

Tourism articulated to the agro-food systems can also positively resize the income of the producers who are on the banks of the value main chain in certain areas, either due to the loss of productive competitiveness of farms or by shrinkage of industrial capacity of food processing capacity. This competitive advantage has proven itself very important in dealing with agrarian spaces in impoverished regions, where the replacement of one crop by another is not affordable or is not in agreement with the producer's expected profitability. In these territories, tourism has positioned itself as a cultural heritage revitalization activity and contributed to its conservation through strategies for the rational use of this resource by local people.

However, it is required the identification of locational agglomerations, so that they can meet their potential for the territory to be used as resource development. On the potentiality of prospective locational for apple agro-tourism, it must be emphasized that apple trees are grown in only 71 of the 1188 municipalities in southern Brazil, approximately 6% of them. These municipalities are those with the right conditions for the establishment of the orchards because of the restrictive variables related to the requirements for the cultivation of the plant. The geographic restrictions are due to the temperatures, typical of temperate climates high regions, to the slope and to the soil quality, factors that, once combined, promote or inhibit the expansion of the plantation areas. It is important to remember that the originally subtropical or subpolar apple tree is a species that demands some considerable chilling hours for its development. In producing municipalities, the apple agro-food system is composed of farms, agribusinesses and cooperatives that select process and market the fruit and products derived from it. State-owned research and extension companies are associated to them, and help producers by means of cultivars research and improvement.

Parallel to these segments is the local government that operates the system by means of the municipal agriculture and tourism. The link between the apple and the local population identity is a favorable factor when developing a tourism plan for the territory that gives prominence to a food that incorporates the institutional fabric of different productive sectors. For this plan to succeed, the linkage between agricultural and industrial economy should be contemplated in order to include them in business and visitation programs. It is worth noting that the regional rural space in evidence in this research, southern Brazil mountain areas, has already tried to assemble agriculture practiced on small farms with other non-agricultural, but tourism-related activities.

This process started in the 1990s and has been successful with the touristic wine routes. Now it intends to expand the business for the properties of apple cultivation. With historical trajectory of resistance to innovation and to income diversification strategies, Southerners apple growers are now placed before the price fluctuations of the fruit in the market, hence, they are less resistant to invest in tourism activities that can add to the family income. In this region, however, the producers' decision on interweaving the

apple growing with ancillary activities such as tourism depends on the income that the activity can offer. Due to the fact that tourism related businesses are not the producers' main ability, including a routine of touristic activities on the farm is often evaluated with suspicion. Producers distrust is associated, on the one hand, to capital investment in a business in which the risk variables are not clear, and on the other hand, to the implications of tourism activities to the maintenance of the working routine in agriculture, so far the main occupation of the property.

Thus, maintaining the agriculture as main activity depends on subjective, however legitimate decisions, taken by producers to maintain or to reduce the hours devoted to working in the field. It is important to stick to this issue because, to the producers, agricultural activity is not only a livelihood, but also the symbol of their rural identity. Another issue to be contemplated when planning the tourism in the Brazilian rural southern relates to the fact that experiments of this type are allocated mainly in smallholdings. These properties are those most affected by the structural fragilities, besides being the most financially vulnerable. Thus, the inclusion of some kind of tourism (visitation, lodging, food or service) is often the last resource to enable the property and what it produces. Still, in southern Brazil, the recognition process of the apple and the producing areas as a tourism destination is incipient. In Rio Grande do Sul, mountain tourism is now well organized, although Apple has little emphasis as a regional tourism product. In Paraná, the tourism situation, especially related to apple production, is also fragile. In Santa Catarina, the formation of a roadmaps winter brand with the use of the apple is already underway, and is certainly promising.

It is worth mentioning that the fruit production of small family farms that want to join tourism cannot avoid technical training in order to know the means of adding value to the product. Firstly, because the cultivation of the fruit is extremely expensive and demanding in terms of the number of work hours added to the production. Secondly, because horticulture is dependent on very specific geographic variables, which means that fruit production is an activity with a high degree of specialization in temperate areas in Brazil. Finally, it should be noted that, although tourism in small farms have a very specific function, that of income diversification, it does not mean that other strategies to promote activity at the local level are put aside. In the case of apple growing it is important that those involved with the fruit processing are articulated in some way in order to make it reference of tourism in the producing regions.

The engagement of different actors is paramount to form an identity for the regional horticulture, a very workable condition in the apple trees growing areas. Therefore, it is important to think apple tourism as a collective project, set to generate income from the exploitation of the localized food system and not with the advent of individualized actions. From this, follows a plan for tourism from political strategies of articulation and concrete evaluation of investment opportunities in order to build plans and designs which can be effectively put into practice. Therefore, the collective organization of those involved in tourism is key to the success of visitation programs in rural properties. Currently, this is the biggest obstacle to advance the activity, considering that the owners of the territory are often not confident in financial returns arising from the tourism. Consequently, there is a notorious mistrust of a portion of social actors when it comes to perceiving the apple

orchards as a potential tourism attraction spot. It is believed, however, that the transformation of unfavorable collective organization scenario is possible and is ongoing, as shown by the experience and potentiality of regional agro-food tourism. The improvement and better performance of the properties involved in this type of tourism will certainly contribute to convincing the other actors currently discouraged in investing in the sector. It is worth noting that tourism development plans are scarce and recent in Brazil, especially those directed to rural areas, which requires the assessment of objective local conditions and at the same time, get information on proposals taken into effect in other regions and countries. Among these proposals it should be cited, in Brazil, the São Paulo Fruits Circuit and, abroad, the Spanish agro-food tourism, including the Apple and Cider Route in Asturias.